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Myth, religion and philosophy: A philosophical analysis

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Abstract
Religion is a natural aspect of human race which grows out of human's desire for meaning and belonging. Even if we try to get rid of one religion, we create another religion. Best or worst, humans seem to be motivated by religion. It represents a cultural and national identity. Myth's philosophical importance is underestimated in that its role has been ignored simply because it is literary or argued as so much as window dressing by analytic interpreters of philosophy. The relation between 'myth and 'religion' is an old and much-discussed topic. However, there are fewer agreements around the phenomenology of the two terms and their functional relation.

Keywords: Myth, religion, philosophy

Introduction

The question one may pose with regards to the origin of philosophy and the relation between myth, religion and philosophy is that, whether the origin of philosophy is associated with myth/ mythology and Religion or religious myth? Whether the origin of philosophy is in fact traced to and inseparable from religious myth/mythology but abandons religious myth in favor of rational account? Whether the whole history of philosophy is nothing but the history of myths or there is no myth in philosophy at all? If we are to argue that philosophy is devoid of myth and religion, how are we going to view the philosophies of Plato (whose works are full of myth), whom we all believe is a philosopher?

To view the relationship between philosophy, religion and myth we need to study the origin and history of philosophy. To understand philosophy as Yosef put it clearly "we should return to its beginnings. Yet to able to return to the historical beginnings of philosophy is to be able to name the first philosopher as well as his philosophical predecessors...."[1] This may help us to know and substantiate our argument of whether philosophy arises out of religious myth or not.

Philosophy is traditionally defined as "an attempt to formulate and justify beliefs about the most universal or fundamental features of reality, knowledge and values, relaying exclusively on the use of human intelligence" [2]. Therefore, human values are one of the concerns of philosophy. Value includes the culture, norms and practices of the society which may come down from generation to generation orally in the form of myth which indicates that myth is also one important area of philosophical investigations.

The relationship between myth, reason and religion is the matter of interest to philosophers and theologians. Whether reason, in religions, is used as the justification for the search of the truth and religions are rational are the questions philosophers and theologians are debating on. Whether myth is worth philosophical is also another debate that is going to be addressed in this article. Moreover, the article discussed the Muthos - logos tensions and relationship from the views point of different philosophers.

The Debate on the Relationship between Myth, Religion and Philosophy
What is the nature of the relationship between religion and philosophy? Are they contradictory to each other or mutually inclusive? What is the nature of the relationship

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1 Baba, Y. M. Metaphilosophy or methodological Imperialism? The rationale for contemporary African philosophy with reference to Oromo philosophy. Nairobi, Kenya: The Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA) press, 2015.
2 Edward, Rem B. Reason and Religion: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion, 1972: 3

between myth, religion and philosophy and how do they are related? This sub-topic investigates and explores the relationship and interaction between myth, reason, religion and philosophy. The difference and similarity between philosophical thinking and mythical thinking are explored from different philosopher's point of view.

Before discussing the relationship between reason, myth and religion/ faith, it is good to define the terms separately for better understanding. Accordingly, internet encyclopedia of philosophy defined the three terms reason, faith and religious faith as follows:

Reason generally is understood as the principles for a methodological inquiry, whether intellectual, moral, aesthetic, or religious. Thus it is not simply the rules of logical inference or the embodied wisdom of a tradition or authority… Faith, on the other hand, involves a stance toward some claim that is not, at least presently, demonstrable by reason. Thus faith is the kind of attitude of trust or assent. As such, it is ordinarily understood to involve an act of will or a commitment on the part of the believer. Religious faith involves a belief that makes some kind of either an implicit or reference to a transcendent source. The base for a person's faith usually is understood to come from the authority of revelation [3]

There is no question as to whether philosophy and myth is related, or myth is worth a discussion in philosophy. Morgan stated "when we ask what is and is not a myth, and ponder the criteria by which we would answer the question, we are engaging in philosophy" [4]. Rather the question would be the nature of the relationship between myth and philosophy and whether myth is important in philosophical discussions.

There are inherent tensions and complicated relationship between myth and philosophy. Rui Zhu confirms the apparent tension between mythologein (mythology, telling stories) and apology (for philosophy) in Phaedo. According to him, "the two themes stand side by side throughout the dialogue but contradict each other because of well-known rivalry between myth and philosophy in Socratic philosophy" [5]. Zhu hinted that myth and philosophy are rivalry in Socratic philosophy.

As opposed to the above claim that myth and philosophy are rivalries, Zhu examining the works of Plato (the ideas of Socrates) and further argued that myth and philosophy can be friendly in that "the mystic are philosophers in Bacchic disguise while stories can stand by the side of reason and be instrument to philosophy. A philosopher might as well be a spiritual masseur, for whom myths and charmers are welcome additions to his reasoning" [6]. He further explained it as follows:

If Socrates' words are to be taken seriously, there must be a common ground between philosophy and myth despite their rivalry such that a eulogy of one does not automatically imply a recrimination against the other. At first appearance, the middle ground seems unlikely because of the well-

organized antinomy between myth and philosophy. After all, while philosophy is a rational enterprise, myth is inherently irrational. To look for a place where philosophy meets myth seems to be a request for an irrational reason, or a frenzied sobriety. [7]

In addition, Megan Halteman Zwart argued that myth or muthos and reason or reasoned argument can be used together (as they are used in the dialogue and the statesman) to illustrate the same point of view for different audiences or from a different angle. In this case, myth is useful but inferior way to achieve a rhetorical goal. Myths are used as a supplementary to achieve the same goal that logos might have. When Socrates asked Protagoras why he believed virtue can be taught, he replied by using both the muthos and the argument [8].

Yosef Mulugeta Baba, in his book "Metaphilosophy or Methodological Imperialism: The Rationale for Contemporary African Philosophy with reference to Oromo Philosophy", argued against John Burnet, who in his book entitled "Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato", argued that philosophy is not mythology or mythologies are not from which philosophy developed. From platonic point of view, philosophy requires rationality and there is no philosophy where there is no rational science [9].

E.A. Ruch and K.C. Anyawu argued in favor of the argument that both myth and philosophy are inseparable. They point out that "myth is both less and more than philosophy" in that the starting point for any philosophical discourse is "common sense experiences and beliefs, which are by their very nature pre-philosophical" [10].

In the dialogue, Socrates told prolonged stories, which he calls them myths, and assert that the stories are used to show the directions of conclusion which cannot be achieved with argument alone. Socrates's last teaching, before his death, about the immortality of the soul, in Phaedo (Plato's dialogue), comes in the form of myth [11]. Here, Socrates is affirming the importance of myth that myth is providing information used to draw a conclusion that cannot be achieved through reasoned argument.

Before pre-Socratic period myth has positive connotations. During the early philosophic authors such as Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Empedokles, myth has no negative connotation. Myth, before pre-Socratics, "was characterized by un demonstrable truth and poetic authority". Mythos, on the other hand, "connotes authoritative, efficacious and performative speech" [12]. But later, myth lost its positive connotations especially during the time of Plato. Morgan explained as follows:

In the aftermath of the first philosophers myth lost its positive connotations. No longer authoritative or efficacious,

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[3] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer reviewed academic Resource: nd

[4] Morgan, Kathryn. Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato. United Kingdom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004: 57

[5] Zhu, Rui. Myth and Philosophy: From a Problem in Phaedo. Journal of the American Academy of religion, Oxford University Press, Vol. 73, No. 2, 2005: 453

[6] Zhu, Rui. Myth and Philosophy: From a Problem in Phaedo. Journal of the American Academy of religion, Oxford University Press, Vol. 73, No. 2, 2005: 455

[7] Zhu, Rui. Myth and Philosophy: From a Problem in Phaedo. Journal of the American Academy of religion, Oxford University Press, Vol. 73, No. 2, 2005: 458

[8] Zwart, Megan Halteman. What Simple Description … Can Never Grasp: Heidegger and the Plato of Myth, 2009: 27 - 28

[9] Baba, Y. M. Metaphilosophy or methodological Imperialism? The rationale for contemporary African philosophy with reference to Oromo philosophy. Nairobi, Kenya: The Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA) press, 2015

[10] Baba, Y. M. Metaphilosophy or methodological Imperialism? The rationale for contemporary African philosophy with reference to Oromo philosophy. Nairobi, Kenya: The Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA) press, 2015: 76

[11] Zwart, Megan Halteman. What Simple Description … Can Never Grasp: Heidegger and the Plato of Myth, 2009: 29-30

[12] Morgan, Kathryn. Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato. United Kingdom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004: 16

it remained undemonstrable, but in a trivial rather than a transcendent sense. Its positive attributes were appropriated by philosophical discourse, and the criterion of demonstrability was attached to the notion of truth. Myth in philosophy exists as the shadow of its former self, on sufferance and admitted only in a reformed persona.... Myth provides an unsettling counterpart to its master, philosophy. … When philosophical discourse claim to be authoritative and to present language that corresponds to the way things are, myth ensures that we do not take too optimistic a view of the potential success of this enterprise [13]

Morgan argued that the attributes attached to myth as fiction, lie, pre-philosophic are based on slender and ambiguous evidence [14] The critics against myth are thought to start with the first philosophers. They criticize myth as irrational and unscientific - opposed to science [15]. The critics against myth are regarded as the transition from mythos to logos – the movement from irrationality to rationality. Nestel noted that "mythos and logos are two opposing poles of the human mind. Mythos is symbolic and pictorial, characterized by a lack of scrutiny, totally non-rational, while logos, of course, embodies the opposite qualities [16].

Philosophers interpret Plato's myth differently. Some interpret it that, for Plato, reason is superior/primary and myth is inferior/ secondary/ subservient. Some others argue that he is against myth. Some still argue that logos and muthos are intertwined.

According to both Zwart and Ludwing Edelstein, Plato believed that myth can be used as instrument of human intellect and accordingly is used as persuasive device. But, yet, reason is superior to myth for him. Zwart stated that "For Plato, logos discourse –or reason in the form of arguments-is of primary importance; insofar as it is commented on at all, muthos discourse is analyzed using logos discourse as a benchmark [17].

Luc Brisson identified two advantage of myth for Plato. First, it is used to maintain the knowledge held by Plato's community and transmitted and second, it is persuasive rhetoric device for behavior modification [18]. Brisson also argued that even though Plato regards myth as inferior to reason, it has a particular usefulness in ethics and politics, where it is used as an instrument of persuasion.

Penelope Murray and Janet E. Smith, on the other hand, claims that myth is a kind of logos for Plato, and they should be viewed together than something against each other. Murray explains evidencing the mythical elements in his writings [19].

For Plato, according to Fowler, the contrast between mythos and logos was complex, philosophical and ideological construct. He argued that:

choosing not to use the term 'mythos' and 'logos' at best requires inconvenient and unnecessary periphrasis for concepts with which we are already comfortably familiar; at worst it could misrepresent an important chapter in intellectual history, in which the historians played their part [20]

On the other hand, the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy in its article "faith and reason" presented four models on the interaction between faith and reason. The first model is called the conflict model which is advocated by both religious fundamentalists and scientific naturalists, who resolve the rivalry between the two on the side of faith and reason respectively. The model stated that "the aim, objects, or methods of reason and faith seem to be very much the same. Thus when they seem to be saying different things, there is genuine rivalry" [21].

The second model, the incompatibilist model, stated that "the aims, objects, and methods of reason and faith are understood to be distinct. Compartmentalization of each is possible. Reason aims at empirical truth; religion aims at empirical divine truths. Thus no rivalry exists between them." The third model, the weak compatibilist model, stated that "dialogue is possible between reason and faith, though both maintain distinct realms of evaluation and cogency." The last model is the strong compatibilist model and it stated that "faith and reason have an organic connection and perhaps even parity" [22].

Robert L. Fowler in his discussion of the relationship between myth and religion tried to define both myth and religion first thereby indicate how they are related. He adopted Walter B. Louden's definition of myth as "a sacred, traditional narrative, which depicts the interrelations of mortals and gods, is especially concerned with defining what is moral behavior for a given culture, and passes on key information about that culture's institutions [23]. He adopted a restricted definition of religion that he said might seem the definition of ritual than religion. Accordingly he used the term religion

To refer primarily to actions that people either individually or in group perform because of their belief in divinity. This might seem to be the definition of 'ritual' rather than 'religion'. But I am interested in the social nexus and meaning of ritual actions, which may be called the social face of religion, and so wish to consider not only the actions but rather context and understanding. This is at least part of what is meant by 'religion'. But admittedly it is a much broader term, encompassing not only ritual but myth, belief, values, individual and group psychology and sociology [24]

Fowler discussing about the relationship between Greek myth and ritual rose two points. First, Myth, he argued, constitutes a parallel discourse to that of ritual, but operates

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[13] Morgan, Kathryn. Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato. United Kingdom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004: 16 - 17

[14] Morgan, Kathryn. Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato. United Kingdom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004: 18

[15] Morgan, Kathryn. Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato. United Kingdom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004: 31

[16] Nestle 1942: 1-2 cited in Morgan, Kathryn. Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato. United Kingdom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004: 31

[17] Zwart, Megan Halteman. What Simple Description … Can Never Grasp: Heidegger and the Plato of Myth, 2009: 36

[18] Brisson, Plato the Myth Maker, trans., Gerard Naddaf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 116 cited by 'The Function of Myth in Plato's Philosophy,' Journal of the History of Ideas 10 (1948): 466 cited by Zwart, Megan Halteman. What Simple Description … Can Never Grasp: Heidegger and the Plato of Myth, 2009: 37

[19] Zwart, Megan Halteman. What Simple Description … Can Never Grasp: Heidegger and the Plato of Myth, 2009: 42-43

[20] Fowler, Robert L. Thoughts on Myth and Religion in Early Greek Historiography. University of Bristol, 2009: 24

[21] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer reviewed academic Resource

[22] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer reviewed academic Resource

[23] B. Louden, The Iliad: Structure, Myth, and Meaning (Baltimore 2006): 9 cited in Fowler, Robert L. Thoughts on Myth and Religion in Early Greek Historiography. University of Bristol, 2009: 22

[24] Fowler, Robert L. Thoughts on Myth and Religion in Early Greek Historiography. University of Bristol, 2009: 22

according to its own rules; it touches on ritual without affecting its essence. In this perspective one may argue that Greek myth has nothing to do with Greek religion. Second, Greek myth has everything to do with Greek religion in that "it is through Greek mythology that the great poets elaborated a powerful and distinctive world-view, with the gods and heroes at the centre. This is the realm of values and beliefs" [25].

George Santayana, an American philosopher, emphasized the relationship between myth and religion indicating that the stories about the lives and beliefs of the great religions of the past reflect many of the qualities of the myth. He argued:

Understanding the meaning of life and finding inspiration and direction through the traditional stories of religious figures is a form of mythic thinking and consciousness. Buddha, Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and Mohammed, all probably real historical figures, led mythic lives. They all embody archetypes that address the meaning, purpose, and value of human life. … Mystic thinking about the future is still very much alive [26]

Myth and religion are also similar in terms of their contents. Fowler contends that they both are concerned with ideas and beliefs about deities of gods and goddesses. Fowler further stated that although religion and myth blurs in to each other, religion grows out of myth. "Myth is narrative whereas religion integrates myth with organized practices of worship and ethical behavior, and often general forms of social organizations of reality and prescription for behavior, institutionalized and codified" [27] Armstrong, on his part, argued that

Humans have been worshipping gods since we were first recognizably human… that gods find their origin in prehistoric times. … that religion emerged as a response to the fear of death and the transitory quality of life … the worship of gods expresses the wonder and mystery human feel in response to the world [28]

Religion is often characterized as more of emotional than rational, especially as compared to science. However, both reason and passion can be found in all religions. They are intertwined in human consciousness. All religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emphasize the value of reason in search for truth and enlightenment [29].

Baba underscores that one can never demonstrate a historical view that demonstrate that philosophy originated and developed out of older religious myth of early Greek society because he believes that there is no historical evidence that justify the chronological order for the emergence of religious myth, philosophy and the structure of the society. He further contends that:

To say philosophy arose from religious myth is tantamount to admitting that from the very moment of the origin of human life on earth, whether this be attributed to creationist or evolution, for the period the historical beginning of philosophy is relegated to only those question concerning religious myth existed. To say the least, this approach would

be an absurd philosophical view as it goes against the philosophical conception of human existence [30]

Conclusion

It is argued and most philosophers believe that philosophizing is inherent in human nature – as both Plato and Aristotle argued "all men by nature desire to know". As Baba stated, "it is natural for man to wonder and raise the fundamental questions of life and propose a provisional and permanent solution" [31] and wonderment is not an option. If all men are inherently philosophizing and men are religious at the same time, in a way to say, it may follow that and supports the view that philosophy developed out of religion. Human beings are philosophizing out of their religious experiences.

To common sense, philosophical thinking and mythical thinking are mutually opposed to each other. Plato is the first to solidify the distinction between logos and muthos discourses by making a claim that logos discourse can be proved to be either true or false, whereas muthos discourse is not. That is the reason why Plato does not use myth as a vehicle to truth; but only as a persuasive device. Myth carries with it resonance of poetic practices, which is not the interest of the philosophers and from which they want to separate themselves.

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