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What Makes a Myth ΕΙΚΩΣ*? Remarks Inspired by Myles Burnyeat's* 'ΕΙΚΩΣ ΜΥΘΟΣ'

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1.

There is every chance that Myles Burnyeat's paper on εἰκὼς μῦθος will very soon become a classic that initiates fruitful discussions by challenging traditional interpretations and by drawing attention to hitherto underappreciated aspects of well-known texts. The paper was first published in 2005 in a thematic issue of the young journal *Rhizai* and was republished in 2009 in *Plato's Myths,* a collection of papers edited by Catalin Partenie at Cambridge University Press. And I am happy to announce that the paper is already available in Hungarian translation.[1] The fact that the organizers of the Urbana conference on the *Timaeus* selected it to be the topic of a special session is further testimony for the importance of the paper.

In what follows, I shall offer a series of remarks, the general tendency of which will not be polemical, simply because I find the gist of the paper compelling. What I shall try to do, instead of raising objections, is to explore and develop certain points coming up in Burnyeat's discussion, to call attention to certain passages in both the *Timaeus* and other Platonic texts that may give further nuances to the picture, and in some cases to suggest some shift of emphasis.

1 M. F. Burnyeat, "ΕΙΚΩΣ ΜΥΘΟΣ," *Rhizai*, 2 (2005), 143–165; Catalin Partenie, *Plato's Myths* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Hungarian translation in Gábor Betegh and Tamás Böröczki, eds., *A formák és a tudás. Tanulmányok Platón metafizikájáról és ismeretelméletéről* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2007).

2.

Let me start by stating that I fully accept what I take to be Burnyeat's central claim, i.e., that the term εἰκώς in the phrases εἰκὼς λόγος and εἰκὼς μῦθος designates a positive norm or standard which the relevant discourses ought to aspire to satisfy. What I would nevertheless stress is that this contention is not incompatible with the claim—which is the core of the traditional interpretation—that the term εἰκώς is limitative and restrictive. The two are not exclusive alternatives, because the same term can express a positive standard *and* a limitation in the relevant contexts.[2] Take for example the term "graduate level" as in expressions like "graduate level work." On the one hand it states a positive requirement, standard, or norm. The fact that a paper was written by a graduate student will not in itself guarantee that this norm is satisfied; it is something the graduate student ought to aspire to in writing the paper, and if the expression can justifiably be applied to the result, it is an indication that the effort was successful. This corresponds, I think, fairly well to what Burnyeat says about the term εἰκώς: an account about a generated thing will not automatically be εἰκώς, but ought to aspire to live up to that standard.

Consider now the following sentence "Professional scholars are expected to produce professional, publishable pieces, whereas graduate students are expected to produce graduate level work." In this sentence, which is meant to be roughly analogous to the way Burnyeat suggests to read the crucial sentence at 29b3–c3, the same term "graduate level" can express both a positive norm (with respect to graduate students) and a comparative limitation (with respect to the work expected from established scholars). In such a sentence there is no pressure to choose between normativity and comparative restriction.

It remains nonetheless true that if we insert a "but" and an "only" in the sentence and say that "*but* graduate students are expected to produce *only* graduate level work" we emphasize the limitative aspect; so Burnyeat's complaints about translations like Cornford's—which introduce a "but" and an "only" absent from the Greek—and the corresponding interpretations, remain fully justified.

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2 I am not thereby implying that Burnyeat would deny this point; indeed when he turns to discuss the "permissibility … of translating εἰκώς as 'probable' or 'likely'," he makes a move in this direction. But the point I am making is different in so far as it has nothing to do with the semantic richness of the word εἰκώς, but is based simply on the structural features of the relevant sentences. Moreover, it has become manifest in discussions of the paper that Burnyeat's greater emphasis on the normative aspect of the term—surely, an effect of the polemical context of his paper—may create the impression that the restrictive aspect of the term is now in need of a defense.

3.

This is how Burnyeat introduces the discussion of that part of the text where Timaeus turns to describe discourses about likenesses (section D in Burnyeat's apportioning of the text): "Please note that the subject of the sentence is not any old statement about a likeness, still less any old statement about the sensible world, but accounts exegetic of a certain type of likeness, namely, one fashioned after an eternal unchanging model. These accounts will be akin to their subject matter in the sense of being εἰκότες accounts of that subject matter" (pp. 151–152). I am not entirely sure whether Burnyeat wants to suggest here that we should restrict the class of εἰκότες accounts to successful accounts about copies made after an eternal model, excluding thus accounts about such copies which have generated things as their models—but in any case his reminder calls attention to a problem that seems to be in need of some further discussion and clarification.

The problem is that the binary distinction of the sentence about discourse types at 29b3–c3 does not map onto the original binary ontological and epistemological distinction announced at 27d6–28c4. The original division distinguished between everlasting beings (let's call them A's) on the one hand, and becoming things (let's call them B's) on the other. In the next step we learn from Timaeus that B things fall into two major classes: those that were fashioned after an A (let's call these B^A things), and those which were created after another B (let's call these B^B things). Timaeus then applies a special argument to show that the cosmos is a B^A thing (28c5–29a5). When Timaeus turns next to discourse types at 29b2, he first speaks about discourses that are exegetical of, and akin to, A things in general, and specifies the characteristics and norms of such discourses. Then, as Burnyeat reminds us, Timaeus refers not to discourses about B things in general, but only to successful discourses about B^A things, characterizing *these* discourses as εἰκότες. But does this mean that Timaeus wants to say that *only* such discourses can be εἰκώς? Or is there some other reason for the restricted scope of this sentence?

Prima facie, the text suggests that discourses about B^B things are not excluded from εἰκότες accounts—Timaeus just does not mention them. First, the explanatory clause ὄντος δὲ εἰκόνος is general enough to accommodate both B^A and B^B things in so far as both are copies. Second, when Timaeus specifies the terms of the proportion, he compares οὐσία (being) to γένεσις (becoming). So, once again, he uses the more general term, γένεσις, which corresponds to the term used in the original ontological division prior to the introduction of the more fine-grained distinction between B^A and B^B things: γένεσις encompasses both B^A and B^B things. These considerations seem to suggest that a successful account about a B^B, in so far as B^B is a copy and is characterized by γένεσις, will be an εἰκώς account.

However, the ἐξηγηταί language that Burnyeat emphasizes may become crucial at this point. For Timaeus' major premise in the argument about discourse types seems to tie the kinship relation between discourses and their objects to the discourses' being 'exegetical' of their objects: "accounts are akin to those things which they are *exegetai*" (29b4–d5, ὡς ἄρα τοὺς λόγους, ὧνπέρ εἰσιν ἐξηγηταί, τούτων αὐτῶν καὶ συγγενεῖς ὄντας). The account thus needs to be 'exegetic' of its object to be akin to it; using this assumption one may suggest at this point that an account about a B^B thing cannot be εἰκώς because it cannot be 'exegetic' of its subject. For Burnyeat stresses the strong religious connotation of the word ἐξηγητής, i.e., that an *exegete* is someone who explains something that is divine or comes from a divine source. Now if this connotation is strong enough to guarantee that an account can only be an ἐξηγητής if it successfully explains something divine or issuing from the divine, the restriction to discourses about B^A things, as opposed to B things in general, may perhaps be explained in this way. For a successful, 'exegetic' account of a B^A thing will explain the object's essential connection to the divine, either by explaining that it came into being by the agency of a god or by referring to its divine model, or indeed by saying that the generated thing itself is a god (as in the case of the cosmos). An account of a B^B thing, by contrast, will, for the most part, remain in the sphere of B things without mentioning anything divine: both the copy and the model is a B thing, and, a god will rarely make a copy after a B thing (I shall return to this point in a moment). The divine does not enter such an account, consequently the account will not be an ἐξηγητής, and if it is not ἐξηγητής, it will not be akin to its object, and therefore even though the object is an εἰκών, the account, even if successful in presenting its object as far as possible, will not be εἰκώς.

The force of this line of thought ultimately depends on the question whether the connection between the word ἐξηγητής and the divine is strong enough—strong enough to bear the weight of this argument. And this, I think, is open to debate. It is of course true that the religious connotation of the word generally speaking is very strong; the question is whether the word necessarily implies a reference to the sphere of the divine or it can be used also in a more general, 'secularized' way.

It turns out that the latter is the case. Surely, an ἐξηγητής in the strict sense offers advice on religious matters, explaining what the relevant sacred law is, and how it applies to the particular case. But we see very soon that the word can figure in a looser sense where the ἐξηγητής becomes someone who offers advice on *any* practical matter, without any reference to the sphere of the divine. Thus the author of a shrewd political plan can be called an ἐξηγητής (Herodotus, 5.31; ἐξηγητής is the reading of all the manuscripts, but was emended into ἐσηγητής by Herwerden and Madvig). The word can be used

even in clearly negative contexts to refer to someone who masterminded a series of frauds (Demosthenes, *Against Lacritus*, 17.6). If we take the other aspect of the function of a religious ἐξηγητής, i.e., to explain something the meaning of which is obscure, we can observe a similar, secularizing semantic development. For example Aeschines can call his traveling companion an ἐξηγητής τῆς ἁπάσης κακοηθείας, "the expounder of all mischief," because he learnt from him the apparently improper and naughty meanings of such words as κέρκωψ, παιπάλημα and παλίμβολον (Aeschines, *On the Embassy*, 40.5). It seems clear that the religious overtone is gone or has turned into very strong irony. These occurrences show, I think, that the reference to the divine is not a *necessary* feature of the word. This means in turn that the religious, theological connotation of the word ἐξηγητής may not be strong enough to restrict the group of 'exegetical' discourses to such discourses which necessarily have a reference to the divine, i.e., discourses about A and B^A things; it may be sufficient if the accounts successfully explain something.

If so, the easiest way to explain the fact that Timaeus in our sentence refers only to discourses about B^A things is that he has already established that the object of his discourse is a B^A thing, so he can now focus only on the relevant class—without thereby excluding that a discourse about a B^B thing, if certain requirements are met, can also be εἰκώς.

Incidentally, it appears that Timaeus also speaks about B^B things, and Burnyeat explicitly calls attention to this fact in a different context. Take for example the way the younger gods created the head after the shape of the cosmos (44d3–4: τὸ τοῦ παντὸς σχῆμα ἀπομιμησάμενοι, with Burnyeat's analysis on pp. 157–158). This is thus an account of a B^B thing, but should, I assume, be considered an εἰκὼς λόγος nonetheless. What, of course, complicates the picture here is that the head is a divine creation as well, even though it is created by the younger gods. But it could hardly be otherwise, since the *Timaeus* speaks only about divine creations. Yet, this is a good reminder that divine agents can also create B^B things in the appropriate circumstances, and that teleological reasoning can also enter the creation of B^B things, even if, as we have learned in the proem, such things can never be καλός (beautiful, good, cf. 28b1–2).

Yet, there may be a further twist: For in their works of creation the younger gods are doing what the demiurge told them to do. Now in his speech to the gods, the demiurge instructed them "to turn according to your own nature to the making of living creatures, *imitating my power in generating you*" (τρέπεσθε κατὰ φύσιν ὑμεῖς ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν ζῴων δημιουργίαν, μιμούμενοι τὴν ἐμὴν δύναμιν περὶ τὴν ὑμετέραν γένεσιν, 41c4–6). So when the younger gods create the heads of mortal beings they model it after a B thing—yet in doing that they are at the same time imitating something that is an A thing, i.e.,

the demiurge.[3] What they are imitating is, most importantly, the teleological nature of demiurgic creation; their creative activity becomes a likeness of the demiurge's action. Now, is that part of Timaeus' discourse 'exegetic' of the human head, a B^B thing, or the demiurgic activity of the younger gods, a B^A, or at least a quasi-B^A, thing? This consideration, I believe, introduces an important novel dimension into what initially appeared to be a clear-cut distinction between discourses about B^A and B^B things.

To sum up, the qualification εἰκώς applied to a discourse could mean in a more general sense that the discourse in question successfully reveals a B thing *as* a copy as opposed to merely exposing it as a thing that has come to be. This is also what Timaeus' parallel between the two types of discourses ultimately suggests. When discourses are successful, they effectively reveal the most salient ontological fact about their objects. A successful discourse about an εἰκών will be εἰκώς precisely in so far as it presents its subject *as* an εἰκών, explaining what its model is, why it was created after that particular model, by whom, etc.

Now assuming that εἰκὼς λόγος is the more general term, εἰκὼς μῦθος being a subset of it (on this see below), I find it tempting to think that, in the case of a B^A thing, an account which reveals only the connection between the B^A thing in question and its model is already a *bona fide*, albeit not complete, εἰκὼς λόγος; in this sense an explanation in terms of the relevant Form or Forms is already an εἰκὼς λόγος. What makes an account an εἰκὼς μῦθος is that we also get a narrative in which we hear about the maker and the maker's reasons for creating the thing in question.

4.

The last sentence of Timaeus' proem contains further notable features relevant to Burnyeat's discussion. It will be useful to have the sentence in front of our eyes:

> (i) If, therefore, Socrates, in many respects concerning many things, regarding gods and the generation of the universe, (ii) we find ourselves unable to furnish accounts which are entirely and in every way in agreement with each other and made completely precise, do not be surprised; (iii) but if we can offer accounts no less likely than anyone else's, we must be content, (iv) remembering that I the speaker and you the judges have human nature, (v) and consequently it is fitting that we should accept the likely narrative

3 For the point that the demiurge is an A thing, see, e.g., 37a1, where the demiurge is characterized as "the best of the intelligible and eternal beings."

about these matters (vi) and seek nothing further. (translation by Burnyeat, slightly modified, my numbering)

The sentence immediately follows the sentence which states the analogy between discourse types and their respective objects. The οὖν, "therefore," in the first part of our sentence indicates that Timaeus is now drawing the lesson from his previous claims. Section (i) then designates the scope of the ensuing claim, first more loosely ("in many respects concerning many things") and then adding some precision ("regarding gods and the generation of the universe"). It may be asked at this point what the force of this addition is. First, is it meant to be exhaustive of the "many things" or is it simply calling attention to some salient examples, especially relevant to Timaeus' current project? Second, how exactly is it supposed to connect to the claims about discourses and their objects in the previous sentence? For we have learned from Timaeus' previous arguments that the universe is a copy (a B thing), and that it is a copy made after an eternal model (B^A thing); a successful discourse about it will be εἰκώς. But what about the gods? As it will become clear in Timaeus' speech, a god can be an A thing (the demiurge) or a B^A thing (the cosmos, the younger gods). However, it seems fairly clear to me that the gods are not mentioned here because they fall into one of the ontological categories discussed in the previous sentence. The important point about them is not that they themselves may be εἰκόνες, and therefore the discourse about them may be an εἰκώς account, but rather that they are the *makers* of the εἰκόνες which are the objects of the εἰκώς accounts.[4]

This point provides immediate support to Burnyeat's claim that a successful, full account about a likeness will reveal not only the likeness' relation to its model, but will also make reference to the maker, his or her motivations for creating the likeness and the practical reasoning governing his or her creative activity. And if this is so, this gives good justification to Timaeus' disclaimer: speaking about the makers' motivations and reasoning may be particularly difficult when the makers are gods. After all, Timaeus has just reminded his audience how difficult it is to find and speak about the father and maker of this universe (28c3–5). The οὖν refers back not only to the previous sentence, but also to what we learned in the earlier parts of the proem.

The upshot is that the difficulty we may face in formulating an account of a likeness depends not merely on the ontological status of the likeness, but also on our cognitive access to the maker and the creation of the likeness. The

4 *Contra* A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's* Timaeus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 74 *ad loc.* and translation in A. E. Taylor, *Plato: Timaeus and Critias* (London: Methuen, London, 1929), who takes the genitive of θεῶν be dependent on γενέσεως. Other translations, like F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1952), and Donald J. Zeyl, *Plato: Timaeus* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), and Luc Brisson, *Platon: Timée / Critias* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1992), make it coordinate with the genitive of γενέσεως.

maker is an all-important part of an εἰκώς account—and this is a marked difference as compared to the Divided Line, and its possible echoes in the first part of the proem, where the cognitive state is made correlative merely to the ontological status of the object.

Sections (iii)–(vi) of the same sentence provide strong confirmation to this contention. The crucial point comes with Timaeus' emphatic reference to our human nature in (iv). Both the claim in (iii) that we must be content if we are able to produce a likely account which is not less likely than anyone else's,[5] and the claim in (v) that it is fitting (πρέπει) to accept the resulting εἰκὼς μῦθος, are made dependent on the fact that both the speaker and the listeners are human beings. If there would be a simple strict correlation between the status of the subject matter of the discourse, i.e., that it is a likeness, and the status of the ensuing discourse, then the heavy stress on the human nature of the speaker and the audience would not make much sense.[6]

What is meant, I assume, must be that in so far as the relevant accounts need to include claims about the motivations and reasoning of the demiurgic god or gods, no human being is in a position to say anything certain about these matters. If it is the case that the cosmos was created (in some sense or other) by one or more divine beings—and Timaeus is certainly committed to this much—then there are facts of the matter that are naturally accessible to these divine beings, but are not available to us humans. If those gods wanted to give an account of the way they created the cosmos, its structural parts and inhabitants, that would be an εἰκώς account as well in so far as it would be an account about an εἰκών—yet that account would be at another level of certainty, one that humans cannot even aspire to. The μηδενός at 29c7 must

5 I find Burnyeat's arguments for taking μηδενός at 29c7 as referring to other people who produce alternative accounts attractive. Two small remarks, however. It is notable that Taylor who, following Chalcidius, took μηδενός to refer to people, translate the parallel phrase at 48d3 μηδενὸς ἧττον εἰκότα differently: "Mindful of what I said at first of the character of probable discourse, I shall endeavour to make a statement in each point and all not less but more probable than what has been said from the beginning of our discourse until now" (Taylor, *Timaeus and Critias*; cf. Taylor, *Commentary*, pp. 310–311, *ad loc.*). This is especially remarkable since the sentence at 48d explicitly refers back to the sentence at 29c. The case is of course complicated by the notorious textual problem posed by the following ἔμπροσθεν at 48d3. But if one decides to construe μηδενός as a neuter at 48d3, it becomes considerable more difficult to keep it masculine at 29c7. Incidentally, Burnyeat mistakenly groups with the majority view T. K. Johansen's *Plato's Natural Philosophy: A Study of the Timaeus-Critias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 49.

6 Cf. Taylor, *Commentary*, p. 75, *ad loc.*: "As Timaeus holds that 'from the nature of the subject' there can be no exact knowledge in cosmology, he probably does not mean to suggest that the exactitude he is denying to man is enjoyed by God." Fair enough—but then Taylor does not offer an alternative explanation of Timaeus' insistence on his and his listeners' human nature.

refer to human beings. There is thus an element of certainty or uncertainty in such discourses that is quite independent of the epistemological limitation stemming from the fact that the object of the account is a generated physical object. This second limitation is absolute, one that human and divine beings share; but in respect of the first one, humans have a handicap that they can never compensate. What we must accept and be content with is the εἰκώς account available to us humans,[7] in so far as we can try to attribute reasons to the divine artificers with some probability.

To sum up, due attention paid to sections (i) and (iv) of the closing sentence of the proem may offer significant support to Burnyeat's contention that the qualification εἰκώς goes beyond the epistemological limitations set by the ontological status of the likeness and incorporates reference to the practical reasoning of the maker.

5.

Thus far, I have concentrated on the adjective εἰκώς saying very little about the words μῦθος and λόγος that it qualifies. In this respect, Burnyeat argues, first, that μῦθος should not be rendered by some innocuous word like "story" or "narrative," but should be translated by the more marked term "myth". This is so, on Burnyeat's argument, not merely because Timaeus relates the deeds of divine beings, but because what he tells us is also a theogony. The variation between εἰκὼς μῦθος and εἰκὼς λόγος should then be viewed against the backdrop of the opposition between Hesiod's *Theogony* and Presocratic cosmogonies, corresponding to the more general μῦθος/λόγος opposition (pp. 144–145). The variation between εἰκὼς μῦθος and εἰκὼς λόγος indicates that Timaeus' discourse transcends this opposition (pp. 145 and 156).

First, I would have a brief remark about the relationship between μῦθος and λόγος. This is obviously not the place to try to tackle the dauntingly complex issue of the relationship between this pair of concepts more generally. But if we concentrate on the way Timaeus uses these terms in his speech, and more specifically in his proem, it appears that there is no real opposition between the two at all. So it is not so much the case that there is an initial assumed opposition which the εἰκὼς μῦθος, being rational and reasoned, overcomes or transcends. It seems to me rather that Timaeus already starts with a sufficiently general and generous concept of λόγος that can encompass mythical accounts or, indeed, which in the relevant cases invites such accounts.

Note first of all that λόγος is used as the most general term for accounts or discourses in the sentence on discourse types at 29b3–c3: λόγοι can have

7 Note also the definite article in front of εἰκὼς μῦθος at 29d2: If we can produce an account that is no less εἰκώς than those give by other humans, then we have to accept *that* one.

as their objects entities from either ontological realms, so λόγοι can express both νόησις (knowledge) and δόξα (opinion) from the original epistemological distinction. Note also that when Timaeus refers for the first time to the speech that he is about to deliver about the universe, he calls it a λόγος, before he settled the question whether it was born or is without birth (ἡμᾶς δὲ τοὺς περὶ τοῦ παντὸς λόγους ποιεῖσθαί πῃ μέλλοντας, ἢ8 γέγονεν ἢ καὶ ἀγενές ἐστιν κτλ., 27c4–5).

As commentators have often pointed out, it is remarkable that as soon as Timaeus has established that everything that has come to be has a cause, he immediately translates the cause into a personal agent; he then applies this point to the case of the cosmos as well. This personalizing move strongly suggests that, for Timaeus, a λόγος about anything that has come to be will naturally take the form of a narrative, and in those cases where the personal agent responsible for the coming into being of the object in question is not a human being, this narrative will be a myth in the narrower sense. In view of this, it becomes relatively unsurprising that Timaeus can switch to the μῦθος language at 29d without any further preparation or explanation; after what we were told in the earlier parts of the proem, it is natural that these λόγοι will take the form of myths.

This consideration also suggests, I would maintain, that the appropriate context to understand Timaeus' use of μῦθος here is what we would call aetiological myths, i.e., narratives that seek to account for the origin of a certain phenomenon, state of affairs, institution, plant or animal species by reference to divine actions in some unspecified moment in the past. So without denying the relevance of Hesiod's *Theogony* (and other, non-Hesiodic theogonies for that matter), what I would emphasize is the relevance of the broader stock of such mythical narratives. More specifically, I would suggest that Plato's use of aetiological myths in other dialogues may bring us closer to understanding what makes a myth εἰκώς for Timaeus.

Consider for example the little myth Socrates relates in his very first sentences in the *Phaedo* as one that Aesop would have told had he noticed a salient fact about pleasure and pain.[9] Socrates first speaks in his own voice:

> What a curious thing, my friends, he said, what people call pleasant seems to be; what an amazing relationship it has to what is considered its opposite, pain. They are unwilling both to come

8 Accepting the reading of F and Y.

9 Here I am building on the analysis of the Aesop myth I develop in Gábor Betegh "Tale, Theology and Teleology in the *Phaedo*," in *Plato's Myths*, Catalin Partenie, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); by a happy chance the paper will appear in the same volume in which Burnyeat's paper will be republished.

> to us at the same time, but if we pursue one of them and catch it, we are pretty much compelled to catch the other as well, as if these two were joined at a single tip. (60b3–c1)

So Socrates notices a phenomenon—the relationship between pleasure and pain—and he finds that this phenomenon is strange. He calls pleasant curious (ἄτοπον), and its relationship to pain amazing (θαυμασίως πέφυκε). But then he adds the following:

> And it seems to me, he said, that if Aesop had thought of it, he would have composed a myth that the god wanted to reconcile them as they were fighting against each other, but when he could not, he attached the tip of their heads together, and this is why if one of them comes to someone, the other as well will later visit the same person. (60c1–5)

This apparently insignificant little fable connects at important points to Timaeus' cosmological myth and, moreover, gives excellent support to Burnyeat's central thesis. Note, first of all, that Socrates says that this is a myth Aesop would have told. Now Aesop's name turns up again a page later, where Socrates says that when he recently felt that the god might expect some poetic work from him, he put into verse Aesop's myths that he knew by heart. It is a clear indication that Socrates considers Aesop a good composer of myths, and, moreover, one who composes such myths that would please the god. Remember that this was after all what Timaeus also asked in his invocation and prayer to the gods: that everything he says should please the gods (θεούς τε καὶ θεὰς ἐπικαλουμένους εὔχεσθαι πάντα κατὰ νοῦν ἐκείνοις … εἰπεῖν, 27c7–d1[10]). And it is easy to see that Aesop's myth about pleasure and pain, had he written it, would have pleased the god, because, as far as we can get a glimpse of it from the preview Socrates relates to his friends, it is an expression of the correct views about the god and the relationship between god and the world.

Let's take a look at the structure of this little myth. The narrative starts with a negative state of affairs: there is a warfare between pleasure and pain. This situation, at the same time, is the privation of the phenomenon Socrates has noticed: pleasure and pain are not yet tied together. Then the god enters the scene and wants to mend the situation by creating order in the relation between pleasure and pain. What he first intends to achieve would certainly be the best solution: "the god wanted to reconcile them." But even the god does not have the power to do anything he would wish, but has to count with

10 I cannot develop the point here, but it is rarely remarked how rich in meaning this prayer becomes when we read it from the perspective of the later developments of Timaeus' speech. For, Timaeus' speech will also specify who the addressees of his prayer really are—most importantly the maker of the cosmos and the makers of its inhabitants. And if he could manage to speak according to their νοῦς (reason), he would indeed accomplish his task to full success.

certain limiting conditions; for, surely, pleasure and pain are by their very natures opposites, so even a god cannot attain a total reconciliation between them. This is why the god has to find a second best solution, which is at the same time the best available, practicable solution. This course of action then leads to the emergence of the current situation, to the conjunction of pleasure and pain, the phenomenon noticed by Socrates. The myth is supposed to have explanatory power with respect to the phenomenon as the phrase "and this is why" (καὶ διὰ ταῦτα, 60c4) indicates.

The structural parallel with Timaeus' myth, I think, is obvious. The crucial elements are all there: the disorderly negative initial situation, which is a privation of the explanandum, the divine intention to install the best possible state of affairs, the limiting conditions set by the nature of the material. And the overall effect and explanatory force of the two myths may also be comparable. For remember that Socrates found the phenomenon curious. The force of Aesop's myth is that it integrates the phenomenon into the order of the world by explaining it as the result of a purposeful action of a god who wants order in the world and aims at the best. If Aesop had composed a myth along these lines, filling in all the details that are missing from Socrates' skeletal formulation—explaining for example why the god went for exactly this solution, whether he considered it a form of punishment, or a reconciliation as far as possible, or a mixture of the two—the outcome would have been a good, appropriate, reasonable myth—an εἰκώς myth, if you wish, at least in the non-technical sense—because it would have revealed why it is good and reasonable that pleasure and pain are so related.

But Aesop would still not be either a philosopher or an expert scientist. He would not have the scientific resources to integrate into his myth the relevant facts about the physiology of pleasure and pain, nor would he have the correct general metaphysical framework about the ontology of things that have come to be. Most importantly, he would not know that they are likenesses. His myth would be appropriate and reasonable in so far as it would be based on the correct theological assumption, that the god is good and wants everything to be as good as possible, and would use the corresponding teleological explanatory scheme for the explanation of a given phenomenon; this much he shares with Timaeus. But Timaeus may remain content because his version would be still more εἰκώς due to his expertise in philosophy, mathematics, and natural science.