

THE DEATHBED DREAM OF REASON: SOCRATES' DREAM IN THE *PHAEDO*

DAVID ROOCHNIK

In this paper, I discuss the dream that Socrates, as depicted in Plato's *Phaedo*, reports he had while in prison the night before his execution. I do so hoping that, in addition to illuminating Plato's conception of dreams, my discussion will provoke some thoughts about Platonic philosophy in general. Specifically, I hope to show how reflection on Socrates' deathbed dream leads to a fruitful discussion of one of the central issues pervading the dialogues, namely the relationship between philosophical λόγος (rational account) and poetic μῦθος (myth, story).¹

I

While Socrates was in prison awaiting the ship from Delos to return to Athens, and thus for the city's ban against execution to end (58b), the rumor had circulated that he had been composing poetry. Specifically, Cebes has heard that Socrates had been setting the tales (λόγους, 60d1) of Aesop into a metrical scheme and doing the same with the hymn to Apollo.² Naturally, this puzzles those who know Socrates; after all, the philosopher, the champion of rationality, seems to have been the dire enemy of poetry throughout his career. As "recently" as the *Apology*, Socrates had condemned

1 I am very grateful for the excellent comments and criticisms I received from an anonymous reader of this essay.

2 My Greek text is Burnet 1967. Translations from the *Phaedo* (and all other dialogues except the *Republic*) are my own. There is a bit of a problem here: the hymn to Apollo would already have been in meter.

the poets for not being able to give an account of the meaning of their beautiful poems. They had, he concluded, composed their works not by any rational expertise, but, like prophets and seers, by some natural gift and inspiration. As a result, they could not explain what their own compositions actually meant (τί λέγοιεν), and thus did not know what they claimed to know (22b–c).

Why, then, would Socrates himself be composing poetry in prison? Because, he explains, he wished to (60e2–61b1),

test what certain dreams (ἐνυπνίων) mean and, in order to purify myself, see if perhaps they had been ordering me to make this music (μουσικήν). For the dreams were like this—in my past life, frequently the same dream came to me, appearing at different times in different visages (ὄψει), but saying the same thing: “Socrates, make music and practice it.” And I, in the past, assumed I was doing the very thing that they were exhorting and ordering me to do. Just like those men who urge on runners, so the dream was ordering me to do the very thing I was doing, namely making music, because philosophy is the greatest music and I was doing it. But now, since the verdict came in and the festival of the god delayed my dying, it seemed necessary, in case the dream was perhaps ordering me to make music in the ordinary sense (δημώδη), not to disobey it but to make it. For it seemed to be safer not to depart before purifying myself by making poems in obedience to the dream.

In response to his dream, Socrates had composed music in honor of Apollo, and then, since it is incumbent upon a poet to make μύθους rather than λόγους (61b4), and since Socrates himself says he is no μυθολογικός (61b5), no “storyteller,” he also put some of Aesop’s stories to music. He was concerned lest he had misinterpreted these dreams and the “music” he had been practicing—and please recall the much wider scope of the Greek μουσική, which comes closer to meaning “culture” than to our word “music”—ought not to have been philosophy.³ Perhaps he should have been making run-of-the-mill music, poetry in its conventional sense.

3 See the Appendix in Dorter 1982 for a thorough discussion of this word.

With these comments from the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* at hand, a workable, even if somewhat crude, distinction begins to emerge. Philosophical rationality, or simply λόγος, is the ability to explain what something means (τί λέγει) in a self-sufficient manner, that is, without relying on any non-rational source such as divine inspiration, and without employing any non-rational devices, such as a narrative. Poetry, or simply μῦθος, is a broad term meant to encompass all kinds of storytelling, as well as the much more specific sense of verse. As this paper develops, this distinction will be progressively refined.

To return to Socrates' dream: it has several features that distinguish it from a typical prophetic dream or from a dream of, as I will shortly describe it, the “standard” Platonic sort. At this point, note the following:

- (1) The dream is recurring (note πολλάκις at 60e4).
- (2) The meaning of the dream requires interpretation or testing. Initially Socrates had interpreted it as “friendly,” that is, as exhorting him to do the very thing he was doing, namely philosophizing. Now, however, he wonders whether the dream may be critical and asking of him a revision of his entire life.
- (3) Socrates attributes an external source to the dream; it comes (φοιτῶν, 60e4) to him. This source seems divine, since responding to the dream properly is a matter of purification (60e2) and getting it right is a matter of safety (61a8). Interpreting dreams has significant consequences and so is a risky business.
- (4) To test a dream requires doing something. In other words, the dream is a practical imperative.
- (5) The “speaker” of the dream, the one issuing the imperative, has during Socrates' life taken different shapes and forms (60e5). But the “logical” content of the dream is always the same. Socrates here suppresses any mention of the various speakers, the visual imagery, or the narrative structure of the dream.⁴ The absence of visual imagery in this passage is all the more striking since, as Gallop puts it, “The Greeks did not speak as we do of having a dream, but always of seeing a

4 Another denigration of ὄψις can be found at 65b2: the philosopher has no interest in it. See also 64d10.

dream" (Gallop 1972.192).⁵ This statement is clearly not true, for Socrates here is concerned not with what he sees in the dream, but only with what it says. His question is exclusively, τί λέγοι (60e2), "what does it say?" or, better, "what does it mean?" On his deathbed, Socrates wonders about an imageless dream, a speech with no speaker, a commandment with no commander.

Why on his deathbed would Socrates concern himself with the meaning of this recurring dream and its singular message, "make music and practice it?" Why, in response to his dream, would he reconsider his commitment to philosophical λόγος and experiment with μῦθος? There is, I propose, an odd, because self-inverting, twist in Socrates' response to his dream. Despite its (possible) admonition to practice poetry, the dream is taken up by Socrates in a strictly "logical" or rational manner. Again, it is embedded in no narrative and is accompanied by no visual imagery. Socrates reduces his many dreams to their singular meaning, which is the imperative. In other words, even though the dreams appeared in different visual forms, Socrates describes them as one and the same dream. As such, he is engaged in the typical rational practice of disregarding sensual content and referring a many to a one.

For the purpose of contrast, consider the dream Socrates claims (to Crito) to have had three nights earlier: "A beautiful, well-formed woman, dressed in a white robe, approached me and called me and said, 'Socrates, on the third day you will arrive in fertile Phthia'" (*Crito* 44a). This dream of a beautiful woman who quotes Homer (*Iliad* ix.363) can be read as both conventionally visual and prophetic.⁶ In other words, if correctly interpreted, it will predict the future, in this case, that Socrates will die very soon. Socrates' deathbed dream is neither prophetic nor does it feature a beautiful woman. Instead, his is one of many dreams that, having been stripped of all ornament and "logically" reduced to their singular meaning, Socrates inter-

5 Gallop follows chapter 4 of Dodds 1951. A visual sense of the dream in the Platonic corpus can be found at *Sophist* 266c, where the Stranger describes a painting as a "man-made dream."

6 Although Achilles never does make it home to Phthia. Timaeus offers an extensive account of prophetic dreams in his discussion of the liver, the "organ of divination," in the *Timaeus* 71b-72c. See also the discussion of prophetic madness in the *Phaedrus* 244a-245b and *Laws* 800a. I disagree with Gallop 1972.188, who likens the dream of the *Phaedo* to that in the *Crito*.

prets as an admonition to cease being "logical" and to practice poetry instead.

To prepare to understand the strangeness of Socrates' deathbed dream, and to answer the various questions I have raised, I next offer a brief general discussion of the role dreams play in Plato.

II

There is, I propose, a sense of the dream in Plato that appears so frequently that one might well call it "the standard conception." It can be expressed through a simple, albeit imprecise, analogy: as opinion is to knowledge, so dream is to the waking state. Consider the following description from the *Republic*: "Is the man who holds that there are fair things but doesn't hold that there is beauty itself and who, if someone leads him to the knowledge of it, isn't able to follow—is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake? Consider it. Doesn't dreaming, whether one is asleep or awake, consist in believing a likeness of something to be not a likeness, but rather the thing itself to which it is like?" (476c).⁷

The standard account of dreams conceives of them as deficient representations of reality.⁸ To think, for example, that a reflection in a mirror, which, in fact, is a likeness of, and hence dependent upon, some original object, is the original itself, is a mistake. A dream image appears and is felt to be fully real, but it is not. So, for example, when describing the noble lie, Socrates has the founders tell the citizens that the education they thought they had was "like dreams"; in reality, "they were under the earth within" (414d). Even though this is a lie (and therefore suggests a kind of undermining and complicating of the issue that I will take up shortly), the distinction between dream and waking cited in this passage is clear: dreams represent a deficient sense of reality.

As a result, dreams can be loosely affiliated with δόξα, which is typically, but too narrowly, translated by "opinion" (see, for example, *Parmenides* 164d). In fact, δόξα names the realm of appearance, of what seems to be, but might not truly be, the case. In the *Republic*, the "doxophile"

7 All citations from the *Republic* are from Bloom 1968.

8 In this very general sense, Plato's view is not unlike Aristotle's. The latter has a far more developed theory of dreams that derives them from "the residual movements" of sense impressions received while waking. A good summary of Aristotle's view, which also contains a helpful bibliography, is Holowchak 1996.

is one who refuses to agree that there are real entities like beauty itself (479a). Instead, he is a lover of sights and sounds who thinks, mistakenly, that the vast multiplicity of sensible items is reality. (Compare *Timaeus* 52b–c, where the apprehension of “place” is through a sort of “bastard” or dream-like form of reasoning.) For this reason, and unlike the (awakened) philosopher (476d), he is dreaming, for he is confusing one order of reality with another.

As Tigner notes, the dream, when it is used as an epistemological metaphor, is not to be equated with total ignorance. Instead, it represents an uncertain, disputable, unexamined state. So, for example, the slave boy of the *Meno*, who correctly answered Socrates’ questions, has had opinions “stirred up in him, as in a dream (ὡσπερ ὄναρ, 85c9).⁹ In the *Symposium* (175e3), Socrates (ironically?) describes his own incomplete wisdom in identical terms, and in the *Republic*, we find that the man who is unable “to separate out the idea of the good from all other things . . . does not know the good itself, or any other good. And if he somehow lays hold of some phantom of it, you will say that he does so by opinion and not knowledge, and that, taken in by dreams and slumbering out his present life, before waking up here he goes to Hades and falls finally asleep there” (534c).

It is from this sort of epistemically sluggish dreaminess that Socrates, as the gadfly he describes himself to be in the *Apology*, works to awaken his fellow citizens (30e–31a). (Note, however, that Socrates has been ordered to perform this mission by the god “through oracles and dreams” [33c].) Indeed, in the perfectly just city described in the *Republic*, one ruled by knowledge and not by δόξα: “The city will be governed by us and by you in a state of waking, not in a dream as many cities nowadays are governed by men who fight over shadows with one another and form factions for the sake of ruling, as though it were some great good” (520c).

This conception of dreams as diminished representations of reality can be explicated not only in epistemological or ontological terms, but also in psychological ones. When, for example, Socrates discusses those unnecessary pleasures and desires that can, in a healthy person, be checked by better and more rational desires, he remarks that some of these unnecessary

⁹ Tigner 1970 collects passages where the dream metaphor represents a deficient epistemological condition. He cites *Sophist* 266c, *Laws* 969b, *Timaeus* 52b–c, and *Phaedrus* 277d–e, among others. Also, see Lieshout 1980.103–40, for a thorough listing of the passages in which dreams appear in Plato.

desires remain: “Those that wake up in sleep when the rest of the soul—all that belongs to the calculating, tame, and ruling part of it—slumbers, while the beastly and wild part, gorged with food or drink, is skittish and, pushing sleep away, seeks to go and satisfy its dispositions. You know that in such a state it dares to do everything as though it were released from, and rid of, all shame and prudence. And it doesn’t shrink from attempting intercourse, as it supposes, with a mother or with anyone else at all” (571c).

The most orderly, rational man suffers from these unruly dreams least of all (572b), while the tyrant is he who acts during wakefulness upon such dreams (574e). Dreams occur when desire is unshackled, when the conscious chains reason applies to desire go to sleep. When this happens, reality is misapprehended, for reason is the sole avenue to reality. (On this point, compare *Theaetetus* 173d.)

Since dreams imply a diminished apprehension of reality, and wakefulness a direct and illuminating one, then technical reasoning, the systematic approach to the apprehension of reality, should be represented as a kind of intensified wakefulness. This is precisely what one finds in the descriptions of dialectic. Consider, for example, the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*. He proposes “by means of an example to become acquainted in a technical manner with the management of cities, in order that this may be waking knowledge for us, not a dream” (278e). The Stranger invokes the old distinction between ὑπάρ, “a waking vision,” and ὄναρ, “a dream, a vision in sleep” (see *Odyssey* 19.547, 20.90), to express the difference between technical knowledge and a deficient grasp of reality. He then goes on to illustrate his technique of conceptual division with an example. As such, this technical methodology becomes what one might term “hyperwakefulness.”

Without commenting on the complicated relationship between dialectic as expressed and practiced by Socrates in the *Republic* and by the Stranger in the *Statesman*, suffice it to say here that both are described as hyperwakefulness. So, for example, in the former, dialectic is said to surpass the mathematical arts precisely by being more in touch with, more awake to, reality. “For all the other arts are directed to human opinions and desires, or to generation and composition, or to the care of what is grown or put together. And as for the rest, those that we said do lay hold of something of what is—geometry and the arts following on it—we observe that they dream about what is; but they haven’t the capacity to see it in full awakesness so long as they use hypotheses and, leaving them untouched, are unable to give an account of them” (533b).

III

Perhaps unfortunately, the standard picture of the dream sketched above cannot simply be adopted as the final Platonic word on the subject. As I will argue next, this is because the standard picture itself must be conceived of as a kind of dream. Plato, in what turns out to be a decisive move, turns the standard picture against itself: he describes the project of methodical rationality, heretofore conceived as hyperwakefulness, as itself a kind of dream.¹⁰ I have already alluded to this point by referring above to the *Apology*: Socrates works to awaken his fellow Athenians (30e–31a). This is a task, however, he was given through dreams (33c).

Two important examples occur in the *Theaetetus* and the *Charmides*. In the former, the ancient precursor of what may be termed “analytical philosophy” is described as a dream (201e). Specifically, it is a dream of a world of “primary elements” or logical simples. Like the alphabet, these simples can be combined according to strict rules to form syllables and then words (202e–204a). As such, the dream is of a knowable world amenable to systematic rational analysis. Clearly, this sort of dream inverts the standard sense. Contrast it with a passage from the *Statesman*. The Stranger, after having just invoked the alphabet in order to explain the notion of a paradigm (277d–278c), urges the young Socrates to pursue “technical knowledge” in order that they may be awake rather than in a dream (278e). As usual here in the *Statesman*, the dream represents a deficient epistemic state (see 277d) that needs to be overcome by technical, methodical wakefulness. In the *Theaetetus*, however, the dream is used in an opposite manner, namely to describe the project of technical rationality itself.

It is not possible in this paper to do justice to the complexities of the famous dream in the *Theaetetus*. (A useful general discussion, as well as a bibliography, can be found in Burnyeat 1990.) Instead, briefly consider only the following two commentaries. Ryle has described the dream as expressing Socrates’ “logical atomism,” that is, as a theory foreshadowing by millennia some of the most sophisticated philosophical work of the twentieth century. His reading of the dream is roughly this: each of the “primary elements” is strictly “itself by itself” (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ, 201e2–3),

10 Gallop 1972 holds a somewhat similar view. For him, “The Platonic dialogues have the status of dreams” (189). By this, he essentially means they are images.

that is, is simple or atomic. From such atoms we and the rest of things are composed. Because knowledge is here defined as including the giving of an account (201c), only of these “molecular” composites can there be knowledge. This is because only of them can there be an account or explanation, an analysis into their elements, the atoms. By contrast, the atoms themselves, because they are simple, can only be named and not further analyzed. As a result, they are available only to “perception” (201e–202b) and not to knowledge. To illustrate what he means, Socrates uses the example of the letter and the syllable. His paradigm is his own name (203a). “Socrates” has three syllables, the first of which, “SO,” is composed of two letters.

As Socrates proceeds to examine his own dream, he quickly awakens from it. In brief, the problem is this: I know the syllable “SO” because I can analyze it into its primary elements, S and O. But precisely because S and O are primary elements, they cannot be known but only perceived. Hence, I know SO by means of two unknowables: I am “ignorant of each [S and O], and knowing neither of them [I] know both [I know SO]” (203d4–5). Knowledge of the syllable cannot, therefore, emerge from knowledge of the elements. Perhaps, then, the syllable should not be identified with its elements, perhaps it should not be conceived as an “all” (πᾶν, 204a11), a mere aggregate of parts. Instead, Socrates wonders if it has “a single form of its own, different from the letters” (203e4–5). In other words, the syllable may be conceived as a “whole” (ὅλον, 204a11) and not an “all.”

Ryle presents the options this way: “Are we to say that the resultant syllable just is the letters composing it, or that it is a new, emergent unit—a unit of higher order?” (Ryle 1990.31). It is tempting to opt for the latter, for without it we are left with the absurdity that “knowing neither [I] know them both” (203d5). But if we do conceive the syllable as a whole, the newly emergent unit “is no more analyzable than [the letters] on their lower level” (Ryle 1990.31–32). In other words, the molecule, conceived as a whole, would then become a “partless idea” (205c2), an atomic form, and so would itself be transformed into a simple. By the current understanding of knowledge, it cannot be known since, as atomic, it cannot receive an account or explanation.

Thus Socrates’ “logical atomism,” which might seem to be a paradigm of hyperwakefulness or of a pure philosophical theory, turns out to be itself a dream. Rosen generalizes this point well. “Philosophy,” he says, “is the dream, not merely of the whole, but of a rational account of the whole.” Because of its dream status, “philosophy can never fulfill itself, or thoroughly awaken into wisdom.” Why? Because the best the philosopher can

do is dream the "dream of wakefulness. In this case, however, one should perhaps speak of a daydream" (Rosen 1980.122 and 154–55).

In sum, the project of analysis is guided by a hope, a dream: namely that the world itself is rational. The more rigorous the conception of analytic rationality one adopts, the more compelling the dream. But, of course, this jars with the previous description of a dream in which it was repeatedly affiliated with a diminished sense of reality. Is the dream of a rational whole, then, a mistaking of the image for the original? If so, what could possibly be its correct or wakeful correlate? Would it be that the world is not itself fully rational, that philosophy, the dream of wakefulness, is just that, a dream?

The *Charmides* passage, which I will here only mention, begins with a reference to *Odyssey* XIX.560ff.: "Listen to my dream, whether it has come through horns [and so is reliable] or through ivory" [and so is not] (173a). Socrates' dream is of a city utterly managed by knowledge. No one, for example, professing to be a pilot would be allowed to be a pilot unless he could be certified as actually having such knowledge. The same rigorous testing would obtain for all the crafts and activities in the city. In short, the picture generated here (173a–d) is of a perfectly technical city "guarded" by a supervisory form of knowledge capable of distinguishing genuine claims to knowledge from specious ones. (Obviously it resembles the "beautiful city" constructed by Socrates in the *Republic*, which, quite strikingly, is also described as being like a dream [443b].)¹¹

Unfortunately, like the "logical atomism" in the *Theaetetus*, the dream city of the *Charmides* also dissolves upon wakeful reflection. It turns out (for several complicated reasons) that, however lovely it may promise to be, the "knowledge of all the rest of the knowledges" (174c) that is required for the dream to succeed cannot be identified or articulated.

To summarize: these crucial passages from the *Theaetetus* and the *Charmides* invert the standard usage of the dream metaphor in which dreams typify a deficient glimpse of reality, a mistaking of the image for the original. In these two dialogues, the quest for intelligibility, that is, for the correct distinguishing between image and original, is itself a dream. Does this mean that the quest itself is an image? What then would be the original that it mistakes?

¹¹ Compare *Laws* 969b, for what is perhaps a more optimistic employment of the dream/waking metaphor.

Since the reading of these two crucial passages has been rather cursory, only a cautious inference is here permissible. Philosophers must do precisely what Socrates does in the *Phaedo*: test themselves in the most fundamental way. Philosophy must challenge itself by asking whether the hope of wakefulness is itself a dream. There are various ways of technically reformulating this point. Rosen does it through what he terms "the context of analysis," and his argument is that every analysis requires a context and an accompanying intuition, which itself cannot be rendered analytically. My own response (which is compatible with Rosen's) is that philosophical dialogue requires a set of internal commitments that cannot be argued for or justified, and that dream language speaks to precisely this point. I will explain by returning to Socrates' deathbed dream in the *Phaedo*.

IV

Recall that, in the name of "safety," and in case his previous interpretation—namely, that the dream was encouraging him to pursue philosophy—was incorrect, Socrates tries his hand at "demotic music" before departing to the next world. Strangely, although the dream commands Socrates to "make poetry," his response to it is hardly poetic. Socrates, after all, is concerned only with what the dream means. He strips a plurality of dreams in various guises down to a single, image-less imperative. In so doing, he practices the paradigmatic rational act of referring a many to a one. The conclusion generated by this practice is, however, an admonition to cease such practices. In other words, his challenge to his first interpretation of the dream, which conceived it as an exhortation to philosophy, *is itself philosophical*. And here perhaps is the clue. One can be philosophical, perhaps one must be philosophical, precisely by challenging the nature of philosophy itself.¹² Philosophy, when properly understood as including radical self-questioning, turns itself inside out and ceases to be a project of rational analysis alone. Instead, like Socrates in the *Phaedo*, it "experiments" with *μῦθος*.

Consider the following examples. Not only does Socrates declare that he has been putting Aesop to music and composing a hymn to Apollo, but he also offers an enormous myth (*μῦθος*, 110b1) of the underworld at the end of the dialogue. Furthermore, Socrates twice says that he and his

¹² For an excellent discussion of this point, see Griswold 1988.143–69.

friends must *sing* songs to charm the fear of death away (77e8 and 114d7), and he likens himself to the Apollonian swans who *sing* their final song (84e–85b). In fact, Socrates, who initially says that “I myself am no storyteller” (μυθολογικός, 61b5), quickly reverses himself less than a page later when he declares that “it is especially fitting for one who is about to depart for the other world to investigate and tell stories (μυθολογεῖν) about the journey there” (61e1–2). This is striking: sometimes it is “fitting” even for the philosopher to tell stories. Indeed, sometimes (as at 110b1)¹³ it is even necessary. Why would this be so?

I answer by briefly tracing one issue that threads its way throughout the *Phaedo*: the ontological status of what are typically termed the “Platonic ideas,” but which Socrates usually names only by using the intensive pronoun αὐτός, “itself” (which, one should note, is the very first word of the dialogue itself).¹⁴

Socrates, in discussing “recollection,” asks us to reflect on the experience of measuring two sticks approximately equal in length.¹⁵ In order to do this, one is required somehow to invoke “the equal itself” (74a11–12). The word “somehow” in the previous sentence underscores how vague Socrates is here. Is he talking about the “concept” of, the idea of, or the meaning of “equality?” Is he referring to the separate form of EQUALITY? He does not specify. What he does do is ask Simmias to agree to two propositions: First, that the equal “is something” (74a12). Second, that “we know what it is” (74b2). Since equal sticks and stones, sensible equals, are never perfectly equal—they “sometimes are evidently equal to one (τῷ), but not to another” (τῷ, 74b8–9)¹⁶—and since equals themselves (74c1)¹⁷ never suffer such imperfection or variation, knowledge of the equal itself cannot be derived from sense perception. It must be recollected, that is, it must be a priori.

13 Burnet prefers δῆ to δεῖ. I disagree.

14 For a good discussion of Plato’s use of αὐτό καθ’ αὐτό, especially his debt for this phrase to Anaxagoras, see Kutash 1993.134–52.

15 At 74a, it is not clear what kind of equality Socrates has in mind. Equality of length or width or weight? Why could not two sticks, or better piles of sticks, be perfectly equal in number?

16 This passage is notoriously difficult. Here I follow the translation in Gallop 1993 because it preserves the ambiguity of the Greek. The dative τῷ could be either masculine or neuter, and thus could mean either “equal to someone” or “equal to something.” There are other possibilities as well.

17 This is a puzzling shift to the plural.

Note that Socrates says that “we know” (ἐπιστάμεθα) what the equal itself is at 74b2. Here he must refer to some sort of non-discursive intuition, for the ability to measure two sticks and declare them to be of equal length hardly requires knowledge of the equal itself in any serious or discursive sense. Being able to say “these sticks are equal” does not require the ability to define the equal itself or explain what equality really is. However, saying “these sticks are equal,” when in empirical fact they are not precisely so, does imply that a standard or an idea has somehow been invoked or referred to and that it cannot be identified with or simply derived from sensory input.

A bit later, Socrates raises the issue of discursive knowledge: “When a man knows, is he able to give an account (δοῦναι λόγον) of that which he knows or not?” (76b5). Of course he is. Socrates continues: people, presumably even those who can say “these sticks are equal in length,” *cannot* give such an account, and therefore do not know (ἐπίστασθαι, 76c1) about matters such as the equal itself. It seems that here Socrates contradicts what he had said just a moment before (at 74b2), namely that people do know what the equal itself is. Therefore, “knowledge” must have two senses. The first describes that possessed by all of us who can say “these sticks are equal.” The second, which includes the full-fledged account of the equal itself, few of us ever have.

In simpler terms: of course we all “know” what the equal is; after all, we describe the two sticks as equal in length. By contrast, how many of us “know” what equality itself really is, can actually give a definition of it?

To summarize: unless he contradicts himself by saying that we do and do not know, there must be two senses of “know,” which I think are best labeled the intuitive and the discursive. Philosophers desire to pursue and to transform intuitions into rational discourse. They are so impressed, so wonder-struck, by the intrusion of ideas such as the equal itself into our ordinary experience that they are propelled by a desire to track down these intuitions and explain them fully. Socrates describes just this desire in his speech on “purification” early in the *Phaedo*. For example, the philosopher seeks for his soul to be “itself by itself” (65c7) and, by thinking, “strives for being” (ὀρέγεται τοῦ ὄντος, 65c9). It is for “beings” that the philosopher “hunts” (66a3; see also 66c2). To hunt means to follow a track or trail. But what is the trail? The original intuitions of entities like the equal itself. The philosophical pursuit of being thus leads to the “itselfs.” We “sniff them out” as they inform our ordinary experience. So, for example, when measuring two sticks and deciding they are equal in length, we realize, we see, we are

impressed by the fact that we have somehow referred to equal itself. And articulation of this "itself" then becomes the object of our desire: we become, in other words, "lovers of wisdom" (66e3; see also 68a2).

The hunt begins, and it takes its first step in the form of the question, "What is it?" Asking this question is already a form of purification because it requires (in some unspecified sense) a reduction of the plurality of experience to a series of intelligible itselfs. Unfortunately, when Socrates gets to the "itselfs"—those entities the articulation of which would constitute answers to the various "what is it" questions—obscurity descends. In his most direct articulation of them, Socrates says this: "Our present argument is no more concerned with the equal than with the beautiful itself and the good itself and justice and piety, and, in short, with all those things that we stamp with the seal of WHAT IT IS, as we are questioning in our questions and answering in our answers" (75d).

What is puzzling about this passage is that stamping is a productive metaphor. The ontological status of entities like the equal itself or beautiful itself is therefore left unclear. Is their reality subjective and derivative from some human activity, that is, is it like a seal that is *produced* by the stamp (itself a human artifact), or is it objective and independent: is the equal itself an already existent reality that merely needs to be discovered and articulated? Is the best metaphor for apprehension of the "itselfs" the immaculate one of vision or the intrusive one of touch?¹⁸

Socrates says that we do the stamping in the midst of asking our questions and attempting to answer them. The questions implied here take the form, I assume, of "What is X itself?" In the asking of this question—what is the equal itself?, what is justice?, what is beauty?—does the human subject somehow impose or project or construct a conception of reality, or is a window opened to being in itself? It is unclear. Only this is known: the "what is it" question is sparked by a dissatisfaction with the multiplicity of particular examples of the equal, the beautiful, and the just, and reflects a desire, an ὄρεξις (appetite, longing, yearning), to capture some unity in order to stabilize the flux of experience. But to desire X does not imply that X is real (except qua object of desire), and so it is far from certain whether such entities have an objective existence independent of human cognition or

18 For comparable instances of ἐπισφραγιζόμεθα, Burnet refers to *Statesman* 258c5 and *Philebus* 26d1.

whether human beings construct them through the use of abstract nouns coupled with intensive pronouns.

In this context, consider again Socrates' use of ὁπέγεται. He tells us that imperfectly equal things like sticks and stones "strive to be like the equal, but fall short" (75b1–2). This is strange: how can sticks and stones strive for anything? Recall that earlier in the dialogue Socrates used the same verb to describe the philosopher as one who "strives for being" (65c9). In other words, the verb associated (at 65c) with the subjective disposition of the philosopher is applied to objects at 75b. Does Socrates anthropomorphize? Does he project his subjective state on to putatively non-human objects? The reader is invited to wonder about the status of these "itselfs" that inform our experience.

Although their reality has not been objectively demonstrated, the "itselfs" are necessary presuppositions in Socrates' attempt to prove the immortality of the soul. For example, they ground the proof based on recollection, and Socrates bluntly admits: "If they [the itselfs] do not exist, then our logos [the proof based on recollection] has been spoken in vain" (76e4–5). In turn, reliance on the notion of recollection is necessary to refute Simmias's "attunement" thesis. Recall that Simmias is tempted by the materialist doctrine that the soul is merely an epiphenomenon of the body. Socrates never directly refutes this position. Instead, he offers Simmias a choice: which of the two accounts—recollection, with its attendant presupposition of the existence of the itselfs, or materialism—do you "choose"? (αἰσῆ, 92c9), he asks Simmias. The former, Simmias replies without hesitation. In other words, agreement on the independent existence of the itselfs is here invoked to refute materialism.

To summarize: Socrates does not, perhaps because he cannot, demonstrate the ontological independence of the itselfs. He cannot, therefore, ground his own philosophical endeavor that he describes as purification: the effort of the soul to divest itself of all impediments of the body in order to apprehend purely things themselves. Furthermore, without the itselfs, he cannot prove that the soul is immortal and so, at least in terms of the mythic logic expressed at the end of the dialogue, he cannot prove that philosophy has any hope or makes any human sense. What reason is there to philosophize if the ground of philosophy cannot be articulated? Why *should* we pursue the question, "What is X itself?" For what sort of wisdom may the philosopher reasonably hope?

There is, of course, always a kind of circularity in meta-philosophical questions such as these. For how can one examine the nature of, and

perhaps even justify a life devoted to, philosophy except through the medium of philosophical argument? But surely one cannot use argument in order to justify or legitimize the project of argument without, in some sense, begging the question. As a result, a fundamental agreement is required before philosophy, even in the form of philosophical disagreement, can begin. There must be agreement that it is good to pursue philosophy and that, at least as Socrates would have it, philosophical discourse is best sparked by the asking of "what is it" questions that aim for articulation of the *itselfs*. To reiterate, Socrates does not demonstrate the ontological independence, and hence the nature, of the *itselfs*. They must, however, be assumed to exist, and to exist independently of human beings. In order for philosophy, conceived as purification, to proceed, it must be assumed that it has a purpose. But this assumption seems to be a matter of agreement rather than an argument justifying the purposeful character of philosophy.

A salient feature of the *Phaedo* is precisely the extraordinarily high level of just this sort of agreement among Socrates' friends. Phaedo and Echechrates, Simmias and Cebes seem to be Pythagoreans. As such, they would share some of Socrates' apparent presuppositions. Most important, they agree on the existence of the independent, non-material, *itselfs*. Note, for example, Simmias's enthusiastic response to the mention of the *itselfs*. When hearing that the philosopher, using "thought *itself*" (65e7) and thus relying on his soul "itself by itself" (66a2), attempts to articulate each thing "itself by itself" (66a2), he says, "You're absolutely right!" (66a9). When asked if Socrates' description of philosophy as purification (which includes the pronoun "itself" at 66e1, 67a1, 67a6, and 67b1) seems right to him, Simmias emphatically answers, "More than anything" (67a6; cf. 68b7). When asked if he agrees that the equal *itself* "is something," Simmias responds, "By God, we wonderfully do indeed!" (74b1). This is a man who clearly likes the sound of the intensive pronoun, of the word "itself." And so, when asked to choose between recollection and attunement, two theses Socrates (perhaps fallaciously) describes as logically incompatible, Simmias unhesitatingly selects the former (92d-e).

In this vein, note also that it is Cebes, not Socrates, who first introduces the notion of recollection (72e) and who, like Simmias, was "wonderfully persuaded by it" (92a2).

In short, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates is among young men who, as good Pythagoreans, believe, indeed stake their spiritual lives on the conviction, that there is an intelligible, non-material structure to the world and that, therefore, the soul as the apprehender of such a reality needs to be purified.

This sense of friendliness generates an almost cultic feeling at moments in the dialogue. For example, after Socrates has announced that those who engage in philosophy correctly are practicing nothing other than death and dying, Simmias responds that the many, if they heard this, would agree. After all, in the eyes of the many, philosophers—pale men talking about useless abstractions such as the equal *itself*—seem to be half-dead. Socrates' advice to Simmias is this: say farewell to those men and instead "let's speak to us ourselves" (64c1). Philosophy from the outside seems absurd, empty, wasteful. Only from the inside, only on the basis of agreement on fundamental propositions, is philosophy meaningful. To continue in philosophy requires saying farewell to the outsiders and concentrating on the insiders.¹⁹

This sense of insiders talking to themselves reappears throughout the dialogue. After describing philosophy as purification, Socrates says to Simmias: "I think it is necessary for all those who correctly love learning to say these sorts of things *to one another* and to believe them" (67b3-4; cf. 66b3-4 and 68b2). After Cebes expresses some reservations about the proof of the immortality of the soul based on recollection, Socrates diagnoses him as someone suffering from the childish fear of death. Cebes laughs and asks Socrates to persuade him not to suffer from this fear, this "hobgoblin." Socrates responds, "It is necessary every day to sing charms to him until you've charmed it out of him" (77e8-9). Socrates uses the same language at the end of his myth. After stating that it would not be fitting for a man of sense to be confident that the afterworld is just as the myth would have it, Socrates nonetheless maintains that believing something like what was stated in the myth is a "beautiful risk" (114d6) and one well worth taking. To live in the face of such risk, the philosopher must "sing such things to himself" (114d6-7). It is almost as if philosophers must chant a cultic oath to, or even hypnotize, themselves: "There is hope, philosophy is meaningful, there is hope, philosophy is meaningful, there is hope . . ."

With these observations, I return to the dream. Like cultic solidarity, dreams have a logic of their own and so are never fully intelligible from the outside. This is why dreams require interpretation: translation of an idiosyncratic dream-logic to the publicly comprehensible terms of waking-logic. There is thus a dream-like quality to the philosophical life. Since the

19 Here it is necessary to recall that Pythagoreanism was, perhaps above all else, a cult. See Burkert 1972 for an extended treatment of this issue.

ontological independence of the itselfs cannot be demonstrated, and since the proof of the immortality of the soul, indeed the entire discussion of philosophy as purification, presupposes this, the project of asking "what is it" questions requires prior agreement on a set of commitments before it can even begin.

But just as a dream must be interpreted, so, too, must philosophers demand of themselves to go beyond cultic agreement. They must attempt to wake from the dream of philosophy. But, to state the paradox a final time, philosophy is the epitome of wakefulness. How can one wake from wakefulness?

What I propose veers close to skepticism. In the "Fourth Mode" of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (I.xiv.104), for example, Sextus Empiricus argues that because one cannot adequately judge whether the appearances presented in waking life are more truthful about things in themselves than those presented during dreams, one ought to suspend judgment on the question of their competing veracity. Plato does not recommend suspension of judgment. Instead, his demand is to try to wake up. Unlike Descartes, who tries to wake from the skeptical dream with utter certainty (i.e., who uses the dream doubt to overcome all traces of probability from his thinking), Plato has us test our wakefulness by challenging philosophy itself. But this, too, is a paradox: to challenge *lóγoc* requires going outside of *lóγoc*; it requires experimentation with *μῦθoc*. Unfortunately, this move seems to head more towards dream-like obscurity than to wakeful clarity.

Recall that Socrates first interprets his recurring dream as an exhortation to pursue philosophy. On his deathbed, he challenges his own interpretation. He does so, however, by following the practices of reason. He reduces the plurality of dreams to their singular logical content, and he makes no reference to visual imagery or narrative context. He is exclusively concerned with the meaning of the dream. But after applying these rational tools to the dream, he concludes he should practice poetry. And so he begins to tell stories. These stories, however, articulate a view in which the rational pursuit of truth is both meaningful and desirable. This is most apparent in Socrates' concluding *μῦθoc* (110b1). It projects a vision of the earth as having twelve sides, each of which is a pentagon of pure color. On the surface of this mythic earth live sharp-eyed, disease-free human beings who are capable of seeing the heavens for what they really are, that is, of attaining the truth (111a-b). The *μῦθoc*, then, offers a hopeful image. The world, it seems to say, is rational, for it is regular in shape and therefore articulable in the purest form of rational language, namely geometry. The

problem, however, is that the way Socrates conveys this message is not at all geometric. It is a *μῦθoc*. There is thus an internal tension at work here similar to that found in the *Theaetetus*. In that dialogue, Socrates dreams of a world composed of logical "atoms" and their "molecular" composites. But if the world were as thoroughly analyzable as his dream would have it, it would not need a dream to describe it. Similarly, if the world were as beautifully and hopefully rational as the concluding story of the *Phaedo* shows it to be, if the *μῦθoc* were true, it would be unnecessary to tell it.

To conclude: far from being a mere ornament or irrelevant appendage to the serious content of Plato's dialogues, his use of *μῦθoc* is a crucial expression of philosophical self-questioning. Without *μῦθoc*, philosophy would present itself in the misleading guise of hyperwakefulness, of pure or systematic rationality. For numerous reasons, only a few of which have been sketched in this paper, and as famously stated in the "Seventh Letter," this is misleading because, at least for Plato, *lóγoc* suffers an inherent "weakness" (*τὸ ἀσθενές*, 343a1). As a result, to pursue the goal of pure rationality is to partake not in a secure and rationally grounded project, but in the dream of sheer wakefulness. The philosopher must awaken from this dream and follow the lead of Socrates who, when told in his dreams that he had to "make music and practice it," challenged his lifelong commitment to *lóγoc*.

Boston University

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