

# Deconstructing a Hermeneutic Presupposition in Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*

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## Preview

This paper critically analyzes Paul Ricoeur's presupposition that Plato's philosophy was built on Orphism. In order to shed light on this central problematic issue in *The Symbolism of Evil*, this paper develops the following conceptual framework. I first examine the hermeneutic method that Ricoeur applies in order to approach Orphism and its relation to Plato's philosophy. I next analyze the hermeneutic maneuver that Ricoeur makes in order to demonstrate that "the famous later myth is an orthodox explication of the archaic schema and . . . is in perfect agreement with it." Thirdly, I consider why Plato's philosophy is not an Orphic doctrine of the salvation of the soul by knowledge. Finally, I conclude that Plato's critical judgments about Orpheus and Orphism and his devastating comments on poets show us not how "the myth of the origin completes the sense of the myth of situation" (Ricoeur), but how Plato critically reinterprets the doctrine of the salvation of the soul through philosophy.

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The myth of the origin *completes* the sense of the myth of situation.  
Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*

And they present a noisy throng of books by Museus and Orpheus,  
offspring as they say of Selene and the Muses, in accordance with  
which they perform their rituals (*καθ' ἃς θρηπολοῦσιν*). Plato, *Republic*,  
364e

This paper critically analyzes Paul Ricoeur's presupposition that Plato's philosophy was built on Orphism. In order to shed light on this central problematic issue in *The Symbolism of Evil*, this paper develops the following conceptual framework. I first examine the hermeneutic method that Ricoeur applies in order to approach Orphism and its relation to Plato's philosophy. I next analyze the hermeneutic maneuver that Ricoeur makes in order to demonstrate that "the famous later myth is an orthodox explication of the archaic schema and .

. . . is in perfect agreement with it."<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, I consider why Plato's philosophy is not an Orphic doctrine of the salvation of the soul by knowledge. Finally, I conclude that Plato's critical judgments about Orpheus and Orphism and his devastating comments on poets show us not how "the myth of the origin *completes* the sense of the myth of situation" (Ricoeur),<sup>2</sup> but how Plato critically reinterprets the doctrine of the salvation of the soul through philosophy.

### Searching for a Method to Understand a Presupposition

One could consider that the most important goal for Ricoeur in the chapter of *The Symbolism of Evil* entitled, "The Myth of the Exiled Soul and Salvation through

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967),

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 293.

Knowledge,”<sup>3</sup> is to demonstrate the strong grounding for the assumption that sustains the idea that “Platonic philosophy presupposes a *παλαιὸς λόγος*”<sup>4</sup> In order to achieve this important goal, Ricoeur makes some comments on the hermeneutic methodology that he uses to shed light on the historical presupposition that has shaped Orphic studies as well as Plato scholarship. Ricoeur is perfectly aware of the degree of complexity implied in acknowledging that Plato’s philosophy was grounded on Orphic cults. He knows that to argue in favor of a “theory of types,”<sup>5</sup> as he characterizes the first hermeneutic method (following Max Weber), implies being “prepared to correct the ideal outline of the ‘myth of the exiled soul’ by a sort of give-and-take between the typological stylization and the patient investigation of history.”<sup>6</sup> The theory of types characterizes Ricoeur’s philosophical approach. As we know, following Weber, an ideal type “is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, an ideal type is a subjective element that builds or constructs an idea and that thereby helps us to understand and order something.

In Ricoeur’s case, the ideal type is the hermeneutic construction that Orphism is the background on which Plato built his philosophy. However, Ricoeur considers that approaching history from the theory of types implies a hermeneutic movement between typological stylization and the investigation of history. The latter allows the philosopher to propose a heuristic comprehension and the former to study the literary documents very carefully. Ricoeur thinks that this method lets him, as a phenomenologist, overcome the perplexity of being “caught between a myth that is pre-philosophical, but not to be found, and a myth that is perfect, but post-philosophical.”<sup>8</sup> This is the most entangled knot that the scholar in Orphic studies as well as in Platonic studies has to untie when using Neo-Platonic references in order to understand the ways in which Plato’s philosophy may be grounded on Orphic religion.

This is the reason why Ricoeur proposes that the “*etiological myth*,”<sup>9</sup> that is to say, the myth that narrates the *παλαιὸς λόγος* of Orphism, “can be

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 279-305.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 281. In relation to the interactions between Orphism and Plato’s philosophy, Ricoeur affirms in the 1960’s that “We know that all of Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy presupposes Orphism and draws nourishment from its substance, but we don’t know exactly what sort of Orphism Plato was acquainted with and what the *παλαιὸς λόγος* of Orphism was like before the late revisions of the myth” (ibid, 279). In the same train of thought, Ricoeur assumes as his own philosophical locus: “The simple fact that the history of the use in Christianity of a Neo-Platonic mode of expression offers so many examples of contamination” (ibid, 330). *The Symbolism of Evil*, the title of this book when it was translated into English, is shaped hermeneutically by this assumption.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 279.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 279-280.

<sup>7</sup> Sung Ho Kim, “Max Weber,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/weber/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 282.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 282.

reconstructed on the sole basis of documents of the archaic and classical epoch.”<sup>10</sup> This may be the case because many scholars have taken an extreme position on Orphic studies, which Ricoeur wanted to avoid. However, according to Ricoeur, to study history through the lens of the theory of type, and to be prepared to correct this view, lets him reconstruct the etiological myth, since from Ricoeur’s point of view “the famous later myth is an orthodox explication of the archaic schema and . . . is in perfect agreement with it.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Ricoeur proposes a reconstructive hermeneutics that, taking the Neo-Platonic version of the Zagreus myth from Damascius and Proclo,<sup>12</sup> aspires to go back and find the historical elements that allow him to overcome the “astonishing situation”<sup>13</sup> of having “the perfect Orphic myth” but in its “post-philosophical”<sup>14</sup> version or situation.

In this matter, I would conclude that Ricoeur is perfectly aware of the significant methodological problem that is implied in presupposing that Orphism provided Plato with the materials on which he grounded his philosophy. Being conscious about this “astonishing situation,” as Ricoeur calls the Gordian knot in Orphic studies, Ricoeur builds a methodological approach that, taking into account the Neo-Platonic myth of situation, tries to reconstruct the *παλαιὸς λόγος* of Orphism. In this sense, Ricoeur faces the most crucial problem in Orphic studies. As Linforth says in 1941 in his outstanding work *The Arts of Orpheus*: “This problem of reconstruction is precisely the problem which scholars have been endeavoring to solve for the last hundred years; but anyone who is acquainted with what they have written must be aware that with all their learning and ingenuity they have not obtained a solution which can be counted as solid and satisfactory.”<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur was not content with either the skeptical perspective, such as that of Wilamowitz and Festugière, or with oversimplifications that underestimated the problem of the documents.<sup>16</sup>

Ricoeur, as a phenomenologist, proposes “an intentional analysis of the fault of the Titans . . . in order to show in what sense it explicates and completes the myth of situation.”<sup>17</sup> He designs an intentional analysis based on ideal types, drawn from the ideal outline, in order to build a bridge between Orphism and Plato.<sup>18</sup> In this manner, Ricoeur thinks that he could demonstrate the strong grounding of the presupposition of the place of Orphism in Plato’s philosophy.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 283.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>15</sup> Ivan M. Linforth, *The Arts of Orpheus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), ix.

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 291-292.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 293.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 279.

## A Hermeneutic Maneuver for Grounding a Presupposition

In this section, I would like to examine the central argument that Ricoeur makes in order to demonstrate that the famous later myth, that is to say, the Neo-Platonic myth of Zagreus, is an orthodox myth that explains the archaic schema. In Ricoeur's view, the myth of situation is capable of teaching us the myth of origin, since following his intentional-phenomenological method the famous later myth shows us the layers of sense that constituted it. In this regard, Ricoeur, who studied Saussure's theory of language<sup>19</sup>, considers that language presents a diachronic development, and he follows the same approach to analyze the Neo-Platonic myth.

There are two central arguments that Ricoeur presents in order to demonstrate that versions of the myth by Damascius (c. 458-538 AD), Proclus (c. 412-485) and Olympiodorus (c. 495-570), can help us return to the original myth. The first argument that I would like to critically review is one that Ricoeur draws from the *Cratylus*. Initially, this seems to be a perfect way to argue in favor of a myth that Ricoeur considers capable of reconstructing with his intentional-phenomenological method. Ricoeur uses a text by Plato in which Socrates exposes to Hermogenes how the name "body" was coined by "the followers of Orpheus who gave the body its name (*οἱ ἀμφὶ Ὀρφέα τοῦτο τὸ ὄνομα*)."<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur uses an important historical text that affirms that the body is "a place of exile."<sup>21</sup> As Ricoeur acknowledges, despite the fact that Socrates's investigation about the name "body" is "prior to the anthropogony of the myth of the origin,"<sup>22</sup> this shows us that the body "is becoming an instrument of expiation, the body becomes a place of exile."<sup>23</sup> That is to say, there is a historical document from the classical period that lets us link the motif of the body as "the place of punishment" described in the *Cratylus* to the punishment of the Titans by Zeus.<sup>24</sup>

The other element that according to Ricoeur allows us to reconstruct the nucleus of the original myth is "the theme of infernal punishment."<sup>25</sup> In this matter, I think Ricoeur misinterprets the geography of the underworld in Orphism. According to Ricoeur, who follows Nilsson, "the Orphics took seriously the Homeric theme of the punishment of great criminals and made of it an imminent threat that weighs upon everyone."<sup>26</sup> Though this could be plausible, in that the underworld appears in some texts as the place of expiation, it is not true in all cases. As some scholars have argued, there were many kinds of

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Zceny, John Castello and Kathleen McLaughlin (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), 142.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 400c 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 283.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 283.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 283.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 282.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 284.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 284.

Orphism.<sup>27</sup> If we take into account the golden tablets, perhaps some of the most significant historical documents to help scholars work out the details of Orphism, the geography of the underworld described in the tablets does not have any reference to it as a place of expiation. Alberto Bernabé, the editor of *Orphicorum et Orphicis simillimum testimonia et fragmenta*, has affirmed in *Instrucciones para el más allá (Instructions for the Netherworld)* that, despite the fact that Guthrie has observed some similarities between the golden tablets and some Platonic texts (for instance, the *Republic*), there are not strong parallels between these, as Guthrie has proposed. Bernabé argues that the geography that these texts describe coincides only in part with the idea of a place of expiation, and further notes that the golden tablets do not say anything about judges in that place. In addition, Bernabé holds that there are two different schemas. The Platonic soul is judged according to its previous way of life. The golden tablets, however, describe a trial that the soul has to overcome. Following these arguments, Bernabé concludes: “It is clear that Plato freely re-elaborated Orphic motifs, in the service of his own philosophical and literary interests” (Está claro, pues, que Platón reelaboró libremente motivos órficos, al servicio de sus propios intereses filosóficos y literarios).<sup>28</sup>

Following Bernabé, I would like to suggest also that the Parmenides poem presents an alternative geography of the underworld that cannot be associated exclusively with the conceptualization of hell as a place of punishment. In this respect, following the Parmenides poem, at least in the form that it has taken in contemporary editions, the goddess—some scholars have argued that she is Persephone<sup>29</sup>—teaches not only how to avoid the path of opinion but reveals to the young traveler the truth of the well-rounded being (*Ἀληθείης ἐκωνδέος ἀτρεμέος ἦτορ*). Reading the Parmenides poem in this way, the goddess of the underworld proclaims good news to the man capable of arriving at her mansion (*ἦ γὰρ ἀπ’ ἀνθρώπων ἐκτὸς πάτου ἐστίν*).<sup>30</sup> The young man, accompanied by immortal charioteers (*ὦ κοῦρ’ ἀθανάτοισι συνάρορος ἠνιόχοισιν*) learns how to judge with his reason that “therefore, it is necessary to *be* absolutely, or not” (*οὕτως ἦ πάντων πελέναι χρεών ἐστίν ἦ οὐχί*).<sup>31</sup>

That is to say, in contrast to a well-known characterization of the underworld as a place in which humans expiate their faults, it could be argued that there is a strain of Orphism that describes the underworld as a place in which the knowledgeable man listens to a revelation that Persephone teaches. One could suppose that this kind of highly intellectualized Orphism is the one with which Plato sympathizes. There is a close relationship between the well-rounded being that Persephone teaches to the *Kurros* and Plato’s ideas that are conceived as unborn and eternal beings.

<sup>27</sup> Alberto Bernabé, *Platón y el orfismo: Diálogo entre religión y filosofía* (Madrid: Abada, 2010), 254-56.

<sup>28</sup> Bernabé, *Platón y el orfismo*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Inverness, California: The Golden Sufi Center, 2003), 43.

<sup>30</sup> Parmenides, fr. 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, while Ricoeur proposes “the theme of the infernal punishment” as a nucleus of ancient Orphism<sup>32</sup> and argues that “Plato attest[ing] that the traffickers in initiation who, at least in his time, usurped the name and the writing of Musaeus and Orpheus, speculates on this fear of punishment after death,”<sup>33</sup> I argue that Plato probably believes that this type of Orphism does not have any relation to authentic Orphism (the highly intellectualized Orphism that appealed to Plato). In this sense, I would conclude that the theme of infernal punishment could be a subject on which Plato disagrees with the kind of Orphism that Ricoeur describes. This is the reason why there are so many critical references around religions that cause feelings of fear instead of teaching a kind of infernal grace, the kind of grace that Persephone teaches in the Parmenides poem or that Socrates teaches in his Theory of Ideas.

The other connection between “the theme of expiation in and through the body and the theme of expiation in the lower world”<sup>34</sup> that Ricoeur makes has enormous implications in his reading, since he considers that “the circularity of life and death is without doubt the more profound myth that subtends the two myths of punishment in the body (*σῶμα*) and punishment in Hades.”<sup>35</sup> In this sense, Ricoeur’s interpretation is very complex but I would like to point out an aspect that Ricoeur appears to underestimate. I am referring to the role that philosophy plays in proposing a new way of life, one that is grounded on the kind of intellectualized Orphism that I believe Plato accepted despite his critical observations on poetry. According to Ricoeur, philosophy learns from Orphism that there is something that “remains identical, the same as itself”<sup>36</sup> and this is thanks to the myth imagined as “a cycle of life and death.”<sup>37</sup> But if we take into account the goddess’s revelation, which is close to Plato’s Theory of Ideas, one should rather suggest that what philosophy learns from the underworld is that “it is necessary to be absolutely, or not.”<sup>38</sup> So from this starting point, one could imagine that Plato builds his philosophy as a proposal for a new way of life. In this respect, Radcliffe Edmonds argues: “Plato has Socrates reject these traditional solutions to the problem of the journey to the realm of the dead.”<sup>39</sup> This is evident if we take into account the multiple references in which Plato criticizes Orphic rituals, which trigger fear in youth. Thus, as Edmonds has argued in his extraordinary book *Myth of the Underworld Journey*, Plato,

. . . instead substitutes the practice of philosophy as the proper preparation for the journey. Rather than rituals that need to be performed *after* death, Plato emphasizes solutions to the potential problems of the

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<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 284-285.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 284-285.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 285.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>38</sup> Parmenides, fr. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Radcliffe Edmonds, *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes and the “Orphic” Gold Tablets* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2004, 181.

transition that must be performed *before* death. The philosophic life, as daily effort of separating the mind from the physical world, is the highest form of this practice of death, μελέτη θανάτου (81a1, cp. 64a, 67e5).<sup>40</sup>

From this perspective, one can understand why Socrates appears as a devastating critic of the kind of Orphism that causes fear, which does not have any relationship to the intellectualized kind of Orphism that the goddess of the Parmenides poem teaches. In addition, this point of view helps us to value the radical place that philosophy takes as a practice whose main goal is the care of the self, something that some types of Orphism attributed to rituals performed after death. According to Plato, the only way to escape the cycle of incarnation is to practice the kind of philosophy that teaches that “it is necessary to *be* absolutely, or not,” as Persephone declares in the Parmenides poem.

The hermeneutic maneuver that Ricoeur makes demonstrates that “the famous later myth is an orthodox explication of the archaic schema and . . . is in perfect agreement with it,”<sup>41</sup> which involves acknowledging that there are some controversial facts about the sources, while at the same time arguing that these are not sufficient objections to “confine ourselves to the citations in the classics.”<sup>42</sup> For instance, Ricoeur holds that “the Orphic movement was distinguished from similar movements of the archaic era by the existence of *writings*.”<sup>43</sup> But, as Edmonds has demonstrated in *Tearing Apart the Zagreus Myth*, this idea of Orphism as a religion that has a founder (Orpheus), as well as prophets, disciples, priests and holy writings, follows “the familiar model of Protestant religion centered around the exegesis of the sacred scripture, [thus] the poetry of Orpheus is seen by these scholars as the equivalent of the ‘Orphic Bible.’”<sup>44</sup> Ricoeur is one of these scholars of the kind that Edmonds warns us about who see the myth of Zagreus “as the story which provides the meaning of the whole religion, much as the story of Christ provides the religious meaning of Christianity.”<sup>45</sup>

In this sense, Ricoeur ends up affirming that although there were Orphic holy writings, these “books must have been in perpetual flux” and that “the diversity of Neo-Platonic versions is itself a sign of this.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, Ricoeur acknowledges: “It cannot be proved that the archaic theogony was expanded into an anthropogony; this can only be conjectured.”<sup>47</sup> However, when the reader of *The Symbolism of Evil* is prepared to go beyond this reconstructive hermeneutic, he or she discovers that Ricoeur does not hesitate to argue that his “typological method does not require us to settle the purely historical debate concerning the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 181-182.

<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 283.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 298.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 290.

<sup>44</sup> Radcliffe Edmonds, *Tearing Apart the Zagreus Myth: A Few Disparaging Remarks on Orphism and Original Sin*, in *Classical Antiquity* 18, 1 (1999): 62.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 290.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 290.

date when the anthropogonic myth was worked out.”<sup>48</sup> That is to say, Ricoeur, instead of acknowledging that the diversity of Neo-Platonic versions of the myth challenges our framework of understanding—as Edmonds does in his extraordinary article *Tearing Apart the Zagreus Myth*—prefers to continue “squeezing”<sup>49</sup> them into an “intentional analysis” that “tak[es] the myth in its final state (hence, in its late manifestation), and relat[es] it retrospectively to the exegesis of the human condition.”<sup>50</sup>

So, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic maneuver has as a final goal of saving the presupposition that Plato’s philosophy was grounded on Orphism. The phenomenological and intentional analysis is the key to Ricoeur’s reading of Plato’s philosophy, despite the fact that the historical documents reduce this presupposition to a simple conjecture.<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur builds an intentional method in order to demonstrate that the latest stages of the Orphic myth reveal the profound intention of the myth of situation. As a result, Ricoeur, applying his phenomenological method to one of the most common mental constructions in Western philosophy, manages to save the appearances about the place of Orphism in Plato’s philosophy that the ideal type presupposes.

Finally, in this respect, Ricoeur proposes that it is through the figure of Phanes—a god who was also called Dionysos—that “the myth resorts to a series of subterfuges.”<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the most important of these is that “in Phanes, the one and the multiple manifestation, we have no longer a representation of the primordial contradiction between good and evil, but rather of progressive separation, of gradual differentiation, as one sees in the myth of the primordial Egg.”<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur thinks that since “a myth of differentiation no longer suffices to explain the evil in man,” as a result the Neo-Platonic philosophers created an “anthropogony to explain evil.”<sup>54</sup> According to Ricoeur, “the Orphic experience of an occult soul imprisoned in a body that is its enemy burst the bonds of the theogonic drama, which was itself in the process of orientation towards a rational cosmology.”<sup>55</sup> Following this order of ideas, Ricoeur justifies the necessity of “a new etiological myth.”<sup>56</sup>

Once again, Ricoeur finds the clues to his interpretation in the myth of origin, which implicitly demonstrates the necessity that Neo-Platonic philosophers felt when they designed a new etiological myth that could explain the causes of evil in man. With regard to this specific problematic, I would argue that another remarkable characteristic of Ricoeur’s approach to the Neo-Platonic versions of the Zagreus myth is his finding the origin of the myth through later versions of it. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of contamination follows the model of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 292.

<sup>49</sup> Edmonds, *Tearing Apart the Zagreus Myth*, 68.

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 293.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 290.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 294.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 294-295.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 295.

*Quellenforschung*. According to this approach, myths present a “common set of elements.”<sup>57</sup> As Edmonds has argued in his 2004 book:

The quest for a single point of origin seeks a simple explanation for the presence of certain influences in the Greek tradition, particularly on Plato and early Christianity, but the construction of a secret Orphic tradition to fill this place distorts the little evidence that remains and obscures rather than illuminates the nature of the text and perspectives on the world expressed in them.<sup>58</sup>

In this regard, Ricoeur considers that a common set of elements, which is constituted in the figure of Dionysos<sup>59</sup> and in the role of the Titans who “are associated with the passion of Dionysos.”<sup>60</sup> This apparent unity given by the origin of the myth implies finding the influences, in Ricoeur’s language of contamination, despite the fact that the late mythology shows us new subjects (e.g. “the Orphic anthropogony”<sup>61</sup>) that induce Ricoeur to believe that the later version of the myth “reveals the profound intention of the myth of situation.”<sup>62</sup>

In addition to the tools that Ricoeur uses to maneuver the “ideal type”, which holds that Orphic beliefs shape Plato’s philosophy (his presupposition), one could postulate that Ricoeur’s procedure considers that Plato’s dialogues are historical documents. These should allow us to reconstruct historical events, such as academic disputes and the transferences of meaning between the composer of the dialogues and the historical context in which he lived. Although this is a possible way to approach Plato’s dialogues and other philosophical texts of antiquity, two important factors should be taken into account. On the one hand, Plato composes dramas that cannot merely be considered a reflection of the reality of the fifth century B.C. Rather, Plato’s philosophical conversations design characters on a stage where he offers us his philosophical point of view of some subjects.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, a perspective like this that supposes that texts are a sort of mirror conceals the invention of new meanings when somebody assembles old pieces in a new context.

Keeping these considerations in mind, I will discuss Ricoeur’s thesis concerning Plato’s philosophy being a doctrine of the salvation of the soul by knowledge.

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<sup>57</sup> Edmonds, *Myths of the Underworld Journey*, 13.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 295-296.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 296-297.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 46-49.

## Plato as a Critic of Orphism

According to Ricoeur, following Guthrie, Plato realized that Orphism had a “potential greatness.”<sup>64</sup> In this sense, Plato capitalized on purification, perhaps the most remarkable contribution of Orphism, for his philosophy. In this vein, Ricoeur affirms: “‘purification’ was already on the road toward philosophy.”<sup>65</sup> But, above all, Ricoeur believes that the Pythagorean literature “marks, decisively and explicitly, the passage from ‘purification’ as rite [to] ‘purification’ as ‘philosophy.’”<sup>66</sup>

Through these connections, Ricoeur completes the whole picture, or the whole ideal type, that supposes that “it is Orphism that the Pythagoreans extend in the direction of Platonism.”<sup>67</sup> That is to say, the puzzle has been assembled from these separate parts. Through Pythagorean philosophy (both Mathematicians and Acousmatics), which according to Ricoeur was influenced by Orphism, Plato grounded his philosophy. The fragmentary picture has been put together, the ideal type—claimed to be “the carrying out of the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition”<sup>68</sup>—has been grounded by Ricoeur’s intentional method.

According to Ricoeur, “‘myth’ rises to speculation.”<sup>69</sup> Could it be that this is another way of justifying the Greek miracle, the passage from myth to philosophy, which is the dominant ideal type for understanding ancient philosophy? I would argue that, in the final analysis, this is Ricoeur’s hermeneutic goal.

## Deconstructing a Hermeneutic Presupposition

In my view, Plato’s critical judgments on Orpheus and Orphism and his devastating comments on poets do not justify the view that “the myth of the origin *completes* the sense of the myth of situation,” as Ricoeur argues.<sup>70</sup> Rather, Plato’s critique of Orphism should demonstrate to us how Plato critically examines and reinterprets the doctrine of the salvation of the soul through philosophy.

First at all, I would like to point out that there is a very strong tendency in ancient philosophy and medicine to critique the central teachings of poets and religious practitioners. From Xenophanes,<sup>71</sup> and later Heraclitus,<sup>72</sup> to Epicurus<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 302.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 303.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 303.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 303.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 304.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>71</sup> In this regard, see Xenophanes: “Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that are blameworthy and disgraceful for men: stealing, committing adultery, deceiving each other.” Xenophanes, fr. 17. Also: “But mortals think gods are begotten, and have the clothing, voice, and body of mortals.” Xenophanes, fr. 19.

philosophers have been concerned about representation of gods as holding human attributes. This concern can be found in some Hippocratic texts in which the physician manifests his disagreement with the role that religions play in medicine.<sup>74</sup>

In no sense would I say that philosophy achieved the disenfranchisement of the ancient religions such as Orphism. Instead, I would suggest that the revisionist spirit in philosophy and medicine drives philosophy to argue that religions cannot continue to endorse terrifying spiritual practices. In this sense, we should read Plato's critique of poetry in the *Republic* and his comments on god as a good being in the *Phaedrus*<sup>75</sup> as evidence of this concern. Since a god cannot be bad in any sense (a central attribute of the divine that philosophy claims and that theology underestimates), Plato endorses a spiritual practice that he thinks might overcome the difficulties that Orphic ritual performance causes: the practitioners of Orphism "present a noisy throng of books by Musaeus and Orpheus, offspring as they say of Selene and the Muses, in accordance with which they perform their rituals (*καθ' ἅς θηπολοῦσιν*)."<sup>76</sup>

In this sense, although I agree that philosophy is a sort of purification, I disagree with Ricoeur's argument that holds that "'purification' was already on the road toward philosophy."<sup>77</sup> Plato's strong critical position about Musaeus and Orpheus, and his tendency to prefer a sort of intellectualized Orphism that I associate with the philosophical revelation from the Parmenides goddess, lead me to believe that Plato builds a new spiritual practice in opposition to the kind of Orphic ritual performances that cause terror. In this sense, Plato should be considered a sort of reformer of Orphism, who through philosophy recreates a new practice of the self.

In sum, Ricoeur's presupposition that holds that Plato's philosophy was built on Orphism reveals the following. First, we analyzed how Ricoeur applies an intentional method that has as a central goal to save the appearances that have shaped the presupposition. In this sense, Ricoeur not only saves the appearances by reconstructing the earliest version of the myth through the last versions of the myth but also tries to ground our "ideal type" of Orphism as the one that shapes Plato's philosophy. In this regard, I would conclude that Ricoeur's intentional

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<sup>72</sup> On this matter, see Heraclitus: "He claimed that Homer deserves to be thrown out of the contests and beaten with a stick, and Archilochus likewise." Heraclitus, fr. 15. Also: "To God all things are fair, good and just, but men suppose some things are unjust, some just." Heraclitus, fr. 104.

<sup>73</sup> See Epicurus: "For the gods exist; of them have distinct knowledge. But they are not as the majority thinks them to be. For they do not maintain a consistent view of what they think the gods are. . . . For the assertion of the many concerning the gods are conceptions grounded to which the greatest misfortunes are brought upon the evil by the gods and the greatest benefits upon the good." Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> See Hippocrates: "My own view is that those who first attributed a sacred character to this malady were like the magicians, purifiers, charlatans, quacks of our own days, men who claim great piety and superior knowledge." Hippocrates, *The Sacred Disease*, II.1-5.

<sup>75</sup> See Plato's *Phaedrus*: "If Love is something a god and something divine—which he is—he can't be bad in any way." Plato, *Phaedrus*, 242e.

<sup>76</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 364e

<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 303.

phenomenological method is the tool that he uses to ground the presupposition. The second conclusion is that the hermeneutic maneuver that Ricoeur makes in order to ground the presupposition ends up underestimating the limitations that contemporary scholars find when they try to reconstruct pieces of fragments that lack the background that could allow us to reconstruct the whole of which they formed part. Despite the fact that Ricoeur acknowledges some of these problems, he prefers to use his method for grounding the presupposition instead of proposing a radical transformation of current approaches toward reconstructing fragmentary texts. Finally, I conclude that Ricoeur's enthusiasm for reconstructing intellectual history ends up producing a holistic representation of ancient philosophy. From this perspective, fragmentary pieces of information can be assembled and completed in a preexisting puzzle that would seem to have already organized broken texts. What becomes the final stage of such an intentional method produces a kind of comprehension of the history of philosophy as a reconstructive hermeneutics in which the broken shards of information become part of a pre-existing meaning.