PLATO, SOCRATES AND THE MYTHS.

I BEGIN with a paraphrase of Plato *Laws* X 887de, which has suggested the arguments to be developed in this brief article. 'The Athenian' speaks to the following effect:

'How can one admonish in all patience those who deny the existence of gods? For no sufficient reason they disbelieve the myths which, in infancy, they heard from nurses and mothers in sportive or in serious vein. They disbelieve also those myths which, at sacrifices, from boyhood onwards, they heard recounted in prayers and saw represented in spectacles. They reject the testimony of their own parents, nay, of all Greeks and barbarians, who by continual prayer and worship show clearly their unanimous belief in the existence of gods. Despising all these things, they lay on us the burden of refuting by reasoned argument their perverse opinions.'[1]

It is noteworthy that the Athenian (i.e. Plato) reproaches the atheists for not believing the myths told to them by their mothers. Yet we know from *Rep.* II 381e that mothers are among the worst offenders who pervert the young by telling false tales about the gods. He reproaches them also for disbelieving the myths which they see represented in religious ceremonies. Yet, without raising the question of the connection between myth and ritual, or enquiring what Plato may have thought of their interdependence, it should be pointed out that there is one representation at least, of which the Platonic Socrates in two places (*Euthyphro* 6b, *Rep.* 378c) expresses disapproval, namely, the 'peplos', i.e. the robe embroidered with scenes from the battle of the gods and the giants (and from other mythical wars of the gods), which was borne in procession at the greater Panathenaea and presented to the statue of Athena Polias. Such disedifying slanders on the gods teach the young hearer unworthy notions of deity, and are a direct incentive to quarrelsomeness.

In the ideal state such myths will not be allowed. But it is easy to show that the atheists addressed in *Laws* X have by no means been brought up under ideal conditions. For example, they have learned of the venality of the gods from those who are reputed to be the best poets, orators, seers and priests (885d). They have heard the myths, both injurious and untrue, concerning the mutilation of Uranus by Cronus and of Cronus by Zeus (886c). Most of them adhere to the latest Athenian version of the materialistic doctrines of Anaxagoras, now incorporating the sophistic distinction between 'nature' and 'law', together with the shallow deductions (the unreality of the gods and of justice) drawn from it (886, 889; see also *C.Q.* for April, 1936, p. 48.). And they live in a society where poets and composers of all kinds falsely apply the adjective 'happy' to wicked men who chance to enjoy material prosperity (899e). But in the city which is to be governed by the principles laid down in this dialogue, poets must compose, and teachers must teach, only what accords with the laws (719b sqq., 810b sqq., 817c); and at sacrifices and prayers Platonically pious language is to be the rule (800-1, 821cd). Clearly the atheists of the tenth book belong to the unregenerate Greek world of the fourth century B.C.; and the myths which they have heard or seen depicted in various ways from childhood onwards include many which Plato himself—chiefly in *Rep.* II and III—has censured for inculcating unsound ethics and theology. Few indeed if any among

[1] The paraphrase is correct even if we began a new sentence in d 2, reading, with the mss., *οὖν* (*οὐ* rightly, Stephanus and subsequent edd.): in which case Plato says that the atheists used to believe the myths in childhood and youth, but now perversely despise all such testimony.

the myths currently told could have been permitted to enter the Platonic state, if Plato's principles had been rigorously applied.

It might perhaps be suggested that we should make a distinction between the Platonic Socrates of, say, the *Republic* and the Athenian of the *Laws*, as though the latter were less severe on mythology than the former. But, as we have seen, the poets and their myths are treated in exactly the same way in both dialogues. And here in *Laws* X on just the preceding page (886c) the Uranus-Cronus-Zeus myths have been condemned by the Athenian for the same reasons as by the Platonic Socrates in *Rep.* II 377-8 (cf. *Euthyphro* 6a).

Our text, then, makes it plain that Plato, the severe and scornful censor of the current myths, assigns to them here this much of value that at least they teach the *existence* of the gods whose *conduct* they so often and so sadly libel. Though this interesting implication seems to have eluded the commentators, it would appear that I am by no means the first to have noticed it. The emperor Julian was following Plato to the best of his dry and pedantic ability, when he held that many of the myths (e.g. those which assert that the gods do harm to mankind or to one another), however 'sportive', were offensive and immoral; that Hesiod's *Theogony* in particular should be withheld from children; but that at the same time it is right that even the common people should learn from the ancient poets of the existence of the gods. It is true that in the ideal state Plato would deny the *Theogony* and myths of the like character to adults as well as children. But in censuring Julian for inconsistency (*C.Q.* XXVIII, 1934, p. 111), I should have added that he has Platonic authority for his views to this extent at least, that in the non-ideal conditions prevailing in the world at large Plato regards the myths as performing a useful function in testifying to the existence of the gods; provided that they instil this necessary truth, it is apparently better (so far as this passage goes) to believe in degrading myths than in none at all. There is, however, no Platonic warrant for Julian's desire to perpetuate this ambiguous condition of affairs; for Plato would wish to abolish the old mythology in favour of new and morally inoffensive tales to be devised by his new race of poets. Nor does Plato authorise Julian's superstition that divine truths can be learned from the old myths by the intelligent reader who is able to interpret them allegorically.

This testimony of Plato's to the usefulness of the current myths arouses, in a more intense degree, the same kind of surprise as the curious deference to the Delphic oracle in *Laws* VIII 828a. In spite of the frequent condemnation of every form of the mantic art which is divorced from the ideal enlightenment of the right Platonic philosopher—see, for example, what is said of seers and priests in this very dialogue 885d, 908d—we learn that the purely empirical religious knowledge amassed at Delphi is to be of use to the governors of the ideal state. Clearly one has to be extremely careful in attempting to read the mind of Plato or of his contemporaries in religious matters. In modern times there has been put forward the generalisation that in or about 400 B.C. the Athenians in general set no store by mythology; that they found 'repulsive' the stories of wars and mutilations in heaven. I have elsewhere criticised this view unfavourably (*C.Q.*, 1933, pp. 74, 159). Here I need only state and illustrate briefly the moral which our passage from the *Laws* appears to suggest. Before committing oneself to such generalisations all relevant facts should be soberly examined. Disrespectful use of the name 'Cronus' (as equivalent to 'old Methusalem')[1] is, for example, a fact, though it is scarcely significant enough to suggest an inference. But there are the additional facts that even Cronus had his festival at Athens (at which he was worshipped as 'a scarcely remembered harvest-god'—Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States* I p. 25); that Plato numbers him with Uranus and Zeus among 'the first and greatest of the gods'; and that Plato deplores

[1] Taylor *Plato*, p. 147.

the anti-ethical influence of the stories concerning him in a way which implies that these stories are currently believed. In sum, the point which I wish to emphasise regarding our passage from the *Laws* is that when we find the arch-critic of Greek mythology himself showing (even for a brief moment) so much regard for the current myths as not to deny to them a certain usefulness in the contemporary conditions of thought and life, we may well hesitate to believe that these myths, even the most repulsive, were utterly discounted by the 'ordinary Athenians,' his contemporaries.[1]

Some points which have arisen in this discussion invite a speculation regarding the indictment of Socrates. It appears (e.g. from Plato *Euthyphro* 6a) that Socrates was an adverse critic of the current mythology. Indeed he could scarcely help being so in a city where an exaggerated respect was paid to the ancient poets as authorities in religion, morals and much else; for he made it his business to examine all assumptions. Further, it is seriously suggested (*ibid.*) that his disbelief in myths such as those concerning Uranus, Cronus and Zeus is one reason why he was accused of impiety. Evidently Burnet is right in holding that *Rep.* II is in character with the historic Socrates, since there, as in the *Euthyphro*, these (and the like) tales are condemned by 'Socrates.' There too, as we have seen, 'Socrates' expressly alludes, as in the *Euthyphro*, to the disedifying nature of the myths portrayed on the robe offered to Athena Polias. The fact that both these dialogues ascribe to Socrates a condemnation of the same two things or sets of things (the *Theogony* and the 'peplos') appears to me significant. I have made it clear that I differ from Burnet in regarding the Platonic Socrates as an amalgam of Socrates and Plato; but I should agree with him so far as to hold that Plato, particularly in the earliest dialogues, based himself on what the historic Socrates actually taught and said, although I should give Plato all credit for developing the Socratic germ into a tree of many branches. I suggest, then, that in this passage of the *Euthyphro* we have little more than the Socratic germ; while in *Rep.* II we have Plato's development of the same theme. The *Euthyphro* is admittedly early enough. Ritter holds that it was actually composed before the trial of Socrates took place. But although I am disposed to agree with Ritter, and although the earlier the date of the *Euthyphro*, the stronger my case, it is not necessary to put the dialogue so early in order to accept the suggestion which I am about to make.

Socrates was charged with impiety on three counts: (1) disbelief in the existence of the gods in whose existence the state believes,[2] (2) introduction of novel

[1] That there is a real inconsistency in Plato's attitude will appear from a comparison of our passage with 906e, 907b, etc. If the young *do* believe the myths, they will grow up believing, on the authority of Homer, etc., not only that the gods exist but that the gods are unjust. This belief constitutes the third form of impiety, which is the worst of all (excepting that of the human beast of prey 909a). Thus in escaping atheism they will fall into a far more grievous error. Plutarch (*de superstit.* 169F) agrees, as Professor H. J. Rose reminds me, with the more characteristically Platonic view (907b) that 'superstition' (which is roughly Plato's third form of impiety) is worse than atheism; whereas Julian takes over the inconsistency from Plato and exaggerates it by his own additions.

A less serious but not uninteresting oversight occurs in 901a where the argument hinges on Hesiod *W. and D.* 303-4. The Athenian, though clearly alluding to these lines, does not quote the really important words; these, apparently, Cleinias and Megillus are expected to know. Yet they have already been congratulated (866b) on their ignorance of Hesiod's *Theogony*; it seems improbable that they will know the *W. and D.* by heart. Further, they are expected to accept this Hesiodic statement on one characteristic of the gods (that they hate the idle man), though it is based on no proof other than the authority of the discredited author of the *Theogony*.

[2] On the meaning of the first count see my articles in *C.R.* 'Greek for "Atheism"' (Feb. 1936) and 'More Greek for "Atheism."' It should be unnecessary for me to add that in contending for what I believe to be the truth on these matters (against e.g. Taylor's statement in *Plato* p. 163 n. 1 that a different interpretation of the indictment is 'quite certain on linguistic grounds') I intend no unkindness towards Professor A. E. Taylor or the memory of Professor J. Burnet.

divinities (i.e. his Divine Sign and the strange 'gods'—material elements like the aither—of the Ionian scientists with whom Socrates was popularly, though wrongly, associated), (3) corruption of the young. What I am about to say refers only to the first count, which would, however, form one item in support of the third; for I do not suppose that the accusers troubled to keep the three accounts quite separate in their arguments.

I suggest, then, that the first count would be supported chiefly by proving that Socrates had (*a*) adversely criticised myths of the Uranus-Cronus-Zeus type, and (*b*) had used critical language regarding the 'peplos.' He may very probably have said something to the effect that if the gods or their children do the kind of thing related by Hesiod or depicted on Athena's robe, then they are not gods or children of gods (cf. *Rep.* III 391d). If he did say so, he would of course mean to invite the hearer to infer that the gods and their children do not make war on one another. But his enemies, themselves believing the myths thus officially sanctioned (in addition to the *Theogony* which lacks such sanction), would say that the gods do act in this manner and that the 'peplos' itself is proof positive to that effect! And thence they would infer that in Socrates' view the gods are not gods.

Can it be, then, that when the indictment complains of Socrates' disbelief in the existence of the gods of Athens, the reference is above all to one important goddess: the pugnacious Athena Polias herself? I am inclined to answer this question in the affirmative. That such critical language on Socrates' part would come under the Attic law of impiety seems clear from the case of Diagoras of Melos who was charged with impiety, not for committing any impious act, but merely for adversely criticising the gods and ceremonies of the Athenians ([Lysias] VI 17).

If we look again at the passage of Plato with which we began, it will be clear how unjust such an exploitation of Socrates' remarks would have been. For criticism of the conduct of the gods as mythically portrayed need not in the least imply disbelief in their existence.

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