

Platonic Vision, Dialectic, and Myth: Seeing the Unseen in the *Phaedrus*

In this paper, I argue that the visual imagery in the myth of the *Phaedrus* provides an important philosophical tool by means of which Plato makes unseeable, but knowable, realities at the core of his ontology, seen. While often acknowledged as literary masterpieces, Plato's myths have sparked much philosophical debate (e.g. Brisson 1998, Partenie, ed. 2009, Slaveva-Griffin 2003, Zaslavsky 1981, among many others), particularly as they appear (at least on the surface) to undermine the traditional view of Plato as a strict rationalist.¹ This is because the myths with their vivid narratives and descriptions are based on the principle tool of the realm of Becoming (τὸ γιγνόμενον or τὸ ὁρατόν), sense perception (αἴσθησις), while the goal of Plato's philosophy is to grasp the knowable, but non-sensible, world of Being (τὸ ὄν or τὸ νοητόν) through reason (φρόνησις or νόησις) (See *Rep.* 509ff., *Tim.* 28ff.; cf. Brisson 1998). I will show that while for Plato, absolute, true wisdom (φρόνησις) ultimately rests on reasoned account (λόγος), he nevertheless, *contra* the orthodox view of Plato as solely a rationalist, recognizes the importance of the senses, particularly vision, as a stepping-stone to grasping eternal truths and especially for *expressing* these truths in the human world. In this way, the likeness or image (εἰκών) of Truth presented in myth (μῦθος) offers a visualization of his philosophical argument, i.e. the λόγος itself (*Phdr.* 245b ff).

In fact, as the language of the senses becomes fully integrated into the *Phaedrus*' charioteer *muthos*, the proof, i.e. the *logos* or *apodeixis* (*Phdr.* 245b), of the soul's immortality comes to life and provides the reader (or the listener, in the case of *Phaedrus*) with a synoptic, collective view of the soul's full interactions between the world of Becoming and the world of

¹ For a basic summary of the traditional or orthodox view of Plato's philosophy (or epistemology), one can consult the entry for "Plato" in the *OCD* with an entry written by K.J. Dover (1999) 1190-3 or in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (1995) 619-2 by R. Kraut. Traditionally, Plato's philosophy has been understood to stress the value of complete rationalism and the rejection of the empirical knowledge based on the senses. I will argue that the conception of vision in the *Phaedrus* complicates this orthodox view.

Being. In this way, the dialectical processes of division (διαίρεσις or διάτμησις) and collection (συναγωγή or σύνοψις), which Plato describes in both the introduction to the proof for the soul's immortality and the epilogue to the charioteer myth, correspond to the proof and the myth, i.e. the proof offers dialectical division, while the myth offers dialectical collection. Indeed, Plato's language and arrangement of the passages (in chiasmus and ring composition) stresses the need to understand the two passages alongside one another as both offer a corresponding view of the soul and its eternal nature. In this way, Plato rehabilitates the "hazy organs" of the senses (*Phdr.* 250d) at least as a tool along the way to true philosophy. While absolute knowledge relies upon contemplation (νόησις) and understanding (φρόνησις) of the forms, this wisdom is arrived at through a kind of vision, one which the soul possesses, despite its incorporeal status. Nevertheless, the soul's vision is quite different from the sensation of human eyes, as it not only can see visible objects but also invisible ones and can even distinguish these objects from their likenesses with wisdom—a synopsis. This vision is accomplished by means of mind (νῶ), which allows the soul to gaze upon truth itself and even to enter into the realm of Being. The myth of the charioteer also offers us the chance to gaze upon the world of Being through visual narrative and description. While it remains only an image, it is nonetheless one which, if understood with the truth expressed by the proof which proceeds it kept in mind, can be collectively grasped and contemplated as a unity. Vision then becomes a stepping-stone along the path to knowledge, a tool which is part of the human condition and cannot be ignored, but can ultimately be transcended through the power of mind.

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