

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-88790-8 - Plato's Myths
 Edited by Catalin Partenie
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

Catalin Partenie

PLATO'S MYTHS

In archaic societies myths were believed to tell true stories – stories about the ultimate origin of reality. For us, on the contrary, the term ‘myth’ denotes a false belief. Between the archaic notion of myth and ours stands Plato’s.

References to traditional mythical characters and motifs occur in, perhaps, all of Plato’s dialogues. However, beginning with the last of his early writings, the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, he seasons his philosophical dialogues with self-contained, fantastical narratives that we usually label his ‘myths’. ‘Myth’, to be sure, is an imprecise label. In Homer the word *muthos* means ‘speech’ or ‘something uttered’. Plato’s works include eight passages containing quotations, mostly from Homer, in which *muthos* is used in this sense (see, for instance, *R.* 389e, 390d, 441b). He uses the word himself eighty-seven times in twelve of the twenty-six dialogues considered authentic, ranging from the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* to the late *Philebus*, *Timaeus* and *Laws* (pace Brisson 1998, 141–2). Of these eighty-seven occurrences:

- (i) forty-two refer to traditional Greek myth in general (*Grg.* 505c10, *R.* 350e3, 376d9, *Phlb.* 14a4, *Ti.* 23b5, *Laws* 840c1, etc.), or to particular such myths – the story of Gyges (*R.* 359d–360b), for instance, or the myth of Phaethon (*Ti.* 22c7) or that of the Amazons (*Laws* 804e4);
- (ii) twenty-seven refer to Plato’s own myths, such as the myth of Er (*R.* 621b8) or the myth of Atlantis (*Ti.* 26e4);

A version of this introduction was presented at the Central European University in Budapest, the *Unité Propre de Recherche 76* of the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* in Paris and the University of Vienna. I am grateful to my audiences for their critical remarks. Valuable written comments on various drafts of the introduction have come from M. F. Burnyeat, David Sedley, Lesley Brown, Michael Inwood, Elizabeth McGrath, Richard Stalley, G. R. F. Ferrari, Wilhelm Schwabe and Debra Nails. I would like to express my gratitude to the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin for awarding me an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship, during which I revised this introduction.

- (iii) the remaining eighteen occurrences form a mixed bag. They refer to (α) philosophical doctrines that Plato presents as his own (*Ti.* 29d2, 59c6, 68d2) or as belonging to others (*Tht.* 156c4, 164d9, e3, *Sph.* 242c8, d6); to (β) 'the rhetorical exercise which Socrates carries out in *Phaedrus* 237a9, 241e8' (Brisson 1998, 144); and to (γ) the preambles to a number of laws in the *Laws* that are meant to be taken as exhortations to the laws in question (see, for instance, 790c3, 812a2, 841c6).¹ The most important category here is (α); (γ) does in fact contain elements of traditional mythology, and (β) seems to be a loose usage of the word *muthos*, although it may be argued that this 'rhetorical exercise' (as Brisson calls it, see above) contains elements of the so-called Platonic doctrine of love, in which case it could be assimilated to (α).

It must be said, however, that *muthos* is not an exclusive label. The myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus* (274c1), for instance, is called an *akoē* (a 'thing heard', 'report', 'story'). The myth of Cronus is called a *phēmē* ('oracle', 'tradition', 'rumour') in the *Laws* (713c2), and a *muthos* in the *Statesman* (272d5, 274e1, 275b1), while the myth of Boreas at the beginning of the *Phaedrus* is called both *muthologēma* (229c5) and *logos* (d2).² Also, Plato does not always label the myths he uses, be they traditional ones or myths that he invented. None the less, to the above-mentioned three-tier use of the word *muthos* – from (iii) let us leave aside (β) and (γ) – there correspond in the Platonic corpus three main categories of myth:

- (1) identifiable traditional myths (which Plato modifies to a lesser or greater extent);
- (2) myths that are Plato's invention but which feature various traditional mythical characters and motifs; and
- (3) philosophical doctrines (his own or those of others) that he explicitly calls 'myths', or 'mythical'.

(1) Plato makes frequent use of traditional mythology. Some 260 proper names of characters belonging to traditional ancient Greek mythology can be found in the dialogues (Brisson 1998, 153–5). Often Plato modifies the myths he uses, and sometimes he only offers a brief summary of them. Not all the traditional myths he uses are interwoven with the line of argument developed in the segment in which they occur; those that are include: the

¹ All these numbers are taken from Brisson 1998, 142–4, who also offers an exhaustive list of references. Brisson also surveys the derivatives of *muthos* (*muthikos*, *mythōdēs*) and the compounds of which *muthos* constitutes the first term (*muthopoios*, *muthologos*) (145ff.).

² I owe these references to Ferrari 1983, which is a review of Moors 1982.

myth of origin (*Prt.* 320c–323a), the Cadmeian myth of autochthony and the Hesiodic myth of ages (which Plato actually combines, *R.* 414c, 415a, 546e). In the *Republic* he is fairly hostile to particular traditional myths: ‘*Republic* II and III attack them as immoral and misleading, and he insists that they should not be allegorised [*R.* 378d3–e1] or explained in terms of physical theory [*Phdr.* 229c4–230a6]’ (Annas 1982, 121).

(2) In his myths, Plato usually mixes his own imagination with various themes of traditional mythology (such as the Isles of the Blessed, judgement after death), and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish his own mythological motifs from the traditional ones. The myths he invents are tightly bound to the arguments they preface or follow: the *Gorgias* myth (523a–527a), the myth of the androgyne (*Smp.* 189d–193d), the *Phaedo* myth (107c–115a), the myth of Er (*R.* 614a–621d), the myth of the winged soul (*Phdr.* 246a–249d), the myth of Theuth (*Phdr.* 274c–275e), the cosmological myth of the *Statesman* (268–274e), the Atlantis myth (*Ti.* 21e–26d, *Criti.*), the *Laws* myth (903b–905b).³

(3) The third category is more difficult to describe.

First, there is the case of the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates discusses Protagoras’ main doctrine and refers to it as ‘the *muthos* of Protagoras’ (164d9) (in the same line Socrates calls Theaetetus’ defence of the identity of knowledge and perception a *muthos*). Socrates also calls *muthos* the teaching according to which active and passive motions generate perception and perceived objects (156c4).⁴ In the *Sophist*, the Visitor from Elea tells his interlocutors that Xenophanes, Parmenides and other Eleatic,

³ The narrative that occurs in the *Republic* (514a–517a), usually called the Cave, is referred to rather indiscriminately as ‘myth’, ‘analogy’ and ‘simile’. The Cave is a fantastical story, in the sense that the scenes it describes are not realistic. We are asked to imagine some human beings who have lived in a Cave since childhood with their ‘necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around’ (514a). But such human beings cannot exist, or if they did they would not be human. The Cave, however, is not called a ‘myth’, and it does not deal explicitly with the beyond (the distant past, life after death etc.), and is thus different from the traditional myths Plato uses and the myths he invents. Strictly speaking, the Cave is more accurately described as an ‘analogy’ (and is linked with another analogy occurring in the *Republic*, usually referred to as the Sun).

⁴ Cf. Cornford 1935, 48: ‘Modern critics usually say that Socrates attributes it [the teaching Plato calls *muthos*] to “certain unnamed thinkers”, and many have proceeded to identify these with the Cyrenaics. For this there is no warrant in the text ... At 155d it is called “the theory we are attributing to Protagoras”, and once more described as a secret “concealed in the thoughts of a man – or rather men – of distinction.”’ Campbell 1861, 51 thought that Aristippus was included among them. Some scholars, however, such as Burnet, thought that this theory of sense-perception founded on the Heraclitean flux must be Plato’s own theory (cf. Cornford 1935, 49). A similar theory of perception is to be found in *Ti.* 45b–46c, 67c–68d.

Ionian (Heraclitus included) and Sicilian philosophers 'appear to me to tell us a myth, as if we were children' (242c8; see also c–e).⁵ Obviously, by calling those philosophical doctrines *muthos* Plato does not tell us that they are myths proper, but that they are (to a certain extent) non-argumentative, like, in a way, a myth. 'Myth' is here used metaphorically.

Second, there is the case of the *Timaeus*. Here *muthos* (29d, 59c, 68d) is used to refer to an extended philosophical account of the nature of the universe. This time *muthos* does not seem to be used metaphorically, for it labels an account that has a narrative form, features a Demiurge who frames the entire universe, said to be assisted by other, less powerful gods, and deals with matters that are beyond our reach, such as the fate of soul after death. But, as I shall argue later (see below the section 'Myth and creation'), the case of the *Timaeus*, by far the most important one in this category, is more complicated.

In archaic Greece the memorable was transmitted orally through poetry, which often relied on myth. The traditional myth may be defined as an invented narrative that is (i) non-falsifiable, for it depicts particular beings, deeds, places or events that are beyond our experience: the gods, the daemons, the heroes, the life of soul after death, the distant past, the creation of the world; and (ii) fantastical, for myth features characters with supernatural powers, such as gods, daemons or heroes. However, as Brisson 2004, 5–14 argues, at the beginning of the seventh century BC two types of discourse emerged that were set in opposition to poetry: 'history' (as shaped by, most notably, Thucydides)⁶ and 'philosophy' (as shaped by the *peri phuseōs* tradition of the 6th and 5th centuries BC). These two types of discourse were naturalistic alternatives to the poetic accounts of things. Now, the myths Plato invents, as well as the traditional myths he uses, are non-falsifiable, fantastical narratives. But Plato links all the myths he invents, and many of the traditional myths he uses, to philosophy, thus overcoming the traditional opposition between *muthos* and *logos*.

In the *Protagoras* (324d) a distinction is made between *muthos* and *logos*, where *muthos* appears to refer to a story and *logos* to an argument. But in

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the translations of Plato's texts that I quote are those of G. M. A. Grube (*Phaedo*), Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (*Phaedrus*), G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (*Republic*), Nicholas P. White (*Sophist*), C. J. Rowe (*Statesman*), Donald J. Zeyl (*Timaeus*), and Trevor J. Saunders (*Laws*), in Cooper and Hutchinson 1997. I sometimes slightly modify the quoted translations.

⁶ For a contrast between Herodotus and Thucydides, as one between storytelling and truth-telling, see, *inter alios*, Williams 2002, 149–71.

various other places the two terms are used without a strong contrast; the myth of Boreas in the *Phaedrus*, for instance is, as I mentioned above, called both *muthologēma* (229c5) and *logos* (d2). And in a significant number of dialogues Plato mixes philosophical discourse with myth. To take just one example: Diotima's discourse in the *Symposium* (201d–212c) is a complex construction about love and beauty. It culminates with an account about forms, but it starts off with a story about how Poverty (*Penia*) and Plenty (*Poros*) became Love's parents that would seem to be a traditional myth (although it is Plato's invention).

There have been many studies in recent years of Plato as a writer, looking particularly at the literary construction of the dialogues and the function of myth from that point of view. But the focus of this volume is rather different in that its contributors are mainly concerned with the way Plato interweaves philosophy with myth (for a summary of the chapters see the section 'This volume', below).

Why does Plato include all these myths in his writings? This question has been answered in many ways (see for instance Frutiger 1976, 2–28, 147–77 and Moors 1982, 1–33).

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates claims that only when one knows the truth, understands 'the nature of soul' and 'determines which kind of speech is appropriate to each kind of soul', is one 'able to use speech artfully (*technēi*), to the extent that its nature allows it to be used that way, either in order to teach (*pros to didaxai*) or in order to persuade (*pros to peisai*)' (277b–c). In other words, only a philosopher will be able to use 'speech artfully'. The philosopher knows the truth, but he knows that not everyone can follow his discourse. For those who cannot, he must use speech artfully, either to teach them the truth, or persuade them to believe or do what is in conformity with truth. Myth is not a rhetorical strategy proper, but also a case of 'speech artfully used', and it, too, has two main aims: to persuade and/or teach the less philosophically inclined (the same myth may, of course, be used both for persuading and teaching). These are the main reasons why Plato used traditional myths as well as his own. For Socrates, persuading one to change one's life in conformity with the rules of reason is part of philosophy's job, and this Socratic legacy is still present in Plato: for him, too, it is philosophy's job to make others believe, and do, various noble things; and myth may prove an efficient means of persuasion. Also, myth can embody in its narrative an abstract philosophical doctrine, and so it may be used to teach the less philosophically inclined. As I mentioned above, Plato contrasts myth with philosophical argument a few times. But he says one thing, and in his writings does another, for in his writings he interweaves philosophy

with myth when philosophy, in addressing the less philosophical, becomes difficult and less persuasive.⁷

MYTH AS A MEANS OF PERSUASION

First, Plato used so many myths, traditional or his own, because he thought of myth as an efficient means of persuasion intended to make the less philosophically inclined, as well as children (cf. especially *R.* 377a ff.), believe various noble things.

In the *Republic*, a myth that serves this purpose is called a 'noble lie' (414b). Here the myth of the gold, silver, iron and bronze men – the 'Phoenician story' told by the poets (i.e., the Cadmeian myth of autochthony) – is presented as a 'noble falsehood'. The poets, says Socrates, have 'persuaded many people to believe it too' (414c). Socrates, however, thinks that 'it would certainly take a lot of persuasion to get people to believe it' (d). But he would be willing to tell it to the rulers and the soldiers and the rest of Callipolis' inhabitants and try to persuade them that 'if anyone attacks the land in which they live, they must plan on its behalf and defend it as their mother and nurse and think of other citizens as their earthborn brothers' (e). The traditional myths, or rather mythical episodes (often presented rather briefly), that are the preambles to a number of laws in the *Laws* may also be taken as 'noble lies'. They are invoked due to their persuasive power and used as exhortations to the laws in question (see Pradeau 2004, 20–3).⁸

Myths used for their persuasive power (including the myth of the gold, silver, iron and bronze men) cannot be so easily labelled 'lies'; for, once deliteralized, these fictions reveal some truth. Such is the case with the *Phaedo* eschatological myth. Certain knowledge about the afterlife is either impossible or extremely difficult to attain in this life (85c). Nevertheless, one should examine the subject. In the *Phaedo*, after close examination, Socrates argues that the statement 'The soul is immortal' follows logically from various premises they considered acceptable (cf. 106b–107a). Socrates is ready to face death with serenity because he believes in logic and reason. But

⁷ The traditional myths Plato uses, as well as the myths he invents, may be viewed as being addressed to the irrational. For Plato, however, in spite of their supernatural elements, myths are not inherently irrational and they are not targeted at the irrational parts of the soul, either when they are meant to persuade, or to teach.

⁸ In this introduction I sometimes ground my claims on evidence taken from texts belonging to various stages of Plato's philosophical career. I do not hold, however, a unitarian view of Plato. But his use of myth, as well as his interweaving of myth with philosophy, remains constant, from the last of his early writings, such as the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, to the late ones, such as the *Laws*. Also, his reasons for using myth are, most of the time, the same – teaching and persuasion.

not all people share his confidence in logic and reason. Faced with death, one may ask for more comforting evidence than logic. After the final argument for immortality (102a–107b), Cebes admits that he has no further objections to, nor doubts about, Socrates' arguments. But Simmias confesses that he still retains some doubt (107a–b), and then Socrates proceeds with an eschatological myth. Does the fact that the *Phaedo* ends with an eschatological myth, after a long series of carefully crafted arguments, imply that Plato wanted to try a final strategy on those not fully persuaded by his arguments that soul is immortal? The myth depicts in great detail the geography of the other world and the fate of souls in it. It does not provide proof and evidence that the soul is immortal. But since it assumes that the soul is immortal – a thing that was earlier proved true – it is not entirely false. As Plato will put it in the *Republic* 377a, a children's story is, taken as a whole, false, but there is truth in it also. The countless details concerning the geography of the other world are evidently fantastical. Socrates himself admits that 'no sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them' (*Phaedo* 114d), and that sometimes the details of a myth rely, *faute de mieux*, 'on the sacred rites and customs here' (108a). But those fantastical details, and the narrative which unfolds them, certainly have an appeal for the less philosophically inclined. And by virtue of this appeal, the myth may inculcate in such people the belief that the soul is immortal, and persuade them to change their lives accordingly. Of course, this is not the sole purpose of the myth. As Sedley 1990 convincingly argued, the myth can be read as providing a teleological cosmology that represents an answer to the question of causality raised earlier in the dialogue. When Socrates' friends see him drinking the poison, most of them can no longer hold back the tears (117c). Did the myth persuade anyone that the soul is immortal? The text leaves room for speculation. One may also argue that the point is to persuade those already convinced of the soul's immortality that there is also justice in the afterlife. Socrates, in any case, hopes the myth will prove to be persuasive (and convince one to believe that the soul is immortal and/or that there is justice in the afterlife). For Socrates claims that taking the myth seriously is worth doing: 'I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief [in the myth he has just told] – for the risk is a noble one – that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places' (114d–e). The same can be said of the myth of Er. The latter is introduced as a first-hand report on the other world: a man called Er died in a war and on the twelfth day; 'when he was already laid on the funeral pyre, he revived and, having done so, told what he had seen in the world beyond' (*R.* 614b). Er revived twelve days after he was killed, and this makes the myth

implausible. But, claims Socrates, it 'would save us, if we were persuaded by it' (621b).⁹ A philosopher, Plato implies in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, should care for his fellow human beings that are reluctant to live their lives according to what reason is able to deduce from what we may regard as reliable evidence. For their sake, the philosopher should envelop his conclusions in myths that 'would serve as topical sugar for a very untopical pill'.¹⁰ Myth represents a sort of back-up: if one fails to be persuaded by arguments to change one's life, one may still be persuaded by a good myth. Myth, as it is claimed in the *Laws*, may be needed to 'charm' one 'into agreement' (903b) when philosophy fails to do so.

MYTH AS A TEACHING TOOL

In the *Statesman*, Plato claims that 'it looks as if each of us knows everything in a kind of dreamlike way, and then again is ignorant of everything when [he is] as it were awake'. That is why 'it is a hard thing to demonstrate [*endeiknusthai*] any of the more important subjects without using models [*paradeigmata*]' (277d). Plato explains what he means by 'model' by an example: that of how children acquire their skill in reading and writing. Children 'distinguish each of the individual letters well enough in the shortest and easiest syllables', but 'they make mistakes about these very same letters in other syllables'. The easiest and best way to help them improve their reading skills is, Plato claims, 'to take them first to those cases in which they were getting these same things right, and having done that, to put these beside what they're not yet recognizing. By comparing them, we demonstrate that there is the same kind of thing with similar features in both combinations' (278a–b). So, Plato then generalizes, 'we come to be using a model when a given thing, which is the same in something different and distinct, is correctly identified there, and having been brought together with the original thing, brings about a single true judgement about each separately and both together' (c). And 'our minds by their nature experienced this same thing in relation to the individual "letters" of everything' (c–d). As Robinson 1953, 213 put it, using a 'model' (*paradeigma*) here means 'getting insight into a case by

⁹ In the *Laws*, Plato introduces an eschatological myth that lacks the vivid, graphic imagery of the earlier eschatological myths (such as those from the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo* and *Republic*), as if he thought for once that inducing the belief in eschatological justice can also be achieved through a more sober narrative. The discrepancy between this myth and the earlier eschatological myths has been explained in various ways. In the ninth chapter of the present volume Richard Stalley deals extensively with this discrepancy; for a summary of his chapter see below.

¹⁰ I borrow this phrase from Ryle 1966, 237.

means of a coordinate case'; and this 'is stated in terms of the man seeking to enlighten another, not of the man seeking to enlighten himself' (213). Our minds are imperfect and our knowledge full of lacunae. Someone, who managed to know more than me about something, say x , may help me better grasp x by making me compare x with a 'coordinate case' of it. When the two cases are compared, 'because of "the same likeness and nature" dwelling in both of them' (Robinson, 1953, 213), a spark of knowledge is caused.¹¹

As Rowe 1999, 278, n. 37 argues, the Platonic myths are not examples or models as the *Statesman* understands these, but they 'may, and do, serve the same purpose, of helping to "demonstrate the greater subjects"'. A Platonic myth is not a coordinate case of something else. It is a narrative that may serve as an 'embodiment' of an abstract content, making the less philosophical better grasp that content. 'Like Simmias,' says Cebes in the *Phaedo*, 'I too need an image (*eikōn*)' (87b) to 'illustrate' the 'relationship of the soul to the body' (d), for the argument that has just been discussed (the argument from affinity of soul to forms, 78b–84b) did not convince them. Simmias' image, or analogy, is a lyre, that of Cebes – a cloak. Socrates, who produced the argument, does not need an image, or analogy, to unveil the relationship of the soul to the body, but Simmias and Cebes do. Plato thought that some of his readers/listeners might not follow Socrates' argument, and – through the characters of Simmias and Cebes – introduces two images, which, taken as analogies for the relationship of the soul to the body, will help those who could not follow his argument. The philosopher should make others wise. But since others may sometimes not follow his arguments, Plato is ready to provide whatever it takes – an image, a simile, or a myth – that will help them grasp what the argument failed to tell them. The myth – just like an image, or analogy – may be a good teaching tool.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato develops the so-called theory of recollection (72e–78b). The theory is there expounded in rather abstract terms. The eschatological myth of the *Phaedo* depicts the fate of souls in the other world, but it does not 'dramatize' the theory of recollection. The *Phaedrus* myth of the

¹¹ In the passage from the *Statesman*, Plato uses the verb *endeiknunai* (*Stm.* 277d2, 278b1). In the translation I quoted, Rowe translates this verb as 'to demonstrate'. Yet, as Robinson 1953, 213 argues, *endeiknunai* means 'to reveal', and for 'to demonstrate' Plato uses *apodeiknunai*: 'By calling the learner's attention to something he already knows, the teacher causes him to know something more. Demonstration, of course, also works by calling our attention to something we already know (the premises); but there the new knowledge is entailed by the old, whereas in the example it is not'; in an example comparing the coordinate cases 'causes the spark of knowledge to leap across from the old to the new, not because the old entails the new, but because of "the same likeness and nature" dwelling in both of them, that is, in our language, because they are coordinate cases of the same universal, although that universal is not explicitly mentioned'.

winged soul, however, does. In it we are told how the soul travels in the heavens before reincarnation, attempts to gaze on true reality, forgets what it saw in the heavens once reincarnated, and then recalls the eternal forms it saw in the heavens when looking at their perceptible embodiments. At 265b Socrates tells Phaedrus a few words about his two speeches on love; at some point, says Socrates, 'we used a certain sort of image [or simile] to describe love's passion; perhaps it has a measure of truth in it, though it may also have led us astray'. This simile turns out to be a 'not altogether implausible speech' and a 'story-like hymn (*muthikon tina humnon*)'. The *Phaedrus* myth does not provide any proofs or evidence to support the theory of recollection. It simply assumes this theory to be true and provides (among other things) a 'screen adaptation' of the theory of recollection, i.e. it embodies this theory in an iconic (for full of visual elements) narrative. Since this theory it embodies is, for Plato, true, the myth has (pace Plato) 'a measure of truth in it', although its many fantastical details may lead one astray if taken literally. Among other things, the fantastical, iconic narrative of the myth helps the less philosophically inclined grasp the main point of Plato's theory of recollection, namely that 'knowledge is recollection'. The audience may, in principle, commit to all the fantastical details of the myth, or else realize that the myth is a fictional treatment of abstract matters meant to make them more accessible. Myth appears then (in some dialogues) as being a part of Plato's complex strategy of writing aimed at luring the less philosophically inclined audience into his philosophical territory (and somehow making available to this audience his view of the world).

In the *Statesman*, after the discussion about the use of examples, the Eleatic Stranger proposes to his auditors that they use an example in their search for the nature of the statesman. 'So what model, involving the same activities as statesmanship, on a very small scale, could we compare with it, and so discover (*heurein*) in a satisfactory way what we are looking for?' (279a–b). The example chosen is that of weaving. But, as Robinson 1953, 214 put it, 'how can the self-teacher find a case that really illustrates unless he already understands the illustrand?' According to Robinson, Plato claims in fact that one 'knows in some ways certain things that one does not know in other ways' (214). And if 'our pre-existent knowledge of *x*, although vague, is enough to guide us reasonably well in the choice of examples, then the example guides us back to a more precise knowledge of the *x* that is both the beginning and the end of our search' (214–15). This justification of the use of examples in discovery is acceptable: one does occasionally venture an example of something one knows only partially in the hope that the example will help one better grasp that something. Now, does Plato choose to tell, or