

BOOK REVIEW

The Platonic Myths. By Josef Pieper. Introduction by James V. Schall. Translated by Dan Farrelly. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2011. 75 pp. \$11.00. ISBN 978-1-58731-637-1.

It has been said that the history of philosophy is nothing more than a series of footnotes on the work of Plato (Whitehead), while, the activity of philosophy is nothing less than the art of learning how to read the dialogues of Plato (Leo Strauss). *The Platonic Myths*, like almost every other philosophical book of Josef Pieper, is an incisive commentary on the ultimate significance of Plato's thought; specifically, a theological commentary on Platonic metaphysics. The book is divided into six parts. Each part consists of one chapter explaining the different senses of myth which Plato employs in his dialogues, *Timaeus*, *Symposium*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Phaedo*. It is very well-served by an excellent Introduction by James Schall, subtitled, aptly enough, "Myths that are True and Truths Expressed in Myth."

After reading this remarkable book I sensed that I had not merely read a philosophical text, but that I had, somehow, encountered philosophy itself. The most impressive qualities of the book are concision and clarity. However, in simply saying this, I am not properly conveying what I mean. What I really mean to say is that *The Platonic Myths* is actually a miracle of concision and clarity; a remarkable philosophical achievement in which the essence of Platonic theology is distilled into six luminous chapters containing profound insights.

Pieper suggests that the careful reader of the dialogues can find two basic kinds of myth in Plato: first, those myths that simply narrate a story, or teach a moral lesson; if you will, "didactic" myths. The meaning of this kind of mythology is examined, mostly, in Ch. I (1-12), and Ch. II (13-20); second, those myths that speak of cosmic origin and destiny; those primordial and ancient accounts of the world and human life in relation to the gods. Pieper explicitly refers to these as the "eschatological" myths, and they are examined in detail in Ch. III through Ch. VI (21-62).

Now, the thesis which *The Platonic Myths* seems to advance, the nerve of Pieper's argument, is that there is no inherent incompatibility between the teachings of philosophy and the teachings of eschatological mythology. Indeed, according to Pieper, things are quite the opposite. He argues convincingly that philosophical knowledge is complimented, and elevated, in the decorous encounter with mythology, especially with respect to such transcendent issues as the meaning of eternity, the origin of the world, and the destiny of human life. Of course, all of this has tremendous significance when applied to the activity

and aims of Christian theology, which Pieper does, magnificently, in Ch. VI (58-62). There, he offers the reader a lucid description of the proper relationship of myth, philosophy, and revelation:

Rooted in Christian theology from the earliest times is the concept which both clarifies and surpasses the Platonic idea of a message coming down to us from a divine source:

the concept of "original revelation"... This indestructible truth of mythical tradition stems, accordingly, from the same Logos (word) that in Christ became man. Only the light of this Logos that entered into man's history makes possible something that goes beyond the strength of pre-Christian thinking... (60-61)

The Platonic Myths is a remarkable exercise of faith and reason; a genuine dialogue between *fides et ratio*. At the same time, it is a particularly subtle critique of modern philosophy (Machiavelli to Heidegger). The feature of modern philosophy which troubles Pieper the most is the absence of the transcendent, the disappearance of the divine, from serious philosophical consideration. Engaging the "eschatological" Plato, according to Pieper, is a crucial first step in the restoration of transcendence to its rightful place in the modern life of philosophy.

Benjamin Jowett, the famous professor of Greek at Oxford University, and foremost modern translator of the works of Plato, is reported to have said that there are certain books which are so necessary, and valuable, that you should sell your bed to purchase them. *The Platonic Myths* is just such a book. Fortunately, for anyone seriously interested in philosophy and theology, the sale of a bed is not necessary. The cost of this book is quite modest, but its lessons are truly priceless.

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