

**CONSTITUTING THE POLITICAL AGE
IN PLATO'S STATESMAN:
NEW CATEGORIES FOR AN OLD QUESTION**

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Abstract: The myth of the age of Kronos and Zeus in Plato's *Statesman* is very ambiguous. In this article, I propose a new set of grounds for upholding the traditional interpretation of the myth against some recent interpretations — by Luc Brisson, Gabriela Carone and Charles Kahn — that seek to view the age of Kronos as a positive condition. To do so I argue that this myth should be understood as a *constitutive myth*. To explain what a constitutive myth is I propose a set of five categories (genetic myth, constitutive myth, epistemic myth, eschatological myth, psychagogic myth). In particular, the myth of Kronos and Zeus in the *Statesman* is a constitutive myth because, by sharply distinguishing the two ages, it highlights the need for politics and techniques in the age of Zeus.

Introduction

The myth of the *Statesman* is one of the least clear and most troubling myths in Plato's works. There has been wide debate about its overall structure, meaning and discursive purpose. Despite Plato's explicit assertion that the myth is recounted in order to overcome the impasse of the first attempt to define the true statesman, it is not clear why such a long myth is thought to be necessary and whether the myth actually achieves its purpose.

The aim of this article is to provide a fresh set of categories to analyse the myth of Plato's *Statesman*. I will not propose a different interpretation of the structure of the myth, nor will I challenge the traditional understanding of specific passages. I will accept the core of the standard interpretation but provide a revised set of reasons for upholding this view. Indeed, I will propose an overall set of categories for interpreting this myth, as well as other Platonic myths. I will argue that we can interpret (at least most) Platonic myths as having two main functions: a descriptive function and a normative function. If we put these two functions on a continuum ranging from purely descriptive to purely normative, we come up with five main functions that a myth may have (genetic, constitutive, epistemological, eschatological and psychagogic). Following this framework, I will argue that the *Statesman*'s myth is a constitutive myth because the current epoch is constituted in opposition to Kronos' golden age. This reading will allow us to challenge some recent interpretations (by Luc Brisson, Gabriela Carone and Charles Kahn) according to which the rule of Kronos is a positive, although unattainable, ideal for political rule in Zeus's era. Although my main claim will be that before identifying *what the myth*

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tells us we should answer the question of *how to read the myth*, answering the latter question will have a bearing on the question of what the myth aims to tell us.

The paper will proceed as follows. First, I will provide a brief summary of the structure of the myth. Second, I will outline the proposed five categories for interpreting Platonic myths. Third, I will explain why the myth of the *Statesman* should be understood as a constitutive myth. Finally, I will show what implications follow from my proposal for the overall interpretation of the myth.

I

Summary of the Myth

In this section, I will provide a brief summary of the structure and plot of the myth. This will be very brief because I subscribe to the standard interpretation of the myth and the point I wish to emphasize is more methodological than content-related.

First of all, we should recall the context in which the story begins. The myth is invoked as a necessary dialogic move because the first *diairesis* has ended in a stalemate and the ‘kingly figure’ (268c)² couldn’t be properly distinguished from other competing figures. To start the argument again and solve the problem with the first division, the Visitor says, a ‘larger story’ should be evoked and ‘an element of play’ should be mixed in (268d). Hence, the story begins by putting together three different traditional myths: the quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes (in particular the inversion of the movement of the sun and stars), the rule of Kronos, and the earthborn human beings.

As is well known, the story features a great deal of cosmological elements, which concern the movement of the universe. As the cosmos is made of divine parts as well as of a body, it moves by itself in a rotation. But such autonomous movement cannot last forever because the cosmos is not a perfect entity. Hence, its movement ‘is helped by the guidance of another, divine, cause’ (270a).

In light of this movement and divine guidance, the Visitor outlines the form and structure of two opposing epochs of the universe. In one epoch the god takes care of the rotation of the universe and, following this divine guide, human beings are nurtured and taken care of by daemons. In this epoch, ‘human life [is] without toil’ (271e). Human beings live in peaceful accord with other animals and with each other, gather food directly from nature without cultivation (272a), and don’t need technical tools or political organization. This epoch, under the rule of Kronos, is a golden age in which divine care makes human life effortless. The Visitor, however, casts doubt on

² Plato, *Statesman*, trans. C. Rowe, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1994). I refer to the standard Stephanus pagination.

whether life in the time of Kronos is real human life insofar as human beings cannot be distinguished from beasts and the leisure they enjoy is unlikely to be devoted to higher and more praiseworthy activities such as philosophy and thinking (272c–d).³

In virtue of a supreme principle of necessity, this golden age has to come to an end (272d–e). Then the god, as ‘steersman of the universe, let go — as it were — of the bar of the steering-oars and retired to his observation-post’ (272e). Bereft of the guidance of the god, the universe takes the opposite direction of rotation. Every change in rotation is accompanied by a destruction of earthly beings. Without the god’s steering influence, the universe is left alone with respect both to its rotation and the life of its beings. This is so because in each epoch life on earth imitates the nature of the cosmos (274a). Accordingly, if in the time of Kronos imitation of the universe meant that all living beings were taken care of and nurtured by daemons, insofar as the god steered the universe, in the time of Zeus, our own epoch, all living beings, including human beings, are left alone much in the same way as the universe’s movement is left alone by the god.⁴ Such human autonomy is sketched by the Visitor along the lines of a Protagorean picture. Here human beings ‘by themselves weak and defenseless’ are without resources or the capacity to cater for themselves and not fall prey to beasts (274c). To solve this unsettling situation, human beings received the traditional gifts from the gods (fire from Prometheus, crafts from Hephaestus, and so on). The story ends here.

II

Types of Functions of Platonic Myths

Now it is worth specifying what I mean by *myth* here. As is well known, understanding what a myth is and what it is not in Plato’s thought is itself a matter of wide and deep controversy. Since I cannot solve such controversies here, I will simply use a working definition: *A myth is a story recounting non-ordinary events, which is usually meant to replace, complement, or complete*

³ As pointed out by G. Giorgini, ‘Introduzione’, Platone, *Il Politico*, ed. G. Giorgini (Milan, 2005), p. 106, despite the seeming attractiveness of this condition, it is unnatural. For a full analysis of the ambiguities of the features of Kronos’ golden age, with respect to the Hesiodic model and other occurrences of the theme in Plato, see D. El Murr, ‘Hesiod, Plato and the Golden Age: Hesiodic Motifs in the Myth of the *Politicus*’, in *Plato and Hesiod*, ed. G.R. Boys-Stones and J.H. Haubold (Oxford, 2010), pp. 276–97, who concludes that the ambiguities of the human condition in the age of Kronos depend on the suggestion that human beings under Kronos are closer to animals than to gods.

⁴ As pointed out by M. Lane, *Method and Politics in Plato’s Statesman* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 109, in the age of Zeus there is a ‘second order’, indirect imitation: ‘Thus, to imitate self-rule means to rule oneself, not to be ruled by that which one imitates. And such second-order imitation can allow for substantial divergence in the actions of imitator and imitated.’

the dialogic rational argument. In what follows I will clarify what I mean by this definition.

A story recounting non-ordinary events. By *story* I mean, quite obviously, a narrative discourse, which is the primary meaning of *mythos*. By *non-ordinary events* I understand events that do not belong to daily experience. In many cases such events belong to a distant past. For this reason, in many cases myths in Platonic dialogues are drawn from traditional sources and recounted by a figure that has access to unverifiable but highly esteemed sources.⁵ In most cases, Platonic myths abound in narrative detail and are self-standing stories that can be recounted independently of the dialogic function they have.⁶ To be sure, some Platonic myths (in particular but not only the myth of cosmic eras in the *Statesman* and the myth of Atlantis and ancient Athens in the *Timaeus-Critias*) are ambiguous as to whether they should be held as true records of ancient events. However, whatever one's take on this, they are not mere signposts of another meaning, not mere symbols of something else, because in order to convey a message the story should at least provisionally be considered a minimally reliable record of facts.

Replace, complement or complete. A myth is a versatile and multipurpose dialogic tool. It can have diverse functions in general (see below) and can have diverse relations with the rational (typically dialectic) argument.

Replace: a myth replaces a dialectic/rational argument when it deals with an issue that cannot be addressed by rational methods. The most explicit example of this function is that presented in the *Timaeus*, where a long *eikōs mythos* is recounted to address events on which a proper rational and dialectic discourse seems to be unavailable or not applicable (the origin of the cosmos and of the natural world).

Complement: a myth complements a rational argument when it is evoked to make a step forward in case a dialectic piece of argument is found unsatisfying. An illustrative case is indeed that of the *Statesman*. In Plato's own words, the myth of the age of Kronos is recounted precisely to overcome the failure of the first *diairesis*, thus supplementing the whole dialogue's argument by illustrating a point (the difference between governing humans and a flock of animals).

Complete: a myth completes a rational argument when the rational argument, although valid, is thought to be insufficient to discharge all the purposes set forth in the dialogue. For instance, by showing the consequences

⁵ M. Latona, '“The Tale is Not My Own”: Myth and Recollection in Plato', *Apeiron*, 73 (2004), pp. 181–210.

⁶ However, sometimes Plato himself calls myths what we may call similes or allegories (e.g. the divided line in the *Republic*). Building on similar considerations, M.M. McCabe, 'Myth, Allegory and Argument in Plato', *Apeiron*, 25 (1992), pp. 47–68, does not draw a sharp distinction between myths and allegories, among which she also includes the analogy of the allegory of the Sun and other images. McCabe emphasizes the commonality between myths and allegories because she aims to highlight that in general Plato's imagery is devised to complete rational arguments.

of a vicious choice the myth of Er in the *Republic* is probably meant to provide a rhetorical and non-rational argument to convince people's souls to lead virtuous lives.

Rational argument. Platonic myths are typically narrative digressions within or at the end of a dialectic argument (with the exception of *Timaeus*). By this I mean that myths should be distinguished from the dialectic argument, strictly speaking. However, as just mentioned, myths form part of the overall Platonic argument. There is a very well known ambiguity in the fact that myths are more often than not reported to be false representations of reality (see in particular the *Republic*), yet are frequently employed and were invented by Plato himself to convey certain messages to a wider audience or to supplement the dialectic argument. This means that, although myths are a non-rationally justified form of discourse, they might convey truthful content. In a sense, the rationality they employ is narrative, in which what counts may be the symbolic meaning of images or the capacity of a story to convey the message. But they are certainly not subject to the same standards as dialectic arguments.⁷

In what follows I will propose a series of categories summarizing the main types of functions that a myth may have in Platonic dialogues. It is worth emphasizing that this is not a fully-fledged taxonomy and it does not aim to cover all the possible instances. However, if it makes sense to list the functions of myths from the normative to the descriptive, this set of categories may be useful for understanding the relations between different types of myths.

This list of categories expresses the diverse functions that a myth can have on a continuum between a fully descriptive function and a fully normative function. The continuum traces diverse possibilities in terms of the capacity, on the one hand, to explain a state of affairs and, on the other hand, to guide the souls of individuals. Explanatory and normative functions are, obviously, two very general functions that can be traced also in Plato's dialogues and rational arguments. However, here I focus only on the myths. Before seeing in detail the diverse functions, it bears stressing that the following categories have only an illustrative function and should be taken with a pinch of salt, because in many cases some myths may be described through more than one category and there are many intermediate cases.

Genetic myth. A myth with a genetic function aims to explain the origin of a state of affairs and its development within a given set of rules and laws. The genetic myth aims to single out the continuity of events that led a set of things from an initial state of affairs to an end state.

⁷ P. Murray, 'What is a *Muthos* for Plato?', in *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. R. Buxton (Oxford, 1999), pp. 251–62, dissents on this because she claims that the overall Platonic corpus should be seen as a style in which *logos* and *mythos* are not in opposition.

Table 1		
<i>Functional category</i>	<i>Myth</i>	<i>Why is this myth genetic, constitutive, epistemic, eschatological or psychagogic?</i>
<i>Genetic myth</i>	The myths of the generation of cosmos, the world soul and the human soul in the <i>Timaeus-Critias</i>	Because it portrays the origin of the cosmos in all its conceptual steps.
	Cataclysms in the <i>Laws</i> (III 676a–682d)	Because it shows the cause of the cyclic extinction of humanity.
<i>Intermediate*</i>	Atlantis and Ancient Athens in the <i>Timaeus-Critias</i>	
	The origin of society and politics in the <i>Protagoras</i> (320b–323a)	See the note at the end of this table.
	Kronos/Zeus in the <i>Statesman</i> (268e–274e)	See below
<i>Constitutive myth</i>	Androgynous beings in the <i>Symposium</i> (189c–193e)	Because it explains why human beings desire other people and establishes the rules governing this desire.
	The Gift of Theuth and the origin of writing in the <i>Phaedrus</i> (274a–277a)	Because it describes the birth of writing and its incapacity to provide memory and true understanding.
<i>Epistemic myth</i>	The Cave in the <i>Republic</i> (514a–519a)	Because it portrays the diverse levels of knowledge and explains the reason for ordinary humans' lack of true knowledge.
	The Winged Soul in the <i>Phaedrus</i> (246a–249b)	Because it shows that the human soul contemplates true reality before being reincarnated.

<i>Functional category</i>	<i>Myth</i>	<i>Why is this myth genetic, constitutive, epistemic, eschatological or psychagogic?</i>
<i>Eschatological myth</i>	The Afterlife in the <i>Phaedo</i> (107c–115a)	Because these myths show that life after death depends on moral choices and attitudes, thus both describing the future of human beings and providing them with further reasons to be virtuous.
	Er in the <i>Republic</i> (614a–621d)	
	The Afterlife in the <i>Laws</i> (903b–905d)	
<i>Psychagogic myth</i>	Leaky jars in the <i>Gorgias</i>	Because it shows that happiness does not consist in the search for the satisfaction of all bodily desires.
	The Noble Lie in the <i>Republic</i> (414b–415d)	By attaching human nature to the story of the three metals, the Noble Lie provides the grounds for complying with one's position in the social order.
	The Golden Age in the <i>Laws</i> (712e–714b)	See below Section IV.

*As mentioned, the advantage of this framework is that we can admit of cases with a hybrid nature. I have decided to put these myths in this intermediate space because they have features of both categories. Indeed, the myth of Atlantis and Ancient Athens is recounted to illustrate the normative opposition between the virtuous ancient Athens and the excessive Atlantis. On this see J.-F. Pradeau, *Le monde de la politique: sur le récit atlante de Platon, Timee (17–27) et Critias* (Sankt Augustin, 1997). The myth of the origin of society in the *Protagoras* shows the constitution of the political order and in doing so it shares many features with the constitutive myths, but it also focuses on the explanation of the intermediate steps leading to the current situation in such a way that it retains some features of genetic myths.

Constitutive myth. A myth with a constitutive function outlines the constitution of an order of rules and laws. It is different from the genetic myth in that it sets forth the discontinuity of a nomic order, that is, of the basic laws grounding the functioning of a system. Whereas in the genetic myth there is a nomic continuity and nothing challenges the system of norms, whether they are natural or social, the constitutive myth explains how this system is formed and how it is different from another system of norms. This kind of myth is in a different position in the continuum because, while still having a prominent explanatory function, in focusing on the constitution of certain norms it also focuses on the functioning of a normative order. However, a constitutive myth does not seek to guide the action of individuals and the normative content is merely illustrated rather than vindicated.

Epistemic myth. An epistemic myth outlines the form and nature of knowledge. In establishing the criteria and levels of true knowledge as distinct from false knowledge, an epistemic myth has a clear normative function. Moreover, given the importance that Plato attributes to knowledge as a source of virtuous life, this epistemic normativity certainly has a direct or indirect practical normative import.

Eschatological myths. An eschatological myth represents the afterlife of souls. By displaying the rewards or punishments that an individual will receive in his or her afterlife the myth provides incentives and motives for individuals to follow a virtuous path. Although all eschatological myths have a clear normative function in that they show the consequences of virtuous or — more frequently — vicious habits, they also provide a description of the afterlife. Hence, the descriptive component is mainly instrumental in terms of the normative role of the myth, but it may still draw on cosmologic motifs.

Psychagogic myth. A psychagogic myth aims to guide the human soul to the attainment of a certain virtuous trait and the avoidance of vicious habits. In such cases, the myth directly displays the trait to be avoided or promoted and the psychagogic function is clearly expressed.⁸ The descriptive elements here are completely instrumental in terms of conveying a specific message and are not intended to represent a true state of affairs.

In Table 1 I have sketched out a possible allocation of some Platonic myths according to the proposed set of categories. This table does not aim to include all the Platonic myths. Rather, it simply aims to show how the following categories may enlighten us with regard to the peculiar features of some Platonic myths. Hence, the remarks should not be taken to offer a taxonomy, but rather a set of paradigmatic examples illustrating the main functions. A more complete defence of the hermeneutic capacity of these categories should be the subject of further research.

Here I cannot provide a full defence of why each myth falls under a specific rubric. Rather, I will simply employ the categories to illustrate the specificity

⁸ G. Cerri, *Platone sociologo della comunicazione* (Milan, 1991).

of the *Statesman's* myth with respect to other apparently similar myths. To defend my argument it will be sufficient to show why the *Statesman* myth is a constitutive myth. I have only to assume that the proposed categories (genetic, constitutive, epistemic, eschatological and psychagogic myths) represent a reliable and sufficiently complete set of categories for analysing the Platonic myths. However, assuming the provisional validity of these categories should not be seen as a controversial move, because the categories are frequently already employed in other accounts of Platonic myths. The originality of this framework lies, rather, in the way in which they are related to each other, that is, in purely functional terms.

It is worth emphasizing, first, that such a classification tracks the function of a myth at least in part independently of its content, because it is not *per se* a theme, say, cosmology, that determines the function of a myth; and, second, that it is a functional set of categories because here myths are classified on a continuum between the descriptive and the normative function.⁹

Two further clarifications are in order. First, these types of functions should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. In other words, a myth can play diverse discursive functions (see the category intermediately in Table 1 and the further remarks below). Moreover, the scalar nature of the continuum between the explanatory and normative function admits of many intermediate degrees. For instance, we can say that eschatological myths may also have an epistemic function.

Second, I do not intend to defend this set of categories as the most convincing one. Admittedly, this is one possible explanation, among others. There are certainly other useful kinds of accounts. For instance, myths can be classified according to their theme and content,¹⁰ the structure of their production and communication,¹¹ or their literary form, concerning for instance the dialogic character recounting the myth.¹² These alternative categories are certainly helpful for highlighting a number of other features. In the Conclusion I will

⁹ C. Horn, 'Why Two Epochs of Human History? On the Myth of the *Statesman*', in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, ed. C. Collobert, P. Destrée and F.J. Gonzalez (Leiden-Boston, 2012), pp. 393–417, proposes a different functional categorization of myths based on the diverse epistemic function played by myths in the dialogues. Such an account may have some overlaps with mine, but it rests, however, on a different idea and yields a diverse set of categories (narrative as a form of cognitive access not reducible to others, exercise of fantasy and imagination, non-cognitive forms of insight, instrumental and allegoric message, aesthetic form of knowledge, pedagogical task, authentication by commonsense, a surrogate for more reliable forms of knowledge).

¹⁰ G. Droz, *Les mythes plantoniciens* (Paris, 1992); F. Ferrari, *I miti di Platone* (Milan, 2007); J.-F. Mattei, *Platon et le miroir du mythe* (Paris, 2002).

¹¹ L. Brisson, *Platon: Les mots et les mythes* (Paris, 1982).

¹² Latona, '“The Tale is not My Own”'; B. Manuwald, 'Platons Mythenzähler', in *Platon als Mythologe: Neue Interpretationen zu den Mythen in Platons Dialogen*, ed. M. Janka and C. Schäfer (Darmstadt, 2002), pp. 58–80; C. Rowe, 'Myth, History, and

provide some considerations that show the merits of my proposal, which, however, should not be seen as calling into question the plausibility of these other accounts.

III

Constitutive of What?

Why the Myth of the Statesman is a Constitutive Myth

Following the definition sketched above, we can now explain why and in what sense the myth of the *Statesman* is a constitutive myth by showing how it differs from other types of myths. The myth of the age of Kronos and the ages of the universe is a constitutive myth because the explanatory contents of the myth serve the purposes of drawing a sharp separation between the two cyclic eras (*discontinuity setting*) and of establishing the main grounding features of each epoch (*nomic establishment*). The first feature distinguishes a constitutive myth from a genetic myth, in that to constitute the nature of something there must, as a preliminary act, be a separation from other cognate things. The second feature characterizes the nature of a constitutive myth by specifying what a constitutive myth is constitutive of.

That there is a discontinuity between the two ages is without doubt. Such a discontinuity is anchored in a cosmic and inevitable movement that is driven by necessity. One may call into question the idea that discontinuity is specific to constitutive myths, arguing that there is also discontinuity in the explanation of the cosmic events in other myths, such as those included in the *Timaeus*, which I have characterized as belonging to the category of genetic myths. Besides these content-dependent diversities,¹³ the difference from these cosmic myths is that the discontinuities in the genesis of the universe outlined in the *Timaeus* are steps of a unique thread of (ideal) events leading to the current state of the cosmos, whereas the discontinuity in the ages of the cosmos of the *Statesman* points to recurrent cyclic events leading to two completely separate states of affairs. Such cosmic discontinuity provides the metaphysical ground for the second feature (*nomic establishment*), because each age is characterized by specific features and rules that are idiosyncratic and in opposition to each other. Irrespective of whether we subscribe to a three-fold or two-fold division of the structure of the myth (see the discussion of Brisson's thesis below) and independently of the assignation of Zeus and Kronos to a backward or forward movement (see the discussion of Gabriela Carone's thesis below), it is uncontroversial to say that the two ages have completely different norms that rule their respective lives. In the age of Kronos, indeed, the life of living beings is characterized by the omnipresent assistance

Dialectic in Plato's *Republic* and *Timaeus-Critias*', in *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. R. Buxton (Oxford, 1999), pp. 263–78.

¹³ A.W. Nightingale, 'Plato on the Origins of Evil: The *Statesman* Myth Reconsidered', *Ancient Philosophy*, 16 (1996), pp. 65–91.

of the god and daemons. In the age of Zeus, by contrast, human beings are autonomous in conducting their lives. Thus we can say that the grounding rule of the age of Kronos is the dependence of human beings with respect to the caring god and daemons, whereas the grounding rule of the age of Zeus is the independence of human beings and their autonomous life (apart from the initial divine help provided by the gods that gave human beings the necessary techniques to survive).

Furthermore, it is easy to see that the myth of the *Statesman* is not an epistemic myth either. No reference is made to diverse levels of knowledge and no epistemic criteria for distinguishing between illusions, opinions and science are advanced.

It is more interesting to spell out why the myth of the *Statesman* is not an eschatological myth. Although it focuses on the births and deaths of human beings and also includes some orphic and Pythagorean elements typical of eschatological myths (see an ambiguous reference to the reincarnation of souls 272e1–3), no normative meaning is placed on these events. Rather, it is stressed that such events are driven by necessity and the cycles of reincarnations are not determined by the goodness or badness of individual conduct or choice.

Finally, it is worth making clear that the myth of the *Statesman* does not have a direct psychagogic function. Indeed, it does not tell us how we ought to live or what behaviours should be adopted or avoided. There is, however, an indirect normative message, in two senses. In a negative sense the indirect message consists in showing why the golden age under Kronos should not be appealing. In a positive sense the myth establishes what characterizes the life of humans in the time of Zeus (autonomy and independence from god's assistance). However, as stated, the normative function of this myth is minimal and limited to illustrating the founding norms of the two different ages. But insofar as we cannot prefer one over the other, the myth cannot have any psychagogic function.

Building on these considerations, now we can specify what the myth of Kronos and Zeus is constitutive of. It is constitutive of two things. It is constitutive of an impossibility and a possibility. It is constitutive of the impossibility of human beings' living naturally without effort, techniques, politics and rationality, given a lack of divine care; and it is constitutive of human political activity and in particular human self-government.¹⁴ That such a condition is opposed to the seemingly positive golden age of Kronos, which is, however,

¹⁴ My proposal arrives at Dimitri El Murr's conclusion through a different route: 'Cependant, par différence avec celui de Kronos, l'âge de Zeus est un âge où la politique (et par là, toute la recherche qui fait l'objet du dialogue) est possible. De ce point de vue, le récit de l'âge de Zeus est un mythe de fondation de la science politique, un mythe qui trace l'espace dans lequel une science politique véritable peut se déployer.' See D. El Murr, *Savoir et gouverner: Essai sur la science politique platonicienne* (Paris, 2014), p. 184. See also D. El Murr, 'Politics and Dialectic in Plato's *Statesman*', in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. G.M. Gurtler and W. Wians

not characterized positively, should come as no surprise and may be read as a further sign of Plato's realistic or pessimistic view of political reality.¹⁵

IV

The Bearing of this Interpretation of the Myth on the Overall Meaning of the Dialogue

In this section I will employ the categories and analysis proposed above with a view to challenging some existing interpretations, notably those offered by Luc Brisson, Gabriela Carone and Charles Kahn. Despite their differences, the three authors similarly seek to lessen the opposition between Kronos' and Zeus's ages and rehabilitate the positive image of Kronos. The overall interpretation I propose challenges these readings because it defends the traditional view of the structure of the myth, explaining why the age of Kronos is not a positive model that we should imitate in our age, and arguing that the overall meaning of the myth is that of exposing the ambiguous nature of our age — which makes politics possible, even if the full attainment of the perfect ideal of the true statesman is not available. More precisely, I will argue that understanding the myth of the *Statesman* as a constitutive myth will shed light on the following points: the structure of the myth, the relation between the age of Kronos in the *Statesman* and in the *Laws*, and the difference between the impossible appearance of Kronos in our age and the impossibility of the occurrence of the true statesman.

To begin, it might be fruitful to discuss Luc Brisson's interpretation of the myth. Brisson makes a number of critical remarks challenging the traditional interpretation of the myth. I cannot discuss all of these at length. It will be sufficient here to discuss just one fundamental point. Brisson notes that the traditional interpretation of the myth is troublesome because it regards the age of Zeus as characterized by the lack of a god. However, Brisson argues, this is surprising if we consider that it is gods who give techniques to human beings and make some relevant interventions for the sake of human well-being.¹⁶ Moreover, the statement about god's absence seems to run against a number of affirmations Plato makes about the presence of god in the universe, as well as in the human soul, and so on. (This is particularly evident in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*.) Building on this, Brisson challenges the traditional interpretation and claims that the myth is in fact divided into three eras (Kronos, an

(Boston, 2009), pp. 109–35; and D. El Murr, 'Protagoras et l'âge de Zeus du mythe du *Politique*', in *Plato's Statesman: Proceedings of the Eighth Symposium Platonicum Pragense*, ed. A. Havlíček, J. Jirsa and K. Thein (Praha, 2013), pp. 80–98.

¹⁵ On Plato's overall underappreciated realism, see F. Zuolo, *Platone e l'efficacia. Realizzabilità della teoria normativa* (Sankt Augustin, 2009).

¹⁶ L. Brisson, 'Interprétation du mythe du *Politique*', in *Reading the Statesman: Proceedings of the III Symposium Platonicum*, ed. C. Rowe (Sankt Augustin, 1995), pp. 349–63, at p. 350.

intermediate era, and Zeus). Here I will consider only two strategies to rebut Brisson's view. The first, proposed by Nightingale,¹⁷ argues that the age of Zeus should not be read as referring to our actual age because it should rather be seen as a hypothetical age in which the universe and human life are deprived of god's presence. According to this view, the two ages serve the purpose of representing two opposite hypothetical conditions characterized by the ubiquitous intervention of god and by the total absence thereof. A second strategy more directly challenges Brisson's argument and assumption. The argument goes as follows. There does not seem to be anything striking and dissonant in the fact that the age of Zeus is characterized by the absence of god. Brisson's reading is prompted by a hidden assumption that the gods' intervention under Zeus must be viewed in the abstract and independently of god's intervention in the time of Kronos. By contrast, I contend that Plato's statement about the absence of god in Zeus's age should be assessed in comparison with the godly presence of Kronos' age. Unlike Kronos' age, in the time of Zeus gods are *not present all the time* to nurture and take care of human beings. They just give them the tools to survive autonomously (274c–d), whereas god's activities during Kronos' age are characterized by a continuous presence and intervention. Hence, the gods' (minimal and scattered) activities in the time of Zeus do not contradict the overall absence of gods and the autonomy of human beings. This means that the explicit absence of gods in Zeus's age is to be interpreted in comparison with the form of presence of both god and daemons in the age of Kronos, that is, the presence of an entity that both steers the universe and constantly guides the life of each human being. From this it does not follow that in the age of Zeus the world is without god *tout court*, because holding this view would be utterly inconsistent with the gods' intervention in donating techniques to humans and to the idea, which Plato never abandons throughout his life, that *nous* and rationality are divine elements of human life.

A further line of thought sponsored by Gabriela Carone challenges the traditional view. She starts from the same presupposition as Brisson (and Rowe), according to which it would seem implausible to consider our epoch, that of Zeus, as bereft of gods. In particular, she claims that it is impossible to

make sense of the possibility of human and political progress when the universe does not provide proper support . . . what is the point, therefore, of advocating the best kind of politics in the rest of the *Politicus*, if the myth suggests that the cosmos either prevents us from such an achievement in our current cycle or promises the abolition of all politics in a future one?¹⁸

To solve such a problem, Carone proposes a diverse interpretation of the structure of the myth. But unlike Brisson, she proposes interpreting the

¹⁷ Nightingale, 'Plato on the Origins of Evil', p. 87.

¹⁸ G.R. Carone, 'Reversing the Myth of the *Politicus*', *Classical Quarterly*, 54 (2004), pp. 88–108, at pp. 90–1.

myth in such a way that ‘both the ages of Kronos and of Zeus go in a forward direction’¹⁹ and both Zeus and Kronos’ eras are followed by an intermediate backwards-direction age. Hence, in Carone’s account, there is no opposition of movement between the age of Kronos and the age of Zeus. From this it follows that our era is not without god’s presence, although there is no divine care as there was in the era of Kronos. On Carone’s view, god’s presence is of utmost importance in guaranteeing the possibility of order and rationality.

In general, Carone is right in pointing out that ‘Plato seems to be willing to suggest here that politics takes place neither in an ideal universe where god’s *nous* would have that kind of power, nor in its opposite under the predominance of necessity (*ananke*), in our *actual* world where *nous* and necessity coexist’.²⁰ However, her reading is flawed in assuming that in Plato’s story the age of Kronos is portrayed as an ideal one.²¹ As we have seen, there are a number of hints suggesting that Plato did not consider life in the time of Kronos to be ideal, but rather minimally palatable. Moreover, Carone seems to put too much emphasis on the need for a god’s ruling the cosmos in order for the activity of politics to be possible and successful. Such a view is certainly endorsed by the late Plato in the *Laws*. The *Statesman* has traditionally been considered a precursor of some theses of the *Laws*. However, we shouldn’t exaggerate the similarity between these two dialogues. Suffice it to say here that in the *Statesman* laws are a second-best way of ruling, while in the *Laws* the passages stating that the laws are a second-best way of ruling with respect to a knowledge-based government (739a, 875c–d) seem to be paying lip service to the traditional Platonic ideal, with respect to the huge amount of praise for the divine elements in the laws. That is to say that Carone’s assumption concerning the need for divine guidance of the cosmos to ensure the possibility of politics seems unwarranted. True, good politics is made possible by human *nous*, which is a divine element of human souls. However, there is no need for a god to steer the movement of the universe. On the contrary, most Platonic thought up to the last dialogues (*Laws* and *Timaeus-Critias*) is characterized by the constant conviction that the empirical world is chaotic. Politics is necessary and useful precisely because empirical things (including political organizations) tend towards a chaotic condition. Consider, for instance, the phenomenology of degenerate constitutions in the *Republic* Books VIII and IX. Such a series of constitutions casts a pessimistic tone on the whole political enterprise of the *Republic*, but this does not diminish the need for the political rule of cities, nor does it call for a divine steering of the universe. Throughout his work, Plato considers the divine element to be the only possible salvation of human chaotic and degenerate attitudes. However, while

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²¹ ‘The age of Kronos depicts an ideal situation which contrasts with the real one’, *ibid.*, p. 104.

he always sees this divine element in human rationality, Plato embeds divine (and rational) control in the cosmos only in his later writings. Although the *Statesman* is certainly one of the late dialogues, we should not take it for granted that in the *Statesman* Plato advances the same theory as in the *Laws*.

So far so good. But, the interpretation I have defended has told us very little regarding the specific political import of the idea that the myth in the *Statesman* is a constitutive myth. To see the political implication of such a view it will be fruitful to discuss Charles Kahn's interpretation of the myth. The core of Kahn's view is based on the intuition that there is a similarity between the divine shepherd of the myth and the true statesman outlined in the second part of the dialogue.

There is a certain parallel, then, between the true Statesman and the divine shepherd of the myth. Both are godlike rulers over mankind, but neither is present in the ordinary human world, the world of the polis. Of course the two figures are not identical. In principle, at least, the Statesman rules over a city, and his rule is a model for actual *politeiai* to imitate . . . For now we can see that the myth is a device for removing the ideal Statesman from the human world and relocating him in the mythical space of an alternative cosmic cycle.²²

Such a view has far-reaching consequences for the interpretation of Plato's political thought. In Kahn's view, indeed, Plato characterizes the two figures in a similar way so as to depict all the ideal rulers (including *Republic's* philosopher-kings) in an impossible world, thus making room for the huge change represented by the *Laws*:

If we see the myth as locating the ideal ruler in a mythic age of Kronos, we can answer our original question: why does the dialogue begin with a 'mistake' that would identify the Statesman with a divine figure in a mythic Golden Age? We can now answer: because that is where the philosopher-king of the *Republic* has been conceptually relocated. This interpretation assumes that, at some level of meaning, the divine shepherd of the Golden Age stands both for the true Statesman and also for the philosopher-king.²³

In rebutting Kahn's interpretation I will limit myself to showing why we should consider the divine shepherd and the true statesman as radically different figures. Understanding their differences will help us appreciate the political import of the dialogue.

A number of diverse content-dependent features mark the difference between these two figures: the divine shepherd nurtures the human flock and intervenes directly in human life, while the true statesman directs the subordinate techniques; the former is a god, while the latter may only resemble a god; the former takes care of a flock, while the latter governs a *polis*; in the former case

²² C.H. Kahn, 'The Myth of the *Statesman*', in *Plato's Myths*, ed. C. Partenie (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 148–66, at pp. 159–60.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–2.

human beings are like animals, earthborn, and there are no conflicts among them, while in the latter case human beings are just like us (they reproduce sexually, are competitive and differ with respect to attitudes). Besides these obvious features, of which Kahn is certainly aware, there is another structural and decisive feature that distinguishes the divine shepherd from the true statesman.

The similarity that Kahn traces between these two figures rests on the idea that both take care of human beings, although in different contexts, and both seem to be unavailable in actual historical cities. Moreover, both figures seem to exceed the regular order of politics and humanity: Kronos in virtue of his divine nature; the true statesman in virtue of his exceptional capacities. To further explain why this claim of similarity is deeply misleading, we have to understand why the unavailability of these two figures is different, and to do so we have to reconsider the features of a constitutive myth.

The unavailability of Kronos is rooted in the cosmic structure, which is constrained by the rule of necessity determining the cyclic order of revolutions. It is a metaphysical impossibility that makes the appearance of such a relation between Kronos and human beings metaphysically (and physically) impossible. This impossibility is binary. That is, either there is Kronos or he is totally unavailable, depending on the age in which one finds oneself.

By contrast the unavailability of the true statesman depends only on the exceptional character of such a figure and not on metaphysical impossibility. He is a human being endowed with the extra-ordinary capacity of knowing the good of all citizens in every moment and of ruling other subordinate techniques (294–5) for the sake of keeping the city united and harmonious despite the difference in attitudes and interests of its citizens (310d–311c). He is (most likely) unavailable because he is an ideal character, the impersonation of the extreme level of human capacities. Hence, the impossibility in this case is a scalar one: namely, one can approximate the ideal of the true statesman without reaching it. So, while the true statesman is an ideal figure of a normative kind, Kronos is a fictional figure of a mythical kind.

As highlighted in the description of the myth as a constitutive myth, there is a sharp division between the two epochs, both in terms of physical elements (rotation . . .) and their norms (being nurtured or being autonomous). It is constitutive of the age of Zeus that human beings are autonomous and are to govern themselves without the god's direct intervention. The figure of the ideal statesman represents the perfect form of such human autonomous political activity, and insofar as it is the ideal representation of this idea it is unattainable. But the statesman is a human character, respecting the rules of the age of Zeus because he does not directly nurture human beings, nor does he assist them in satisfying their basic needs, and so on. Rather his capacity consists in directing (292b10) other techniques and in knowing the good for individuals and the city as a whole. From this it follows that, as seen, the alleged golden

age under Kronos is not a positive condition that we should seek to replicate in our age.

One might rebut my interpretation by saying that Plato gives a positive characterization of the age of Kronos in the *Laws* because the Athenian Visitor claims that the rule of Kronos is a model for current constitutions.²⁴ This statement seems to contradict my reading of the *Statesman* myth as a constitutive one because it apparently challenges the radical distinction between the two ages and the negative image of the age of Kronos. To respond to this challenge and reject this interpretation we should, first, analyse the differences between the two versions of the myth of the age of Kronos and, second, better understand the role played by the myth of Kronos in the *Laws*. First, it is worth recalling that in the *Laws* the Athenian Visitor recounts a very abridged version of the myth of Kronos and, unlike the *Statesman*'s version, in the *Laws*'s version political references abound. Indeed, to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of human beings, Kronos 'appointed kings and rulers for our states', who 'were not men, but beings of a superior and more divine order'.²⁵ But the daemons in the *Statesman* version are not politicized, for the whole picture is, rather, de-politicized. This point is strengthened, a few lines later, by the fact that the daemons not only give human beings 'peace' and 'respect for others', but also 'good laws' and 'justice in full measure'.²⁶ Needless to say, *eunomia kai aphthonian dikes* are alien to the possibilities of a human flock in the age of Kronos of the *Statesman*. While the age of Kronos in the *Laws* is explicitly said to have a normative function, we have seen that the myth of the age of Zeus and Kronos in the *Statesman* rather has a constitutive function.

The second reason we have to call this rejoinder to my interpretation into question is that the age of Kronos in the *Laws* has an altogether different function from the function it has in the *Statesman*.²⁷ Indeed, the explicit conclusion of the brief version of the myth in the *Laws* is intended to lend support to the idea underlying the whole dialogue: without divine guidance human beings are doomed. What mostly approaches the divine nature in human beings is their immortal part, which is expressed by laws as 'edicts of reason' (*tou nou dianomen*).²⁸ Hence, Kronos here stands as the representative of god, and the divine part in human beings is rationality. However, in the context of the *Statesman* Kronos is not the only representative of the divine nature, for

²⁴ Plato, *Laws*, trans. T.J. Saunders, in *Plato, Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1994), 713b. I reference the standard Stephanus pagination.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 713c8–d3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 713e2–3.

²⁷ This point is also accepted by Christopher Rowe, who proposes a different reading of the myth of the *Statesman* and is otherwise more keen to trace similarities between these two versions of the myth, see C. Rowe, 'The Relationship of the *Laws* to other Dialogues: A Proposal', in *Plato's Laws: A Critical Guide*, ed. C. Bobonich (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 29–50, at p. 41.

²⁸ *Laws* 714a2.

there is also Zeus. Although Zeus is characterized as being absent or at least not as present, as Kronos is, in the life of human beings, he does not seem to be less divine or less rational than Kronos. Hence, the opposition between god and human beings in the *Laws* does not have a counterpart in the *Statesman*, where the opposition is, rather, between two types of gods (Kronos and Zeus) and between human dependence and human autonomy. Hence, the positive and political representation of the age of Kronos in the *Laws* should be kept separate from the image of Kronos' age in the *Statesman*, and we should not conflate the former into the latter. This suggests that we cannot use the *Laws*'s explicit reference to Kronos' age as a positive political model as a proof that Kronos' age is a model in the *Statesman* as well. In sum, Kahn's overall claim seems unwarranted.

Conclusion:
The Advantages of this Interpretation

To conclude, the interpretation I have proposed aims to defend the traditional understanding of the structure of the myth. It provides, however, a different and novel set of reasons for supporting this reading and for rejecting the alternatives. Such a defence of the traditional interpretation may help us to understand some peculiar features of the myth: in what sense in the age of Zeus god is absent; why Plato includes some comic and unpalatable elements in the golden age; the difference between Kronos and the true statesman; and the political significance of the myth.

Besides proposing that the *Statesman* myth is a constitutive myth, the set of categories I have outlined has other more general advantages with respect to the alternatives. First, it represents the different types of myth on a unique scale, thus yielding a more coherent and uniform set of relations between them. Second, it tries to account for the dialogic function of the myth according to two functions (description vs. normative prescription), which are not peculiar to Platonic thought, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Platonic thought in general. Accordingly, the categories I propose make the functions of Platonic myths less idiosyncratic with regard to the specificity of the dialogues and bring them more in line with general theoretical issues.

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