

The Epistemological Function of the Myth of the Reversed Cosmos of Plato's *Statesman*

This paper argues that the Myth of the Reversed Cosmos (MRC) of Plato's *Statesman* plays an essential epistemological role in the dialogue, a role which has received insufficient attention due to the focus on the political and cosmological attractions of the myth.

The *Statesman*'s MRC has primarily been treated as a vehicle for Plato's political thought.¹ Recent attention has also been devoted to a serious consideration of the cosmology of the myth.² Its epistemological role has not gone entirely unnoticed. Melissa Lane details important political elements of the tale but also emphasizes its epistemological use as a paradigm. The first attempt at division of *politikê* fails, Lane suggests, because of the lack of a paradigm as a guiding model for the analysis. Paradigms, Lane argues, are a necessary tool for diairesis, serving as organizational principles to sort out the relevant similarities and dissimilarities that various other kinds bear to the target kind.³ In the *Statesman* one is needed to properly separate the various arts from *politikê*, and the MRC is deployed for this purpose. Although Lane acknowledges that the myth provides several important insights for the correction of the failed diairesis, her ultimate verdict on its service is negative: it serves as a negative paradigm. She bases this verdict on the assessment of the Eleatic Stranger (ES) himself who states that the myth was much too long for its limited purpose (277ac). Lane takes this narrative excess however to serve another function: it sets the stage for the discussion of the important notion of due measure, a somewhat deflationary role for so grand a tale.

Like Lane, I argue that the MRC has an important epistemological and methodological role to play in the economy of the dialogue. Unlike Lane, however, I shall argue that the MRC

¹ Thus Campbell (1867), Skemp (1952), Rosen (1979, 1995), Miller (1980).

² Rowe (1995).

³ So too Gill (2010).

plays a much more important and positive role than the ES' words at first suggest and that, properly understood, it serves an essential function in the analysis of *politikê*. The proper analysis of *politikê* requires a knowledge of human nature which, for Plato, means an axiological consideration of human being. The method of division, as ES stresses, is blind to such axiological considerations (266cd). It thus provides only a partial analysis of human nature, one only in terms of material nature. The MRC serves as the methodological supplement to diairetic analysis, serving as a means for an axiological consideration of human being by presenting to us human beings in two very different settings: the apparent golden age of the reverse cycle and the parlous circumstances of the current epoch.

At the very heart of the MRC the ES asks the question which is at the heart of the dialogue itself: in which period are the humans more blessed (272bd)? ES does not directly answer this question, but rather provides a series of conditional statements regarding the necessary conditions which would have to obtain for the humans of either epoch to have eudaimonia. I provide a careful analysis of this passage and argue that the subtle implication of ES' conditionals is that, although rational activity or philosophical inquiry is a necessary condition for proper human nature and thus for human eudaimonia, whether or not it is also sufficient is left tantalizingly undetermined. Additionally, in leaving the verdict in this incomplete state, requiring the reader to work out the conditionals by drawing on the resources provided by the MRC, Plato has cleverly led the reader to engage in the very activity which ES identifies as a necessary condition for eudaimonia. The MRC may seem like an excessive heap, but only if we fail to see how each element of the MRC is needed in order to answer the question concerning human eudaimonia at its center, the answer to which is essential for the remainder of the analysis of *politikê*.

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