

**GERARD NADDAF CPA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
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ALLEGORY AND THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

The birth of philosophy is generally identified with the rejection of *mythopoiesis* and the adoption of rational/natural explanations in terms of causality, whence the popular expression from *muthos* to *logos* or from myth to reason. Much has been written on this famous transition, which many once considered a “miracle.” However, there is little on how the proponents of myth responded. They fought back with *mutho-logia*, that is, with a *logos* about myth. This “rational” approach invoked the same *logos* that is generally associated with *philosophia*. In fact, *philosophia* and *mythologia* are at times so intimately connected that until the Enlightenment period, it is often difficult to distinguish between them. This is due to the “spell” of myth, particularly Greek/Homeric myth, or to be more precise, because of the allegorical interpretation of Homeric myth. The allegorical phenomenon is connected with the notion that the “first” poets were divinely inspired; they were given access to the “divine” secrets about the universe.

In my presidential address, I would like to shed some light on the origin and development of this rather unremarked —albeit remarkable— “story” in the history of our discipline. I will begin by showing to what degree the pre-Platonic project of philosophy was at times overshadowed by the allegorical approach to myth. Given the importance of allegoresis, that is, allegorizing as an interpretative mode, it is most surprising that histories of ancient philosophy rarely mention the notion in the development of early Greek philosophy.

The history of allegoresis is complex. It features many actors with widely different positions and roles. The initial protagonists are, of course, Homer and Hesiod, who were canonized prior to the birth of philosophy as the “educators of Greece.” Their works constitute

the original and primary object of allegoresis. Then there are the Milesians. They are the real heroes in this affair — although never acknowledged as such by contemporary scholars. Indeed, within a generation or two of their articulation, their naturalistic theories — with which we associate the origins of philosophy— appeared so convincing to the intellectual milieu that there is a sense in which they were uncontested. If Homer and Hesiod were to maintain their unparalleled prestige as the guarantors of the cultural past, their poems had to be seen as conveying the same ideas as those of the Milesians, at least by a large portion of the intelligentsia. This is already clear in the scholium to the late 6th century BC grammarian Theagenes of Rhegium, who plays, as we will see, a pivotal role in this history.

We also have Xenophanes and Heraclitus, who were the first to challenge publicly the idea that Homer and Hesiod had any claim to “truthful knowledge.” Until their very public scolding of the two great poets, there was nothing to indicate that Homer and Hesiod were understood otherwise than literally. It was only when Xenophanes and Heraclitus drew attention to the consequences of a literal interpretation that allegoresis, a radical new way of interpreting Homer and Hesiod, was introduced. Xenophanes and Heraclitus thus appear to have paved the road for the aforementioned Theagenes of Rhegium, a younger Italian (or western Greek) contemporary, who is the first person credited with writing an allegorical exegesis of Homer as a reply to his detractors. It is unclear if Theagenes initiated allegoresis, but I will argue that his counterattack against the detractors of Homer and Hesiod was so effective and convincing that the traditional philosophical successors to Xenophanes and Heraclitus thought that Homer and Hesiod had access to the doctrines they themselves espoused. Indeed, there is evidence that in some instances they thought that their respective doctrines were defensible because they were “somehow” endorsed by Homer and Hesiod. There is thus a complex reciprocal relation between philosophy and mythology/poetry that has never been fully appreciated, in which poetry acts as a catalyst in the post-Heraclitean development of philosophy. As I hope to show, all the Presocratic philosophers, including Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Empedocles and Democritus (to

mention only the “giants” of Presocratic philosophy), employ allegory and/or allegoresis to various degrees and, no doubt, for various reasons. Although Plato, at least in appearance, rejected allegory (and thus traditional mythology) because children he argued were not in a position to distinguish “hidden” meaning from the literal meaning (*Republic* 2. 378), his ambiguous attitude toward myth and poetic inspiration was a catalyst in the post-Platonic development of allegory and philosophy at least until to the Enlightenment period. With this in mind, I will provide a overview of the rather surprising relation between philosophy and mythology with allegoresis as the driving force from Aristotle to Newton, from the Hellenistic period to the Enlightenment period.

Given the complexities of the history of allegoresis, it should be no surprise that allegory itself is a very complex notion. By way of clarification, we can distinguish calling a text allegorical in a *strong* or in a *weak* sense: “A text will be allegorical in a *strong* sense if its author composes with the intention of being interpreted allegorically,” while “a text will be allegorical in a *weak* sense if, irrespective of what its author intended, it invites interpretation in ways that go beyond its surface or so-called literal meaning” (Anthony Long 1992, 43). We could also characterize the *strong* and *weak* senses as intentional and nonintentional or deliberative and nondeliberative respectively.

The word “myth” is notoriously difficult to define. No one definition has been universally accepted. In a general sense, myth is a message that a social group considers to have received from its ancestors and that it transmits orally from generation to generation. In the Greek oral tradition, myths took the form of poetry and it was the great poets, Homer and Hesiod, who are seen as the primary “creators” of “oral tradition” and, by extension, of “myth.” This is also the position of Herodotus (484-420BC) when he states that “Homer and Hesiod are the poets who composed our theogonies and described the gods for us, giving them all their appropriate titles, offices, and powers.” The gods (*theoi*) were so named, Herodotus, notes because they disposed

all things in order that is, established the physical and moral/social order of the universe (*Histories* 2.52.1).

The relation of Homer and Hesiod to myth is complex and not always fully appreciated. In a world in which myths are always and hence “naturally” conveyed in oral accounts, writing “denaturalizes” myth. With the advent of writing, Greek myths were open to interpretation, since they could be recorded in a literary form.

What did Homer and Hesiod see themselves as doing? There can be little doubt that Homer and Hesiod saw themselves as disseminators of a historico-genealogical tradition. In the case of the Homeric epics, the Greeks of the subsequent generations never doubted the authenticity of the Trojan War and the heroes who participated in it. And while it is true, as Thucydides (460-400BC) notes, that “people are inclined to accept all stories of ancient times in an uncritical way” (1.20), in particular those of poets like Homer, he is nonetheless well aware that he is dependent on Homer’s account of the Trojan war in his reconstruction of the early history of Greece (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.10, 21).

Homer’s account of the Trojan War is a perfect example of oral tradition. It was how the personalized gods openly intervened in human affairs and how they behaved toward one another that was later to raise eyebrows. Indeed, while there is quite obviously a strict code of behavior based on the sacred tradition, what stands out in the Homeric epics is the devious and perverse behavior of the gods, behavior which is not only seen as mirroring human action but as providing its primary motivation: “Zeus [or any divinity] made me do it.”

There are a number of contradictions here. On the one hand, Zeus is the protector of social order, and to ignore this is to invite an Achillean type of divine wrath. On the other, he appears to endorse, indeed actively participate in, extreme asocial behavior. The gods sanction

devious and antisocial actions, including murder, rape, and theft, as long as these actions take place outside the spheres of their individual concerns. In this respect, as Walter Burkert (1985, 249) notes, “the very model of behavior” that the myths of the gods offer is one in which one must not do X if there is a danger of offending, but if there is no danger of offending, X is permitted. In fact, it is quite stunning to what degree the order of events in the Trojan war is actually dictated by Aphrodite’s sphere of activity. Aphrodite seduces Paris who in turn seduces Helen. Sex and intrigue, seduction and carnal pleasure, go hand in hand throughout the epic. Hera is well aware that sex, if anything, will take Zeus’ eyes off the Trojan war (*Iliad* 14.160f; 215f).

Hesiod’s *Theogony* shows that this amoral or asocial behavior was at the foundation of the present world order. The *Theogony* describes the origin of the world and of the gods and the events which led to the establishment of the present order. As such, it explains the origin of the organizational structure and code of values of the gods (and by extension the heroes and humans) which we see in action in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Did Homer and Hesiod themselves believe in these oral, traditional accounts? Given that the Greeks of subsequent generations did not doubt the authenticity of the Trojan War, there is little doubt that this was also the case for Homer and Hesiod. But did they believe that the gods/goddess actually intervened in human events in the ways described? Did they believe that the heroes were in part of divine origin, albeit “mortal”? Did they believe that the gods actually were anthropomorphic and, once born, behaved toward one another in reprehensible ways? It was in fact these “nonhistorical” embellishments that were later to be associated first and foremost with *muthoi*, that is, “myths.”

There is no good reason to believe that Homer and Hesiod did not also have a “literal” belief in the “nonhistorical” component of their traditional accounts. Indeed, there is good

evidence that this view was widely accepted for generations by the proponents of traditional religion and morality (the nonintellectual class and thus, it seems, the majority: or what Heraclitus would call the *hoi polloi* or “ignorant masses” in DK22B104). As David Furley (1985, 201-208) has shown, Plato’s character Euthyphro is a perfect example of this. He is a religious interpreter and representative of traditional religious and moral beliefs who takes a literal or orthodox interpretation (analogous to contemporary fundamentalists) of the bloody and cruel battles among the gods as they are portrayed in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (*Euthyphro*, 5d-6d). Nor was this restricted to the “uneducated class.” It has become a cliché, in light of Plato’s observations in the *Republic*, that Homer (and Hesiod to a lesser degree) was considered “the educator of Hellas” (*Republic* 606e), that is, the founder of traditional education (*Republic* 10.598d-e). What Plato means is that most Greeks believed that Homer and his cohorts “know all the arts and all things pertaining to virtue and vice, and all things divine” (10.598e). For Plato, this is nonsense and the source of the “old quarrel” between philosophy and poetry (*Republic* 10.607b). It is unclear when Plato sees the quarrel as having originated. This brings us back to the origin of philosophy.

As I noted above, the origin of philosophy is generally identified with the rejection of *mythopoiesis* and the adoption of rational/natural explanations. There is a sense in which the first philosophers, or *phusiologoi* as Aristotle characterized them, discovered “nature,” that is, nature as an objectivity. As Gregory Vlastos (1970, 24) correctly observes, the first philosophers were “united in the assumption that the order which makes our world a cosmos is natural, that is to say, that it is immanent in nature.” The world order derives from the essential characteristics of the components themselves; consequently, there is no need for the intervention of the supernatural entities we see in “mythical” accounts. There is indeed a consensus that the first philosophers were all engaged with what the Greeks called *historia peri phuseos*, that is, an “investigation into nature” and that the primary preoccupation of this investigation was to give an account of *all* things based on rational argumentation.

The first philosopher to have written a book reflecting this new vision of nature was Anaximander of Miletus (c. 610–546). Anaximander's book, *On Nature* (*Peri phuse s*), was one of the first known examples of prose in Greek and the first philosophical prose treatise. His choice to write in prose rather than in verse may have been an attempt to free the language of philosophy (or what was to become philosophy) from the undesirable preconceptions of poetry. However, the picture is complicated.

Anaximander's new concept of nature is evidenced in a number of ancient sources. One of particular importance describes how Anaximander conceived the formation of the universe (DK12A10). The central idea is that the cosmos grows, like a living being, from a seed or germ. According to the doxography, the cause of all natural change is the reciprocal action of the opposites — that is, hot, cold, wet, and dry, which are the basic components or principles of all things. Once the separation of the mutually hostile opposites commences, the cosmogonic process perpetuates itself in a cyclical process through the natural operation of the reciprocal power of the opposites. This is corroborated in Anaximander's sole surviving fragment, which explains how the present order of things is maintained. According to this fragment (DK12B1), the order of nature is based on an equilibrium of rights and obligations, an equilibrium which results when the constituent powers or primary opposites act as equals. In sum, the natural order of things is the result of a constant interchange between the primary powers or opposites, the same powers or opposites which were behind the initial formation of the universe: hot and cold; wet and dry (which are associated, in turn, with the four elemental bodies: earth, air, fire and water). For Anaximander, there is no role for the traditional gods; indeed, as far as we know they do not enter into the picture. This brings us back to the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.

We are all familiar with Xenophanes (c. 570–470BC) scathing remarks with regard to Homer and Hesiod's portrayal of the traditional gods: "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the

gods every kind of behavior that among men is the object of reproach: stealing, adultery, and cheating each other” (DK21B11). This remark was the first known salvo in what Plato later calls the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry (*Republic* 607b5). The criticism Xenophanes directed against the two Greek icons and their crass anthropomorphism centers on the idea that if the gods do indeed behave this way, then there is no reason to worship them. Indeed, their portrayal of the gods is socially irresponsible, for it fosters social disharmony and civil strife.

Xenophanes was well aware that Homer had the reputation of being the “educator of the Greeks.” Indeed, he was the first to mention Homer by name in this context: “From the beginning [of one’s life] all have learned according to Homer” (DK21B10). Heraclitus of Ephesus (540–480BC), a younger contemporary of Xenophanes, concurs with him when he states: “Hesiod is the teacher of most men” (DK22B57), or again when he characterizes Homer as “the wisest of all the Greeks” (DK22B56). And yet Heraclitus’ criticism is even more bitter than that of Xenophanes: “Homer deserved to be expelled from the [rhapsodic] competition and beaten with a staff (*rhapizesthai*)” (DK 22B42). Hesiod fares no better (see DK22B57; 22B106). Heraclitus is both appalled and frustrated that the ignorant crowd or *hoi polloi* believes that what the *ainoioi* or poets say is true (22B104). Xenophanes and Heraclitus object first and foremost to Homer and Hesiod as a source of wisdom. The Muses cannot be used as a source of truth (*aletheia*), or even opinion (*doxa*), for that matter, when it comes to truth claims. The gods simply do not reveal “truth” about the universe to humans, including poets; humans must search for themselves, using their minds and the senses, that is, rational argument and observation, to arrive at valid conclusions about the nature of the universe and our place in it. In sum, the two great poets are denied any claim to “truthful knowledge.”

It seems clear that both Xenophanes and Heraclitus are not only familiar with the poetry of Homer and Hesiod through oral recitations but that they have also read and reflected on the poetic texts. Despite their hostility toward Homer and Hesiod, it seems also clear that both

Xenophanes and Heraclitus presume that the texts of Homer and Hesiod are transparent and their meaning unambiguous (Harvey Yunis 2003, 194; Andrew Ford 2002,75). They appear to make no distinction between what Homer and Hesiod intended and what their texts literally said. This suggests that what Homer and Hesiod were saying was not a concern for those toward whom their criticism was addressed and it seems that their criticism was directed toward a wider public.

This is where the plot thickens. As Glenn Most notes, by denying Homer and Hesiod any claim to “truthful knowledge,” Xenophanes and Heraclitus not only initiated one of the most tenacious polemical traditions in Western poetics, but they also laid the foundation for the most influential way of safeguarding the poets from such attacks, namely allegorical interpretation. The most stunning and ironical surprise in this recuperative measure, given the stakes in the polemic, is that “the allegorist believes that the only true doctrine is in fact the one the philosopher possesses” (Most 1999, 339). The allegorist does not claim that the obvious reading of the poet’s text is incompatible with the philosopher’s doctrine but in fact asserts that, though the poet may seem to be saying one thing that contradicts the [philosophers’] truth, in fact he means another that is entirely compatible with it. There are a number of variations on this claim which is already evident in a number of pre-Platonic philosophers who were already smitten with the allegorical bug. So when and with whom did allegoresis originate?

The first person credited with having written an allegorical exegesis of Homer was Theagenes of Rhegium. The Neoplatonist philosopher and philologist Porphyry (AD 234–c.305), provides an example of Theagenes’ method. The passage refers to *Iliad* 20.67ff (= DK8.2), in which the gods, with Zeus’s permission, descend to the plain and battle each other for the fate of Troy. The gods line up in opposition to one another — Poseidon against Apollo, Ares against Athena, Hera against Artemis, Leto against Hermes, and Hephaestus against Scamander — and the scholiast/ Porphyry notes the following:

Homer's doctrine on the gods usually tends to be useless and improper, for the myths he relates about the gods are offensive. In order to counter this sort of accusation, some people invoke the mode of expression; they feel that all was said in an allegorical mode (*allegoria*) and has to do with the nature of the elements, as in the case of the passage where the gods confront one another. Thus according to them, the dry clashes with the wet, the hot clashes with the cold, and the light with the heavy. In addition, water extinguishes fire, while fire evaporates water; in a similar way, there is an opposition between all the elements making up the universe; they may suffer destruction in part, but they endure eternally as a whole. In arranging these battles, Homer provides fire with the name of Apollo, Helios, or Hephaistos, he calls water Poseidon or Scamander, the moon Artemis, air Hera, and so on. In the same way, he sometimes gives names of gods to dispositions, the name Athena is given to wisdom/intelligence, Ares to folly, Aphrodite to desire, Hermes to speech, all according to what is associated with each. This kind of defence is very ancient and goes back to Theagenes of Rhegium, who was the first to write about Homer.

Porphyry provides us with no information other than this reference with regard to Theagenes, but other sources inform us that Theagenes was a contemporary of the Persian King Cambyses (530–22 B.C.), which means that he would have been living during the same period as Homer's detractors. There is to be sure a fair amount of controversy regarding this obscure but now famous figure, albeit almost exclusively in the domain of literary criticism. However, the relevance, indeed importance, of Theagenes of Rhegium for the history of the origin and development of Greek philosophy is rarely mentioned in this context.

The most common interpretation of this reference from Porphyry is that Theagenes sought to “defend” Homer against his detractors. It is unclear if Theagenes thought that Homer

himself was an allegorist in the strong sense, that is, someone who consciously constructed his poems so that their apparent meaning refers to an “other” meaning. To be sure, there is plenty in Homer and Hesiod that is arguably allegorical, not to mention the much-discussed observation that both Homer (*Odyssey* 19.203) and Hesiod (*Theogony* 24-28) stress that the poet and the Muses are capable of reciting true and false stories. Before canvassing this is further, I would like to return to the Milesians.

It is surprising the Milesians are generally passed over in silence when discussing Theagenes as the first recorded allegorist, that is, the first to practice allegoresis. Indeed, it is the Milesian doctrine of the primary opposites to which the Porphyry (the scholiast) refers when he claims that Theagenes was the first to argue that the battle of the gods in Homer is really a description of the fight in nature between the primary elements and/or opposites. It seems clear — although scholars are loath to mention it — that Theagenes was more impressed with the Milesians than with Homer. It’s as if Theagenes were a disciple of Anaximander. But if Theagenes endorsed the new naturalist vision of the universe and the arguments on which it is premised, just what position did he maintain with regard to Homer? Did he believe, as commonly supposed, that Homer as a poet (if not *the* poet) was a prophet directly inspired by the gods? From this perspective, Theagenes would have seen Homer as one of the famous “masters of truth,” that is, a “master of truth” who was already *aware* that the universe functioned according to “natural laws,” but laws that were hidden from the masses. The Milesians had now discovered these divine secrets through their *historia*.

It is, however, difficult to know whether Anaximander, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, or Heraclitus believed that the gods of traditional religion were fictions pure and simple, or whether they thought that there was an element of truth to the myths that Homer and Hesiod related about the gods, just as they thought it was true that the Trojan War had indeed occurred. Xenophanes, in fact, replaced traditional gods with a radical “new” conception of the divinity that has

similarities with Anaximander's *apeiron* and Anaximenes' *aer* (and Heraclitus' *logos*) insofar as these basic principles are also said to "govern" all things (Naddaf 2005, 65-67; 117).

On the other hand, I believe that there is evidence to show that all the subsequent philosophers we characterize as Presocratic either composed some of their verses allegorically, as in the case of Parmenides and Empedocles, or interpreted allegorically as in the case of Anaxagoras and Democritus. Most of the Presocratic references make implicit, if not explicit, allusions to Homer in particular as an allegorist. And where Homer is not the explicit focal point, it seems that all are contending that Homer had insights that conform to their own theories. There is little to indicate that these positions could be invariably characterized as "positive" or "defensive," that is, either to use Homer's prestige to enhance their own doctrines, or to defend Homer against charges of simplicity. So what are these Presocratics claiming? Some appear to suggest that the allegorical references in Homer are unintentional and thus allegorical in the weak sense while others suggest that they are deliberative and thus allegorical in the strong sense. Let us turn briefly to the Presocratics beginning with Parmenides of Elea.

Parmenides, the father of deductive logic, not only composed in hexameter verse and claimed to be divinely inspired, but his "revelation" was delivered by a goddess in the form of a *muthos* or story on the hidden nature of being (DK28B2.1). More to the point, Parmenides' proem is heavily allegorized and was the subject of considerable controversy (read: exegesis) even in antiquity. There can be no doubt that Parmenides was familiar with Theagenes' interpretation of Homer, not to mention the competing Pythagorean and Orphic mysteries. On a number of occasions, Parmenides borrows expressions from Homer. A case at point is his preference for the Homeric term *aither* (DK28B10.1; 1.2; see also B8.9, 9 and 11) to designate the upper sky in which the stars are located rather than the Milesian *pur* (fire) and/or *aer* (air). However, whatever the expressions that Parmenides borrowed from Homer and/or Hesiod and whatever the influences he underwent, it seems clear that Parmenides saw his method as

“objective” and the “truth” he espouses as his own discovery. As for his allegorical approach strictly speaking, Parmenides is difficult to categorize. There is a sense in which he is allegorizing in the strong and deliberative sense in the proem, for example, but there is also a sense in which he is using the weak and unintentional sense as in his references to Homer and Hesiod.

Empedocles, like Parmenides, also propounded his philosophy of nature in hexameters and contended that they are derived straight from a god (DK31B23.11). As many have pointed out Empedocles was a curious mixture of shaman and natural philosopher. He is often credited as the originator of the doctrine of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. These elements are aligned with the Homeric divinities: Zeus, Hera, Aidoneus, and Nestis (DK31B6; 96, 98). Whatever our interpretation of these correspondences, they could suggest that Empedocles was imitating Homer when he gives the elements divine names. It was also considered that Empedocles borrowed his two antagonistic cosmic forces, Love and Strife, from Homer and Hesiod. In fact, Empedocles personifies and/or allegorizes a large number of divinities that are also found in Homer and Hesiod, including Aphrodite, Harmonia, Beauty, Ugliness, Murder, Anger, Truth, Anger, and Death (DK31B118, 119, 120, 122, 124). Although no one questions the profound Pythagorean influence, the question is: To what degree did Empedocles’ readings of Homer influence his own account and/or lead to a rationalizing of Homer? Empedocles’ doctrine of metempsychosis would elicit an affirmative response, for it would suggest that he knew Homer in a previous existence. More importantly, Empedocles was well aware that had he not written in a poetic form imitative of Homer, he would not have met with such success (see Most 1999, 356). The evidence that we have suggests that Empedocles may have used Homer to foster his own prestige.

The relation of Anaxagoras to Homer appears somewhat different from what we find in Parmenides and Empedocles. According to Favorinus of Arles, Anaxagoras was “the first to

demonstrate that Homer’s poetry was about virtue and justice.”(DK59A1). This could suggest that Anaxagoras believed that Homer’s poems were to be understood not literally but allegorically, if the accent is on moral allegory rather than physical (Gábor Betegh 2004, 309 n. 14). Indeed, it suggests that Anaxagoras thought that Homer composed his poems allegorically in the *strong* sense — a point that is reinforced by his disciple Metrodorus of Lampsacus who interpreted the gods and heros of the *Iliad* as parts of the universe and as parts of the human body (DK61A3–4). It seems meanwhile disconcerting that one of the great figures of the Greek Enlightenment would have defended Homer contra Xenophanes. Given the popularity of Homer, this may have been one way for Anaxagoras to avoid an accusation of impiety. However, given that Anaxagoras’ cosmic *nous* has knowledge of all things past and future (DK59B12) and given that humans participate in this *nous*, it is theoretically possible for a human being to understand the “will” of the cosmic *nous*. From this perspective, Anaxagoras may have argued that Homer’s “divine dispensation” enabled him to understand that the universe exhibits the same moral order as expressed in his own “scientific” understanding of the universe (see fragment 910 Nauck).

Democritus, for his part, is said to have practised psychological allegory in his interpretation of Homer. Diogenes Laertius (DK68A33) provides an example of his explanation of Athena’s title Tritogeneia (e.g. *Iliad* 4.515, 8.39) as referring to the threefold nature of *phronesis* or wisdom: reflection, speech, and action (DK68B2). Another instance of allegory appears to be Democritus’ comparison of the ancient notion of Zeus with the then modern notion of air (DK68B30). This suggests that Democritus believed that the ancient poets had a privileged access to the composition of the universe. In conjunction with this, the founder of Greek atomic theory was a strong believer in poetic inspiration, and it was, as he notes, precisely this that enabled Homer to build a *kosmos* of varied verse (DK68B17, 18, 21). Moreover, Democritus also believed in god-images or *eidola* (DKA78) and that these gods, these atomic compounds, were not only living and intelligent but that they also, in contrast to Epicurus, play a role in human affairs. He believed that these gods could “reveal the future by appearing and speaking”

(DKB166), although they did not create or control the physical universe. The evidence strongly suggests that Democritus believed that Homer was indeed a visionary sage with a privileged utterance that he intentionally transmitted allegorically. To be sure, this does not detract from Democritus' own originality, but it appears, in my view, inconsistent and disconcerting given his place in the pantheon of Ionian rationalism.

Plato, for his part, was in fact the first Greek author to take the already existing term *muthos* and make systematic use of it, opposing it to the term *logos* (rational discourse). And giving it the meaning we are now accustomed to give it, when we use the term "myth." Plato's own position on allegory as indeed on myth and poetry, is ambiguous. We are all familiar with the famous passage in *Republic 2* (377b-378d) in which he argues that children must not be exposed to the poetic myths about the gods for the young are not in a position at this vulnerable age to distinguish deeper from surface meaning. More to the point, Plato is critical of myth on the one hand because it cannot be declared true or false and on the other hand because it is inferior to argumentation (Luc Brisson 1999, 9-10). Ironically, Plato is no doubt the greatest mythmaker of them all, but this is another "story".

In what follows, I would like to show that the history of philosophy at least until the Enlightenment period continued to be captivated by the allegorical approach to myth such that it is often difficult to distinguish between philosophy and mythology — the latter consisting of "primitive truths" about the universe and man's relation to, and place in, it to a privileged group of individuals. From this perspective there is a continuation and an intensification of what originated with Theagenes' reaction to the critical inquiry we now associate with "philosophy" and thus the initial dethroning of Homer and Hesiod as the purveyors of "traditional" divinely inspired wisdom.

Let me begin with Aristotle — a rather unlikely candidate. Aristotle has a great admiration for Homer and argues that there are many lessons to be learned from the great poet. But he sees the poems as making “fiction” or “the marvellous possible” (*Poetics* 1460a18ff). Aristotle, however, goes much further than this. *Metaphysics* 1074b1–14 shows that for Aristotle the initial or pre-anthropomorphic notion of the divinity that was handed down in the form of myth (*en muthou schemati*) and that identified the primary natural forces or substances with gods must have been divinely inspired, for it constitutes the germ that culminated in his own philosophical theology. More important, Aristotle (*Movement of Animals* 699b35ff.) provides with his own notion of the Unmoved Mover an allegorical exegesis of the famous scene in Homer’s *Iliad* 7 in which Zeus describes his formidable power in the form of suspending *all* the other gods, and thus the entire universe, from a golden chain. The reasoning behind Aristotle’s own contention is grounded in his notion that human civilizations are repeatedly developed and periodically destroyed by natural catastrophes. However, Aristotle believes that some humans do in fact survive and these retain some fragments of antediluvian wisdom. This suggests that Aristotle is interpreting Homer in the weak and nondeliberate sense, but nonetheless contends that the traditional poets had access to “truths” about the universe.

The Stoics, the most influential philosophers during the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, wanted to appropriate the gods of traditional religion/mythology into their system. They were notorious for their allegorical interpretations of Homer, Hesiod and even Orpheus and Musaeus. The Stoics saw Homer and Hesiod as crypto-Stoics who had a correct understanding of the world, that is, the same understanding as the Stoics. Etymology in particular enabled the Stoics to appropriate into their system the gods of traditional religion, whom they associated with the elements and natural forces or more precisely the manifestation of divine reason in these entities..

After the Roman victory of 87 B.C., Sulla closed the four philosophical schools of Athens (Platonic, Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic), and the result was a radical change in the interpretation of texts. With the dispersion of the disciples, systematic textual commentaries of the writings of the original leaders became a must; there was a shift from speaking to reading, from discussing problems together to examining how the founders themselves approached the problems. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the approach to the texts became exegetical. There was a strong Pythagorean influence on the interpretation of Platonic texts, with the “secret” aspect (one of the tenets of Pythagoreanism) acquiring a fundamental role. But in the Pythagorean tradition the “secret” is transmitted orally through *sumbola* or *ainigmata* that is, symbols or enigmas, or more precisely messages, messages that can be interpreted on two levels: one for the initiated and one for the uninitiated.

The interpretation of myths was now closely associated with mysteries, and comparisons were drawn between the Eleusinian Mysteries and their several degrees of initiation, with which most were quite familiar, and what appeared to be parallel themes in certain Homeric myths. Homer was now understood as consciously concealing in his myths messages that he is delivering to humans from the gods. Since Plato established a relation, notably in the *Phaedrus*, between philosophy on the one hand, and divination, mysteries and poetry on the other, from a Pythagorean-Platonic perspective, it appeared that he saw all four as expressing the same reality, a reality emanating directly from God. Poets and philosophers were now part of the same privileged camp; they all received coded messages directly from the gods because they were capable of assimilating with the gods.

Philo of Alexandria (fl. 40 AD), the famous Jewish philosopher who operated within the Greek philosophical tradition and language, still applied Stoic concepts in his allegorical approach, but his introduction of the mysteries led him in a radical new direction. Philo saw Homer and Hesiod as theologians and their poems (and myths) as sacred texts that were revealed

to them by the divinity. To understand the true meaning of these texts, that is, their hidden meaning, and the messages they contain, required an initiation into the mysteries, a spiritual preparation or exercise, and this was restricted to a limited number of initiates. Since the steps in the initiation process are identified with the curriculum or program of Plato's *Republic* (the correspondence of which Philo sees in the Book of Genesis), Philo perceived these sciences as the slave to philosophy; but since philosophy must be considered as the slave to wisdom, that is, the word of God as it was revealed to Moses, philosophy becomes the slave of theology (Pierre Hadot 2002, 255–56). This perspective will have a lasting effect well into the Renaissance.

The philosopher and biographer, Plutarch of Chaeronea (fl. 100AD), moved in a similar direction, but believed that his approach could be applied to all myths, both Greek and non-Greek. In fact, since “secret” knowledge, according to him, is a feature in both philosophy and religion and since Egypt is “the cradle of civilization” and the place where such secret knowledge originated, the legendary Greek sages, including Hesiod, Homer, Plato, and Pythagoras all visited Egypt and lived among the priests, who initiated them into their most profound secrets (notably the interpretation of the myths).

Around 150 AD an obscure (but influential) Neopythagorean, Numenius, contended that there was a primitive widespread revelation of theological truths that were transmitted in Greece *and* elsewhere (including among the Egyptians, Persians, and Jews) to a few individuals including Homer, Pythagoras, and Plato. This could be confirmed through an allegorical interpretation of their respective works. From this perspective neither Homer nor Plato have a truth-value over the other: same revelation, same truth; history has *no* value. This is a twist — and a fundamentally important one — to the history of philosophy that is too often completely ignored.

The Neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus (204–70AD), identified the three great gods of Hesiod's theogony, Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus, with the three principle hypostases of his

system: the One, Intellect and Soul. In a similar manner, Plotinus interpreted in a most original way a number of traditional and Platonic myths, to illustrate his own thesis. However, Plotinus, contrary to the Stoics, was not looking for perfect correspondences between the mythical characters and philosophical realities. Plotinus believed that poetry is a *different* means (or mode) of expressing the *same* truth. The aim of interpreting myths for Plotinus is to demonstrate the existence of a correspondence between the myth (transmitted directly by the gods) and the philosophical system of the same reality to which it refers, a reality situated beyond time and governing the sensible reality. The richest (or most imaginative!) of the Neoplatonic approaches to allegory, in particular with regard to the traditional mythology, must be Porphyry's *The Cave of the Nymphs* in which Homer's *Odyssey* is interpreted as a spiritual journey of the soul through the Neoplatonic universe. Porphyry (234-305AD) uses the works of Pythagoras and Plato to elucidate the more esoteric lines in the great poet since they are all derived from the same divine source.

While allegorical interpretation did not subside with the Neoplatonic School of fifth-century Athens, it took on a radical new twist. It was now impregnated with a terminology proper to the mysteries and thus with an increasing emphasis on secrecy and exclusivity. Indeed, Platonism was invaded by the practice of theurgy, the belief that there are "rituals" capable of purifying the soul and allowing it to contemplate the gods. The Neoplatonists saw the soul as having fallen into a body, an imprisonment from which it could only be saved through *direct intervention* on the part of the divinity. Plato meanwhile continued to be considered as a "theologian" whose work was likened to other "sacred scriptures." In conjunction with this, Proclus (412-485A.D.) established a complete correspondence between the Platonic theology and the other theologies, including those connected with Pythagoras, Orpheus, and the *Chaldean Oracles*. But he went further than this and included the theologies of Homer and Hesiod, who are themselves characterized as "theologians." Any distance between philosophy and mythology is

now abolished, since there is only one unique truth and it is only revealed to those who are “worthy,” whence the notable obsession with the fate of the soul and the structure of the cosmos.

Although Proclus left a flourishing school to his disciples, when the school of Athens was closed by Justinian in 529 AD, the school had limited its auditors to a small restricted group of initiates. Moreover, Homer and Hesiod and thus polytheism were now restricted material. The Christian interpretative and pedagogic tradition would now assert itself and attempt to reduce the gods of Homer and Hesiod to motifs with purely aesthetic value. But this attempt failed as an historical analysis of the Byzantine period (AD 529–1453) and its reception of pagan myths clearly shows.

In the ninth century, there was already a keen interest in the accumulation and transmission of manuscripts and thereafter the ambitious and enormous encyclopedic work known as the *Suda* reached completion. It is this work in particular that allows us to measure the quantity and quality of knowledge that was available at the time. With Michael Psellus and his disciples in the eleventh century we have numerous allegorical interpretations of Neoplatonic inspiration, and with John Tzetzes in the twelfth century we have a number of volumes devoted to an allegorical interpretation of Homer. There were, of course, a number of hostile ecclesiastical interventions, but the Byzantine inheritors were determined to safeguard Greek culture. It was thus possible to transmit the myths that embodied the pagan religions, but they had to be interpreted in such a way that they would conform to a culture other than the one from which they originated. Thus the homeland to which Odysseus longs to return is none other than the celestial Jerusalem. In sum, if allegory was again the privileged means of interpreting myths, to make the myths acceptable to the Byzantine orthodoxies Christian and pagan allegory had to be fused together.

It is clear that during this period Homer remained the primary author studied. In fact, the education of the Byzantine child still began with Homer. It seems strange that in a profoundly Christian society Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* continued to be the primary school texts. This may have been simply a question of following "tradition," and the church fathers, for whom to know Homer was still the *sine qua non* of a cultured man, had thus recommended that Christians could still profit from it. But the Byzantines, as Robert Browning notes (1992, 147), were also well aware that their culture had two roots, pagan and Christian, and that Homer was the primary symbol of this complex and determined culture.

During the Renaissance, the original texts from antiquity were rediscovered, and the advent of the printing press enabled their even wider distribution. What the Renaissance attempted to do was integrate mythology into sacred history and Christian theology. Few were able to distance themselves enough to ask if their interpretations were textually based or fabrications of their own minds (Luc Brisson 2004, 152). The intent throughout the period was to show that the Old and New Testaments were behind all other religions. Indeed, there was an obsession to establish agreements between biblical figures and the pagan gods. More important, there was the conviction that since Adam was the first human, God would have revealed the "perfect theology" to Adam (and/or a primitive humanity) before the Fall. This sacred knowledge was passed down "orally" from generation to generation in the form of symbols but progressively deteriorated — another twist to an old legacy. Some, in particular the Hebrews, preserved the message more faithfully than others. Thus Semitic languages derived from Hebrew, like Chaldean, Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, and Phoenician, preserved the "perfect theology" better than non-Semitic and younger languages like Greek which, they thought, was also derived from Hebrew. In this interpretation, the early Greek poets like Homer and Hesiod as well as their philosopher successors, including Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, must have traveled to Egypt as tradition confirms, where they were initiated into the mysteries and sacred texts associated notably with Hermes Trismegistus, the name designating the Egyptian god

Thoth. Only allegory, it was thought, would reveal the hidden secrets. Even our own heroes of the Renaissance, such as Bacon, Rabelais, and Erasmus, all endorsed some form of allegorical interpretation of Homeric myths; that is, whatever would accommodate their own interests, including Homer the Theologian, Homer the Physicist, and Homer the Moralist.

At the end of the seventeenth century most antiquarians and theologians/philosophers were convinced in light of allegorical interpretation, that there was an historical relation between ancient mythology and biblical tradition. This explains Issac Newton (1642-1727) rather eccentric obsession with seeking to reconcile Greek mythology and record with the Bible which he considered as the primary authority on the early history of mankind. Or again, his fixation with alchemy (and the so-called ‘philosopher’s stone’) and his bizarre belief that Greek myths encoded the alchemical recipes he was seeking. It is not unthinkable to argue that Newton considered himself one of the chosen few, one of successors to whom primal wisdom was revealed, the wisdom without which the universe could not be understood. Pascal (1623-1662) gave a more philosophical ring to the problem. Contradiction, he notes, is a sign of allegory (*Pensée*, fgt. 659 Brunschvicg). In sum, when the prophets in Sacred Scriptures appear to contradict themselves in the *same* chapter, they must be understood allegorically.

When Europeans discovered during their voyages of exploration and conquest that other peoples in the Americas, the Pacific Region, and the Far East also possessed mythologies that both resembled and conformed to the mythology of the Greeks, this was to occasion a profound crisis in the Christian vision of the world, for it entailed that irrationalism rather than rationalism was at the foundation of Greek religion and culture, the very culture on which Christianity was premised at least from an allegorical (and thus the only true) perspective (Frank Manuel 1959, 24ff). The plethora of new information on foreign religions led to the deism of the eighteenth century, that is, the belief in a natural religion and, on the one hand, a God that does not intervene in human affairs and on the other, a complete rejection of “revealed” truths and of the

principle of authority in religious matters. However, with the rejection of the very tenet on which the allegorical interpretations of myths were hitherto based, that is, revealed truths, the study of myth was not abandoned. In fact, there is a sense in which it was completely revitalized! The shift now turned to the “origin” and “nature” of myth in general and with it, a new twist in the allegorical phenomenon. But this is another story or at least another chapter that need not concern us here. In this lecture my aim was to draw your attention to a rather surprising phenomenon of which many philosophers may not have been aware; to wit: that mythology and allegory were as important to the origin and development of philosophy throughout the ages as the rational and argumentative discourse, we more generally associate with philosophy. Thank you for listening!