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Plato and the Language of Mysteries

Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues

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Abstract

Despite Plato's repeated criticism of both μῦθοι and mystery cults, Orphism/Pythagoreanism and the Eleusinian Mysteries feature frequently in his dialogues. This paper uncovers the reason why, and the context in which, Plato employs motifs and language associated with these cults. Prevailing explanations in scholarship are shown to apply in some instances but not others, and to be largely insufficient in providing an underlying reason for Plato's use of mystery cults in general. Through a detailed examination of various mystery motifs in the dialogues, this paper argues that Plato has simply borrowed from religion what he could not achieve with philosophy alone: emotional appeal.

Keywords

Plato – mystery cult – Orphism – Pythagoreanism – Eleusis

1 Introduction

At various points in his dialogues Plato criticizes or mocks the Eleusinians, Orphics and Pythagoreans (notably *R.* 363c-d, 364-366, 378a, 560e; *Tht.* 155e-156c).¹ Yet he repeatedly refers to their doctrines and often employs language associated with these mystery cults. To what purpose? According to Plato,

¹ Despland 1985, 98-99.

μῦθοι are 'on the whole false, but contain some truth' (*R.* 377a) and believing them is 'worth the risk' (καλὸς γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος, *Phd.* 114d).² Their main function is generally agreed to be to illuminate the theories he expounds in his dialogues and to promote the practice of philosophy in an accessible way.³ But can we infer a more specific function for Plato's religious μῦθοι, in particular those derived from Orphism/Pythagoreanism and the Eleusinian Mysteries? The most popular explanations are: that Plato sought to give more authority to his texts by associating them with these well respected cults;⁴ that he intended to make his writings more accessible and appealing to his readers by aligning them with familiar doctrines;⁵ and that he made use of mystery language to cover topics (such as the afterlife) which were beyond the scope of dialectical or scientific inquiry.⁶

To test the plausibility of these commonly accepted theories, this paper examines in detail Plato's references to the mystery cults, and use of linguistic motifs associated with them. I first give a brief overview of the most important characteristics of the mystery cults, the differences between them, and the language associated with them. I then discuss Plato's use of Orphism/Pythagoreanism through close analysis of passages in eight dialogues: *Cratylus*, *Gorgias*, *Laws*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*. Finally, I consider references to the Eleusinian Mysteries in *Gorgias*, *Sophist*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic* and *Symposium*. My examination aims to address the inconsistency between the way Plato appears both to endorse and to disapprove of mystery cults, and ultimately to show how Plato makes use of an established set of doctrines and linguistic registers to promote his own philosophical positions.

2 Orphism, Pythagoreanism and the Eleusinian Mysteries

Mystery cults arose early in Greek religious culture, with the Eleusinian Mysteries being thought to predate Homer, and Orphism/Pythagoreanism first appearing in the 6th century BC.⁷ Mystery religion seems to have arisen as a

2 Thayer 1988, 376.

3 Annas 1982, 121-122; Bernstein 1993, 56; Partenie 2018 provides a useful overview of Platonic myth in general and summarizes recent views in scholarship on its function.

4 Edmonds 2004, 28; Rodriguez 2016, 119.

5 Dorter 1976, 299, 303; Keping 2009, 291.

6 Casadesús 2016, 4-5; Edelstein 1949, 467-468; Guthrie 1993, 239-240; Keping 2009, 285; Morgan 1990, 169; Sattler 2013, 152.

7 Graf and Johnston 2013, 69-70; Guthrie 1993, 46. Due to the fact that Orphism and Pythagoreanism were so similar that it is often unclear which of the two Plato is referring

counter-movement to Greek state religion, focusing on the individual rather than the community and promising future everlasting blessedness rather than immediate temporary benefits.⁸

The Eleusinian Mysteries centred around the sanctuary of Eleusis, where each year a large procession of *mystai* arrived to be initiated. The rites themselves were kept secret, and most ancient accounts on the topic are by later Christian authors, whose writings are biased and unreliable. This has led to uncertainty about the content and order of the rites performed in the Eleusinian Mysteries. One older but influential theory, as presented by Riedweg, proposed that the *mystai* first had to undergo purification rituals, after which the Lesser Mysteries, also called *muesis* ('initiation'), took place at Agrai. These were held in honour of Kore and consisted of instruction, through the experience of physical rituals, of the initiates. Subsequently, the Greater Mysteries in honour of Demeter, called *epopteia* ('beholding'), took place in the Telesterion at Eleusis.⁹ A different theory, most recently argued for by Bremmer and Edmonds, states that the terms *muesis* and *epopteia* do not refer to the Lesser and Greater Mysteries, but rather to two different parts within the Greater Mysteries.¹⁰ Clinton has moreover suggested that at the Greater Mysteries the same event, *epopteia*, was experienced by all initiates, but that the *mystai* were blindfolded, while the *epoptai* (those who participated as *mystai* the year before) were allowed to see.¹¹ In this scenario, however, *muesis* is not the first-time experience

to, and since they are often confused or grouped together, I will henceforth treat them under a single header. I by no means aim to imply that they formed a single religious current, but rather that these cults and their doctrines were sufficiently similar that Plato himself felt no great distinction and refers to them in the same contexts and manner. For a brief discussion of Orphism's relation to Pythagoreanism see Parker 1995, 501-502; for a more elaborate discussion see Burkert 1982, 1-22.

8 Evans 1993, ix; Evans 2006, 6.

9 Riedweg 1987; *μύησις* may be compared to the Latin word *initia* ('beginnings') or its derivative *initiatio* ('initiation'), denoting introduction into secret things: the verb *μύω* signifies the action. The verb *μύω*, from which the noun *μύησις* derives, means 'to close (one's eyes)', implying the element of secrecy and the metaphorical (or literal) blindness of the initiate. See Kerenyi 1967, 46; Dowden 1980, 414. *Ἐποπτεία* (from *ἐφοράω*, to look upon) refers to the 'beholding', supposedly of sacred objects and/or rites, in the Telesterion, and appears to have been used exclusively in reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries. See Farrell 1999, 126-127.

10 Bremmer 2014, 9-10; Edmonds 2017, 197-199. While I will henceforth follow this distinction of the terms *muesis/epopteia* from the terms Lesser/Greater Mysteries, I do not agree with Edmonds' and Bowden's dismissal of *Gorgias* 497c and maintain with Riedweg and Clinton that the Lesser Mysteries too are an educative stage of initiation that one must participate in before being initiated into the Greater Mysteries.

11 Clinton 2003, 50-52, 66-67; also Bowden 2010, 44.

of the *epopteia*, but rather a preliminary purification rite required before the Greater (and potentially also the Lesser) Mysteries. Although the main point of relevance here is the central idea of progression through various stages of initiation, regardless of what these stages are, I will nevertheless settle, for the sake of clarity, on the following order: (potentially) *muesis*—Lesser Mysteries (performed only once)—*muesis* (before procession to Eleusis)—first initiation into Greater Mysteries—*epopteia* (one year later).¹²

The Lesser Mysteries were held at a different time of the year from the Greater Mysteries, and it is the latter that are often referred to simply as ‘the Mysteries’. The Greater Mysteries, an eight-day festival, started with purification rituals (*muesis*), perhaps consisting of a bath in the sea and the sacrifice of a piglet or ewe, a subsequent procession from Athens to Eleusis, and the celebrations at Eleusis itself.¹³ Throughout the various rituals the *mystai* were guided by a *mystagogos*.¹⁴ The procession and the Mysteries themselves were a festive occasion, open to everyone and celebrated happily alongside the city’s own religious events. The more private part of the festival, the initiation and *epopteia*, took place for a select group of initiates in and around the Telesterion. It is supposed that this secret rite was a visual experience, likely involving bright light, the presentation of sacred objects, or perhaps a dramatic performance.¹⁵ Edmonds stresses the importance of recognizing the Eleusinian Mysteries as an “imagistic religion”, as opposed to doctrinal religion, where “particular intense experiences impress themselves on the worshippers’ memories”. The ‘mystery’ of Eleusis was thus not the bestowing of some secret knowledge or set of ideas, but a unique experience, an encounter with the divine itself.¹⁶

12 This order, which summarizes my observations from other scholars, I have found most convincingly argued for by Dowden 1980, who blames the confusion in scholarship mainly on the misuse of certain terms, misinterpretation of Plato’s *Symposium*, and lack of knowledge about the Lesser Mysteries (which had by then fallen out of use) among the Christian authors. However, though Dowden argues that at the Greater Mysteries only the *epoptai* were allowed inside the Telesterion, I think that Clinton’s theory, that both *mystai* and *epoptai* experienced the same event in the Telesterion but that the former were blindfolded, is equally plausible.

13 Bowden 2010, 30–35; Bremmer 2014, 4–7; Clinton 1988, 69–70; Clinton 2003, 52.

14 Bremmer 2014, 3; Evans 1993, 193; Farrell 1999, 33.

15 Kerenyi 1967, 45, 48; Lebeck 1972, 272; Boyancé 1962, 464–474, though not ruling out other possibilities, argues specifically for the unveiling of statues of the gods, while Clinton 1993, 118–119; 2003, 66–67 and Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 29–34 argue for an interactive drama based on the myth of the rape of Kore. For more aspects of the festival and the sanctuary at Eleusis see Bowden’s full account, 2010, 26–48.

16 Edmonds 2017, 202; Bowden 2010, 44–48; For more detail on imagistic religion see also Whitehouse 2000, Whitehouse and Martin 2004, and Martin and Panayotis 2009.

While the Eleusinian Mysteries were widely known and participated in by large groups of ordinary Athenians, Orphism/Pythagoreanism was more obscure and elitist, partly because it was a literary cult, for which teaching and initiations involved writings that would have been accessible only to the educated. Most of the evidence available on Orphism deals with the afterlife: the Orphics/Pythagoreans believed that the divine soul, which is immortal, separates from the mortal body which serves as a kind of prison.¹⁷ On death, the soul travels to the underworld, and eventually returns to a new human body in a cycle of reincarnation.¹⁸ In the underworld the soul encounters two springs, the spring of Memory and the spring of Forgetfulness, 'guardians' whom they are required to give certain passwords, and a two-forked road which leads the uninitiated to lie in the mud and carry water in a sieve while the initiated were led to a banquet in the sacred meadows or Isles of the Blessed.¹⁹ The Orphics/Pythagoreans are also thought to have held a doctrine of original sin: a myth tells how the Titans killed the infant Dionysus, here the son of Persephone and Zeus, tore his body to pieces and ate his flesh. Zeus, having saved Dionysus' heart, resurrected him and punished the Titans by hurling a lightning bolt at them. From the smoke of the burning Titans the human race is said to have sprung, and is forever being imprisoned in bodies as punishment for this 'original sin'. Through this story the cult associated itself with Persephone, to whom humans owe recompense for the murder of her child, and Dionysus, as a symbol of rebirth.²⁰

Although both cults revolve around ideas of ritual purification, gaining inside status, and securing individual divine favour, Orphism/Pythagoreanism is heavily focused on texts and can be considered a doctrinal religion, whereas the Eleusinian Mysteries focus on visual experience and are therefore closer to imagistic religion. In addition, the main aim of Orphism/Pythagoreanism seems to have been eschatological, the securing of a happy afterlife, whereas the

17 Guthrie 1955, 31; Parker 1995, 487.

18 Burkert 1987, 87 asserts that before Plato, the Orphics/Pythagoreans were the only Greeks known to have believed in transmigration. That is not to say that the concept of transmigration was invented by the Orphics/Pythagoreans, in fact its origin is disputed: while ancient authors, such as Herodotus (2.123), seemed to think that the concept came from Egypt, modern scholars, most recently Duceur and Muckensturm-Pouille 2016, have drawn parallels with Indian and Oriental conceptions. On the concept and its origins in relation to Orphism and Pythagoreanism in specific see e.g. Bernabé 2007 and 2011, 97-114, Mendoza 2008, and Bernabé and Mendoza 2013. On the concept and its origins in relation to Plato's Myth of Er see e.g. Biesterfeld 1969 and Calabi 2007.

19 Dieterich 1893, 73; Edmonds 2004, 50-51; Guthrie 1993, 160.

20 Alderink 1981, 73-74; Bremmer 2014, 62-63, 76; Graf and Johnston 2013, 66-93, 98-100; Parker 1995, 495.

Eleusinians, though likely assuming that their acquired personal connection with Demeter would ensure *post-mortem* blessings, mainly celebrated fertility and agriculture. Orphism/Pythagoreanism, furthermore, was mostly male-centered, exclusive to men who honoured Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Dionysus; Persephone is mentioned only occasionally.²¹ The Eleusinian Mysteries, on the other hand, admitted women as well as men, involved female priestesses, and honoured Demeter and Kore (and only rarely Dionysus).²²

3 Orphism/Pythagoreanism in Plato

Around 387/386 BC Plato made his first trip to Sicily,²³ where he encountered Orphism/Pythagoreanism. Given the significance of this encounter, it is important that the texts relevant to us, namely *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic* (the exact order is uncertain), were probably written after the visit. The *Timaeus* and *Laws* were written near the end of Plato's life.²⁴ Most of the ideas that Plato had in common with Orphism/Pythagoreanism only surface in his works after this first journey to Sicily. Plato frequently attributes certain doctrines specifically to the Orphics/Pythagoreans, and, even without naming them, certain wording or imagery, specifically in his writing concerning the afterlife, resembles that of the Orphic/Pythagorean texts to such a degree that it cannot be a coincidence: Plato purposefully adopted Orphic/Pythagorean motifs.²⁵ He engages with three particular Orphic/

21 There may however be a difference here between Orphism and Pythagoreanism: while the latter was an all-male community, for the former a female following may be inferred from the presence of Orphic Gold Tablets in female graves. See Bremmer 2014, 69; Edmonds 2011, 41–48.

22 Evans 1993, 137; Evans 2006, 2; Boyancé 1962, 481–482 argues that a third goddess is worshipped under the name of Themis/Ananke, or 'Necessity'. Note also that Kore, goddess of agriculture and fertility, should not be confused with Persephone, queen of the underworld: while Orphism/Pythagoreanism seems to have worshipped Persephone only in her function as queen of the underworld, it is uncertain whether in the Eleusinian Mysteries she is known merely as the maiden Kore or whether she has some additional eschatological function. See e.g. Bowden 2010, 47–48.

23 Commonly accepted as the approximate date for his journey, e.g. Brandwood 1990, 15; Thesleff 2015, 9.

24 Brandwood 2006, 109–110.

25 Bernabé's 2011 monograph on the influence of Orphism on Plato, an influence that is now generally agreed to have occurred, outlines the various doctrines and themes of Orphic origin that appear in Plato. Since the main objective of this paper is to discuss the function of these motifs within Plato's writing rather than to deliberate on the extent to which

Pythagorean motifs: the body as prison; reincarnation; and *post-mortem* reward and punishment.

As mentioned, the Orphics/Pythagoreans saw the body as a kind of prison for the soul, from which it would be released at death. Plato attributes this doctrine directly to the Orphics at *Cratylus* 400c and indirectly to the Orphics/Pythagoreans at *Phaedo* 62b, as well as mentioning it in *Phaedo* 67c-d, 81e, 82e-83a, 92a, *Phaedrus* 250b-c and *Timaeus* 74a.²⁶ In *Phaedo* Plato calls the doctrine 'weighty and not easy to understand' (μέγας τέ τις μοι φαίνεται καὶ οὐ ῥάδιος διδεῖν, 62b), which some scholars have interpreted as meaning that Plato disagreed with it.²⁷ However, the phrase can also indicate simply that Plato did not want to elaborate too much on this topic because it was complicated and would distract from the matter at hand. This interpretation is reinforced by the use of the body/prison idea in several other places in Plato's texts, as well as by Plato's repeated use of cognates of λύω ('release') to describe the separation of the soul from the body upon death (e.g. ἀπολύων, *Phd.* 65a; διάλυσις, *Grg.* 524b).²⁸ In *Phaedo* 67c-d, Socrates explains why the philosopher need not fear death:

κάθαρσις δὲ εἶναι ἄρα οὐ τοῦτο συμβαίνει, ὅπερ πάλαι ἐν τῷ λόγῳ λέγεται, τὸ χωρίζειν ὅτι μάλιστα ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ ἐθίσαι αὐτὴν καθ' αὐτὴν πανταχόθεν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος συναγείρεσθαι τε καὶ ἀθροίζεσθαι, καὶ οἰκεῖν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν παρόντι καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔπειτα μόνῃ καθ' αὐτὴν, ἐκλυομένην ὥσπερ ἐκ δεσμών ἐκ τοῦ σώματος;

πάνυ μὲν οὔν, ἔφη.

οὐκοῦν τοῦτό γε θάνατος ὀνομάζεται, λύσις καὶ χωρισμὸς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος;

they are of Orphic/Pythagorean origin, I refer to Bernabé for a detailed discussion of the arguments.

26 Bernabé 2011, 115-144; Ferwerda 1985, 274. Unsurprisingly the majority of references to Orphism/Pythagoreanism can be found in *Phaedo*: this dialogue is particularly suited for adopting the often eschatological motifs of the cult because it revolves around the topic of death. In addition, *Phaedo* is connected with Pythagoreanism through the location where Socrates' story is retold, namely Phlius, one of the centers of mainland Pythagoreanism, and through Socrates' main interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes, who were pupils of the Pythagorean Philolaus at Thebes. See Cornford 1991, 245; and Morgan 1990, 57. For a detailed comparison between the *Phaedo*'s final eschatological myth and the Orphic Gold Tablets see Edmonds 2004.

27 Bluck 1958, 163.

28 Gordon 2012, 189-190.

“And is purification not this, which we mentioned earlier, to separate the soul as much as possible from the body and to make it accustomed to gathering and collecting itself from everywhere in the body, and to live, as far as it can, both now and hereafter, *released* from the body as *from fetters*?”

“Very much so.”

“Then is this not what we call death, a *release* and separation of the soul from the body?”²⁹

The aim of Plato's argument here is to convince the reader that the soul is better off without the body. But why does he invoke Orphic/Pythagorean imagery here? As mentioned, some suppose that he wished to lend authority to his theory, but if he wanted to connect this passage to the Orphic/Pythagorean cult, surely he would have made this connection more explicit, for example by naming it. Even if the link was clear to his contemporaries, which was not necessarily the case, the authority would lie in the name, or at least an allusion to the name. Besides, the fact that Plato at other points criticizes the Orphics/Pythagoreans makes it unlikely that he thought they held any authority.³⁰ Nor does it seem plausible that he used the body/prison metaphor to make his theories more accessible and appealing by aligning them with familiar doctrines. The references to Orphism/Pythagoreanism are brief and few, and would have had little influence on the appeal of the dialogue as a whole. Besides, the cult and its doctrines were not very, if at all, familiar to Plato's Athenian readers. The other explanation proposed, that Plato used the mysteries to discuss a topic that could not be sufficiently covered by dialectical or scientific enquiry, also does not seem to apply to the *Phaedo* passage. Socrates spends a significant part of the dialogue explaining the immortality of the soul and its relation to the body in rational terms. It remains, then, to examine the passage further.

It is evident that the comparison of the body to fetters principally emphasizes its limiting nature. Plato does not call the body a prison because it is a banishment of the soul for some original sin, as was proposed in Orphism/Pythagoreanism, but because it is imagined as an unpleasant enclosure that restrains the soul and keeps it from reunification with the divine (i.e. the Forms).³¹ The metaphor conjures up a dramatic image in the mind of the reader which

29 All translations are my own.

30 Bernabé 2011, 42-47 argues that while Plato greatly valued certain Orphic doctrines and ideas, he was no fan of Orpheus himself and his priests. For this reason he often avoids naming them and rather attributes their doctrines to ‘ancient sources’.

31 Bernabé 2011, 145-154; Bluck 1958, 164; Graf and Johnston 2013, 66-93; de Vries 1953, 430.

aims to evoke certain emotions: dread at the mention of the δεσμοί, and hope at the prospect of λύσις. If Plato had merely said: ‘after death the good soul will continue existing separately from the bad body’, the reader would have understood the concept but would not have been encouraged to feel any real disdain for the body or desire for separation from it, because the argument would not appeal to their imagination. The same tactic is used at *Phaedo* 82e-83a:

γινώσκουσι γάρ, ἡ δ' ὅς, οἱ φιλομαθεῖς ὅτι παραλαβούσα αὐτῶν τὴν ψυχὴν ἢ φιλοσοφία ἀτεχνῶς διαδεδεμένην ἐν τῷ σώματι καὶ προσκεκολλημένην, ἀναγκαζομένην δὲ ὥσπερ διὰ εἴργμου διὰ τούτου σκοπεῖσθαι τὰ ὄντα ἀλλὰ μὴ αὐτὴν δι' αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐν πάσῃ ἀμαθίᾳ κυλινδουμένην, καὶ τοῦ εἴργμου τὴν δεινότητα κατιδοῦσα ὅτι δι' ἐπιθυμίας ἐστίν, ὡς ἂν μάλιστα αὐτὸς ὁ δεδεμένος συλλήπτωρ εἴῃ τοῦ δεδέσθαι.

“For the lovers of knowledge”, he said, “know that when philosophy first receives their soul it is absolutely *imprisoned* in the body and glued to it, forced to behold the realities not alone by itself, but through the body as if through a *cage*, and wallowing in complete ignorance. And (philosophy) sees that the most terrible thing about the *cage* is that it is there because of desires, so that most of all the *prisoner* himself is the accomplice of his *imprisonment*.”

Again Plato seems to have used the Orphic/Pythagorean doctrine to emphasize the negative influence of corporeal existence on the soul's progress. On a linguistic level this is a simple technique: Plato associates the body with various ‘red-flag words’, thereby lending to it negative connotations. It is not just individual words, however, but the entire myth that Plato builds around the concepts of body and soul, to engage the reader's imagination so that one pictures the unfortunate fate of the trapped soul behind the bars of its prison cell. The emotional response to this picture will encourage readers to view the body as negative regardless of whether they agree with, for example, Plato's theory of the immortality of the soul. A similar explanation for Plato's use of religious or ‘ethical’ myth was first proposed in 1949 by Ludwig Edelstein, who claimed that “the ethical myth is rooted in man's irrational nature, and it cannot be banished from philosophy because both these parts of the human soul must be equally tended by the philosopher”.³² Plato recognizes that, although the philosopher must strive to follow reason, the passions that are inherent in human nature cannot be ignored and must therefore be guided properly, through the

32 Edelstein 1949, 474.

medium they best respond to: myth.³³ As shown from the passages discussed above, Edelstein's theory can also be applied to the Orphic/Pythagorean motifs. A final example of the body/prison doctrine appears at *Phaedrus* 250b-c:

κάλλος δὲ τότε ἦν ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, ὅτε ... ἀπαθεῖς κακῶν ὅσα ἡμᾶς ἐν ὑστέρω χρόνῳ ὑπέμενεν ... καθαροὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀσήμαντοι τούτου ὁ νῦν δὴ σῶμα περιφέροντες ὀνομάζομεν, ὁστρέου τρόπον δεδεσμευμένοι.

At that time Beauty was shining bright, when ... we were without experience of the evils which awaited us in later times ..., being pure and *not entombed* in that which we now carry around and call the body, in which we are *imprisoned* like an oyster (in a shell).

Here not only the metaphor of a prison, but also of a tomb, is used to express the ill effects of the body. The gloomy view of Orphism/Pythagoreanism on embodied life adds an almost eerie quality to Plato's theory of dualism, and seems designed to evoke antipathy towards the body. We may infer that the effect of the Orphic/Pythagorean myth on the reader's irrational passions, which I will henceforth refer to as 'emotional appeal', has led Plato to adopt the motif time and again in his philosophical discourse.

Related to the body/prison doctrine is the Orphic/Pythagorean belief in reincarnation, which Plato refers to in *Meno* 81b, *Phaedo* 81d-82b, *Phaedrus* 248c-249b, *Republic* 618-620, *Timaeus* 42b-c and *Laws* 870d-e.³⁴ In *Phaedo* Plato has Socrates discuss what happens to the souls which, after death, are 'weighed down' to earth by the heavy corporeal element that has stuck to them. Tyrants and robbers return to life as wolves, hawks and kites (82a), while those who have practiced justice, but without philosophy, become bees, wasps, ants or even humans again (82b). Why does Plato bring this somewhat fantastical story of reincarnation into his rational discussion of the immortality of the soul? We find the answer at 82c-d, where Plato explains that only the true philosopher can escape the cycle of reincarnation, through refraining from bodily desires. The evident reason, then, for Plato's allusion to the Orphic/Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis, is to suggest that readers steer clear of bodily desires

33 Edelstein 1949, 464, 474-477. He writes at 477: "supposing that the main points of my discussion are correct, it would still be necessary to work out the details of my thesis". Farrell 1999 has since made an attempt to provide such an analysis, but focuses specifically on Eleusinian motifs and does not explain Plato's use of mystery motifs in general; I have used her work extensively in the second half of this paper.

34 For the argument for, and more detail on, Plato's transposition of the Orphic/Pythagorean theme of reincarnation see Bernabé 2011, 97-114.

and practise philosophy by presenting them with the long-lasting consequences of doing otherwise. In the *Timaeus* we similarly read:

ὁ μὲν εὖ τὸν προσήκοντα χρόνον βιούς ... βίον εὐδαίμονα καὶ συνήθη ἔξει, σφαλεῖς δὲ τούτων εἰς γυναικὸς φύσιν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ γενέσει μεταβαλοῖ· μὴ παυόμενός τε ἐν τούτοις ἔτι κακίας, τρόπον ὃν κακύνοιτο, κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῆς τοῦ τρόπου γενέσεως εἰς τινα τοιαύτην αἰὲ μεταβαλοῖ θήρειον φύσιν.³⁵

He who has lived his appointed time well ... will have a blessed and congenial (after)life, but whoever fails will be changed into a woman's form at second birth: and if in this shape he still does not refrain from evil, he will each time be changed into some bestial form after the similitude of his own nature, according to the manner in which he is corrupted.

This passage clearly functions as a warning against straying from a true philosophical path. The doctrine of reincarnation suits Plato because it indicates that bad behaviour has consequences not only in the afterlife, but also in the lives that will ensue thereafter. It is safe to assume that Plato did not actually think that one might return to life as a bee, and indeed he may not even have believed in reincarnation at all; but he recognized the intended effect of the Orphic/Pythagorean doctrine on the initiates, and its philosophical potential: the thought of enduring an endless cycle of miserable lives could evoke feelings that might persuade listeners of the benefits of living a philosophical life better than any rational account.

The Orphics/Pythagoreans also held that in the afterlife the initiated would enjoy various blessings, while the uninitiated would lie in the mud and carry water in a sieve. This doctrine is mentioned by Plato at *Gorgias* 493a-c, *Phaedo* 69c, 111d, 113a-b and *Republic* 363c-d.³⁶ In the *Republic* we read:

Μουσαῖος δὲ τούτων νεανικώτερα τάγαθὰ καὶ ὁ ὕς αὐτοῦ παρὰ θεῶν διδῶσιν τοῖς δικαίοις· εἰς Ἄιδου γὰρ ἀγαγόντες τῷ λόγῳ καὶ κατακλίναντες καὶ συμπόσιον τῶν ὁσίων κατασκευάσαντες ἐστεφανωμένους ποιοῦσιν τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον ἤδη διάγειν μεθύνοντας ... τοὺς δὲ ἀνοσίους αὖ καὶ ἀδίκους εἰς πηλὸν τινα κατορύττουσιν ἐν Ἄιδου καὶ κοσκίνῳ ὕδωρ ἀναγκάζουσι φέρειν.³⁷

35 *Ti.* 42b-c.

36 For the argument for, and more detail on, Plato's transposition of the Orphic/Pythagorean theme of afterlife punishment and reward see Bernabé 2011, 155-188.

37 *R.* 363c-d.

Musaeus and his son attribute to the just more enjoyable blessings from the gods: in their story they lead them into Hades, make them recline and prepare a symposium of the pious, and crowning them they make them spend the whole time drinking ... but the impious and unjust they bury in some sort of mud in Hades and make them carry water in a sieve.

If the prospect of reincarnation into a kite does not suffice in steering the listener away from the corporeal, Plato emphasizes the more immediate ramifications of the unphilosophical life and the benefits of a philosophical one.³⁸ He does not merely point out that the just will be rewarded and the unjust punished, but discusses these rewards and punishments in detail, again invoking the reader's imagination. The passage has a humorous overtone: νεανικώτερα implies a certain level of frivolity, and the 'blessings' which the gods bestow are endless drinking and partying. It is clear that Plato is lightly mocking the doctrine and its followers here, but that does not necessarily negate its effect on the reader. The passage follows Plato's discussion on the definition of justice, and illustrates his argument that justice is beneficial. The argument is thus afforded by a religious motif that bids to appeal to the emotions: the dramatic scene of unfortunate souls lying in the mud would have been as abhorrent to the living as the banquet with the gods would have been alluring.³⁹ While most of the *Republic* consists of dialectical and rational discourse, these religious myths and images stand to be imprinted on readers' memory: just as in Orphism/Pythagoreanism there was no possibility of a blessed afterlife except through initiation, for Plato's readers there was no possibility of a blessed afterlife except through philosophy.⁴⁰ The motif of punishment in the mud is used in a similarly illustrative, but more serious manner in *Phaedo*, where Socrates explains why only non-philosophers ought to fear death:

οἱ τὰς τελετὰς ἡμῖν οὗτοι καταστήσαντες ... πάλαι αἰνίττεσθαι ὅτι ὃς ἂν ἀμύητος καὶ ἀτέλεστος εἰς Ἄϊδου ἀφίκηται ἐν βορβόρῳ κείσεται.⁴¹

38 Plato here, as often, compares the philosopher to someone initiated into the mysteries, see Morgan 1990, 64. Broadly speaking philosophers, the initiated, and the just were all on the same side of the spectrum and were used interchangeably by Plato.

39 Rodríguez 2016, 118. An interesting detail that Morgan 1990, 77 points out is the relation of mud to impurity. The oppositions between pure and impure, just and unjust are emphasized repeatedly in passages related to this motif of mud in the underworld.

40 Macchioro 2004, 104.

41 *Phd.* 69c.

They who established the mysteries ... foreshadowed long ago, that whoever goes into Hades uninitiated and unsanctified will lie in the mud.

By confronting the readers not just once but repeatedly with such gloomy images, Plato “moulds” (as Edelstein phrases it) a deeply rooted fear in their souls, in the same way that the descriptions of banquets and other afterlife blessings “mould” feelings of hope.⁴²

Finally, in the *Gorgias* Plato attributes a particular meaning to the motif of carrying water in a sieve:

καὶ τοῦτο ἄρα τις μυθολογῶν κομψὸς ἀνὴρ, ἴσως Σικελὸς τις ἢ Ἰταλικὸς ... ἐνδείκνυται ὡς τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου ... οἱ ἀμύητοι καὶ φοροῖεν εἰς τὸν τετρημένον πίθον ὕδωρ ἐτέρῳ τοιοῦτῳ τετρημένῳ κοσκίνῳ. τὸ δὲ κόσκινον ἄρα λέγει ... τὴν ψυχὴν εἶναι· τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν κοσκίνῳ ἀπήκασεν τὴν τῶν ἀνοήτων ὡς τετρημένην, ἅτε οὐ δυναμένην στέγειν δι’ ἀπιστίαν τε καὶ λήθην.⁴³

Some clever man, some Sicilian or Italian,⁴⁴ ... showed that of those in Hades ... the uninitiated carry water into a leaky jar with some other leaky sieve. And by the sieve ... he means the soul: and the soul of the thoughtless he likened to a sieve as being leaky, since it cannot hold anything because of its unbelief and forgetfulness.

Using the sieve as a metaphor for the soul, a motif not associated with Orphism/Pythagoreanism elsewhere, fits with the doctrine of memory and forgetfulness (cf. the two springs in the Underworld): blessedness can only be achieved if the immortal soul retains its knowledge and identity. This reference is an early sign of Plato’s thoughts about *anamnesis* and memory of the forms, and recalls the Myth of Er, where the souls have to drink from the water of Lethe before returning to life. Plato himself later gives his reason for telling this story, namely to ‘persuade (the listener) to change, and instead of an insatiate and undisciplined life to choose one that is orderly, and sufficient and contented with what it has’ (*Grg.* 493c). He achieves this, however, not by graphically describing the punishment that awaits the uninitiated in the Orphic/Pythagorean afterlife, as he did in the other passages related to the underworld, but by using this punishment as a metaphor to demonstrate the bad influence of the body on the soul, as he did in the passages discussed earlier concerning the body/

42 Edelstein 1949, 474.

43 *Grg.* 493a-c.

44 ‘Sicilian’ might refer to the Orphic Empedocles and Italian might refer to one of the Pythagoreans. See Graf 2011, 58.

prison motif. In this way Plato is killing two birds with one stone: he is showing the threat that the body forms for the soul as well as reminding the listener of the fate that awaits the non-philosopher after death. It may also be suggested that Plato used this particular metaphor to associate the corporeal, to negative effect, with the realm of Hades. Linforth notes that Plato brings death into the conversation already at 492e, where Callicles says: οἱ λίθοι γὰρ ἂν οὕτω γε καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ εὐδαιμονέσταιοι εἶεν ('in this way stones would make the happiest corpses', and Socrates quotes Euripides in reply: τίς δ' οἶδεν, εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἐστὶ κατθανεῖν, τὸ κατθανεῖν δὲ ζῆν ('who knows whether life be death, and death be life?')); Subsequently, in 493a, he adds to this: ἤδη γὰρ τοῦ ἔγωγε καὶ ἤκουσα τῶν σοφῶν ὥς νῦν ἡμεῖς τέθναμεν καὶ τὸ μὲν σῶμά ἐστιν ἡμῖν σῆμα ('for I once heard wise men say that we are now dead and the body is our tomb'). Linforth then argues that Plato deliberately obscures the distinction between life and death to prepare the listener for the idea that the story of the sieve applies not only to the dead, but also to those who we call alive but are in fact dead.⁴⁵ This seems to me rather farfetched, but I do agree with Linforth in that the religious motif "reinforces by its unforgettable images the conviction of a truth which is established independently by rational argument": Plato makes an appeal to the emotions by connecting life closely with death.⁴⁶

After considering these examples it appears that Plato mostly refers to Orphic/Pythagorean doctrines in eschatological contexts, such as the fate of the soul upon death and the restraining influence of the mortal body on the immortal soul. Regarding Plato's reason for using the doctrines, we may tentatively conclude that he illustrates his theories with (often graphic) Orphic/Pythagorean passages in order to add a dramatic effect to his argument which might evoke strong emotions in his listeners, who are thereby (unknowingly) more easily persuaded. This, in fact, demonstrates the very difference between philosophy and religion: while the former is rational and stimulates people's intellect, the latter is imaginative and stimulates people's emotions. Plato, remarkably, was aware of this and eagerly uses the language of the mysteries to support his own cause.

4 The Eleusinian Mysteries in Plato

Since the Eleusinian Mysteries were widely known to the Athenians, it is no surprise that we find references to them in Plato's writings, notably in the *Gorgias*, *Sophist*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*. However, Plato was

45 Linforth 1944, 309-310.

46 Linforth 1944, 295.

not simply picking up on some common usage of mystery motifs in everyday speech, since, as we will see, his references to the mysteries often contribute to his argument and Plato engages with their content as well as with their imagery.⁴⁷ I will test Edelstein's theory of emotional appeal, which I have shown to apply to the Orphic/Pythagorean references, on Eleusinian motifs and language in Plato's texts, by examining examples of three of the most well-known motifs of the Eleusinian Mysteries: the progression of the initiate through different stages of initiation; the visual experience of the *epopteia*; and the guidance of a *mystagogos*.⁴⁸

At *Gorgias* 497c, when Callicles complains about Socrates' persistent questioning, the latter tells him: 'Lucky you, Callicles, that you have been initiated into the Greater Mysteries before the Lesser!' (εὐδαίμων εἶ, ὦ Καλλικλείης, ὅτι τὰ μέγала μεμύησαι πρὶν τὰ σμικρά). Evidently it was required that one first went through the preparatory stages of initiation before reaching the final stage. These stages are replicated closely in the *Symposium*.⁴⁹ Prior to initiation, the candidate is ignorant and filled with impurities, of which he must be purified. This process is depicted by Plato in the scene prior to Socrates' speech. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the purification consists of a physical ritual, *muesis*, but Plato replaces this with a *katharsis* through *elenchos*:⁵⁰ in 199b-201c Socrates interrogates Agathon to show the flaws in his argument and 'purify' him of his false beliefs, in the same way that, as Socrates points out, the priestess Diotima previously enlightened himself (201d-e). This idea of *elenchos* as purification is elaborated on by Plato in the *Sophist* (230b-e), where the Athenian Stranger says: τὸν ἔλεγχον λεκτέον ὡς ἄρα μεγίστη καὶ κυριωτάτη τῶν καθάρσεων ἐστὶ. The aim of the *muesis*, in the Mysteries, is to remove any blemishes that might prevent the initiate from coming into contact with the *hiera*, the divine, and

47 Farrell 1999, 68.

48 These are three of the five important Eleusinian themes in Plato as discussed by Farrell 1999. There is little doubt in scholarship of the presence of these themes in the Eleusinian mysteries: they are confirmed even by the pre-Platonic sources, as discussed by Sattler 2013. Most references to the themes can be found in the 'Myth of the Soul' in *Phaedrus* and Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*, but I will also make brief mention of the 'Myth of the Cave' in the *Republic*, and a single passage in the *Gorgias*.

49 As mentioned I will follow the stages outlined by Dowden 1980 (potential *muesis*—Lesser Mysteries—*muesis*—first initiation into Greater Mysteries—*epopteia*), taking into account Edmonds 2017 and Clinton 2003 in not identifying the term *muesis* with the Lesser Mysteries but rather with a preliminary ritual required before the Greater, and potentially also the Lesser, Mysteries. Important is that all theories share the concept of a progression through different levels of initiation. On the replication of these stages in the *Symposium* see Casadesús 2016, 14-17; Farrell 1999, 105-115; Riedweg 1987, 21.

50 Farrell 1999, 73, 75, 82, 86, 105, 116, 134, 137; Riedweg 1987, 18-21.

herein we may find Plato's reason for using this religious metaphor: assimilating the *elenchos* to a purification emphasizes the importance to the philosopher of removing false beliefs and desires in preparing himself for true knowledge of the forms. No one likes to admit they are wrong, but when this concession is portrayed as a dignified ritual one conceives a kind of respect for it, and looks at it as a positive, and necessary, step in the right direction rather than a shameful experience. Both Plato and his readers know that *elenchos* is not truly a purification ritual: no water is poured, no sacrifices made. And nowhere does Socrates give any rational arguments for why *elenchos* is necessary, why Diotima could not just give him the correct answers upfront. But through the Eleusinian metaphor it is suggested that the irrational, passionate part of the soul is affected, and the rational part will follow. The depiction also adds to Plato's portrayal of the forms as holy and divine: in order to be allowed, or indeed able, to behold them, one must be pure. Subsequently we have Diotima's narrative about Eros, the inner layer of the dialogue. The *Symposium* starts at the outer layer of Apollodorus' conversation, then moves inwards to Agathon's symposium, then to yet another layer in Socrates' speech, to finally reach Diotima's narrative, much like the *mystes* reaches the *epopteia* after moving through the different stages of initiation. Diotima's speech itself is full of mystery terminology and mirrors the structure of the Eleusinian Mysteries, starting with *muesis* (her *elenchos* of Socrates) and then processing through to the *epopteia*, of which Diotima says:⁵¹

ταῦτα μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐρωτικά ἴσως, ὦ Σώκρατες, κἂν σὺ μυηθείης: τὰ δὲ τέλεα καὶ ἐποπτικά, ὧν ἕνεκα καὶ ταῦτα ἔστιν, ἐάν τις ὀρθῶς μετήη, οὐκ οἶδ' εἰ οἶός τ' ἂν εἴη.⁵²

Into these mysteries of love, Socrates, even you may be *initiated*: but I don't know if you could be (initiated) into those *rites* and *epoptika*, for which these, if pursued correctly, are a preparation.

Interesting here is the word τὰ τέλεα, cognate with τέλειος, 'perfect', highlights the belief that through initiation the *mystai* became complete. By using this word in addition to ἐποπτικά Plato suggests that true knowledge of the forms makes one perfect and complete.⁵³ The *erotika* that Diotima refers to are the physical, human loves which she has previously discussed and which

51 Evans 1993, 143, 153; Farrell 1999, 103.

52 *Smp.* 209e-210a.

53 Farrell 1999, 95.

function as instructive experiences for the philosopher, whereas the *epoptika/epopteia* refers to the spiritual love of the forms which she will relate thereafter.⁵⁴ *μυηθείης* need not be taken to refer, as Edmonds has claimed, specifically to the ritual of *muesis*, but can also denote the general act of being initiated.⁵⁵ Following this interpretation we may either, along with Riedweg, compare the initiation into the *erotika* with the Lesser Mysteries, or alternatively with the first initiation into the Greater Mysteries. In this way the stages in Diotima's speech (purification, instruction and revelation) correspond with the stages in the Eleusinian Mysteries (*muesis*, Lesser and first-time Greater Mysteries, *epopteia*). The Ladder of Love itself, where the philosopher moves through the different types of love towards the highest love of the Beautiful, also reminds us of these stages, and of the physical ascent up to the Telesterion at Eleusis. Its function in the text is that of the first-time initiation into the Greater Mysteries: one may catch a first glimpse of what the *epopteia* pertains to, but is not yet allowed to really see and understand it. The reader is, as it were, still blindfolded. In this way the Eleusinian metaphor helps Plato emphasize that in order to know the forms the philosopher must first change, be educated and prepare himself through living a philosophical life.⁵⁶

Phaedrus is similarly structured in terms of the Eleusinian Mysteries. The dialogue takes place on the banks of the river Ilissos near Agrai (*Phdr.* 229), which is the site of the Lesser Mysteries. Socrates relates Agrai to a myth concerning the ravishment of a nymph by Boreas: the Lesser Mysteries are believed to be celebrated in honour of Kore, who was kidnapped by Hades and whose reunion with Demeter was celebrated at Eleusis. It is evident, then, that Plato wants his listeners to connect the dialogue with the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁵⁷ *Phaedrus'* subsequent suggestion to walk in the 'pure' (*καθάρᾳ*) river (entering the river is suggested as part of the purification rituals at the Lesser Mysteries), hints that Socrates and *Phaedrus* are about to participate in the mysteries themselves. Central to these mysteries is the palinode, Socrates' speech in praise of love, at the start of which Socrates says:

ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν, ὦ φίλε, καθήρασθαι ἀνάγκη.⁵⁸

Now I, my friend, must purify myself.

54 Kerenyi 1967, 45.

55 Clinton 2003, 52–53. For Edmonds' interpretation see 2017, 199.

56 Farrell 1999, 66, 68–69.

57 Farrell 1999, 87; Kolakowska 2010, 44; Kerenyi 1967, 45; Rinella 2000, 66.

58 *Phdr.* 243a.

In this way Plato presents the speech as a kind of purification ritual, a *muesis*, in order to regain his vision and be able to behold the forms, just like the Eleusinian *mystes* had to be purified in preparation for the *epopteia*. Socrates unveils his head prior to the palinode (243b), just as the Eleusinian initiates are thought to have removed their veil after the purification, as a symbol of renewed vision.⁵⁹ In the palinode Plato subsequently relates the story of the soul as consisting of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer (246a f.), which ascend through the sky towards the forms in a religious procession of gods and spirits (246e-247e), reminding strongly of the procession from Athens to Eleusis which culminated in the *epopteia*.⁶⁰ At 250b-c we read:

κάλλος δὲ τότε ἦν ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, ὅτε σὺν εὐδαίμονι χορῷ μακαρίαν ὄψιν τε καὶ θέαν, ἐπόμμενοι μετὰ μὲν Διὸς ἡμεῖς, ἄλλοι δὲ μετ' ἄλλου θεῶν, εἰδόν τε καὶ ἐτελοῦντο τῶν τελετῶν ἣν θέμις λέγειν μακαριωτάτην.

At that time Beauty was shining bring, when with a *blessed* chorus, ourselves following Zeus and others following other gods, they saw a *blissful* and divine sight, and were *initiated* into what are rightfully called the most *blessed of mysteries*.

The passage, indeed the whole palinode, is perfused with mystery language, adding weight to Plato's statement that knowledge of the forms is the *μακαριωτάτην* of mysteries, implying that it is superior even to the Eleusinian Mysteries. In addition, the plethora of religious terms in this particular passage is similar to, and has the same effect on the reader as the Orphic/Pythagorean references to the rewards in the afterlife: it evokes hope and a desire to pursue the path necessary to obtain such blessings. In the remainder of the palinode Plato tells how the human souls were separated from the gods, much like Eleusinian Demeter was separated from them when she searched for her daughter Kore on earth (*h.Cer.* 300, 325, 345).⁶¹ Subsequently, as in *Symposium*, the spiritual love of the forms can only be regained by beginning on the level of physical love, just as the spiritual Greater Mysteries can only be reached by first passing through the more practical Lesser Mysteries and *muesis*.⁶² By shaping his argument about the progress required of the philosopher in terms of the religious progress in the Eleusinian Mysteries, and perfusing it with mystery

59 Evans 1993, 186; Farrell 1999, 81-82, 87; Mylonas 1961, 205-208, 236, 241-242.

60 Lebeck 1972, 271.

61 Evans 1993, 201.

62 Kerenyi 1967, 46, 98-99; Rinella 2000, 67, 69, 76.

terminology, Plato attributes to his philosophy an air of the divine, seeking to appeal to people's spiritual or irrational as well as their rational minds. In this way both *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* show how Plato uses the structure and rituals associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries to persuade his listeners of the importance of developing oneself by going through the various stages of philosophy.

The most well-known motif of the Eleusinian Mysteries is that of the *epopteia* and visual experience. Due to this focus on the visual aspect of the mysteries, the language associated with Eleusis encompasses many terms related to sight, as well as to light (the ritual in the Telesterion is said to have incorporated bright lights). Plato's use of such terminology is found in the aforementioned passage of *Phaedrus* about the vision of the forms:

κάλλος δὲ τότε ἦν ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, ὅτε σὺν εὐδαίμονι χορῷ μακαρίαν ὄψιν τε καὶ θέαν ... εἶδόν τε καὶ ἐτελοῦντο τῶν τελετῶν ... ὁλόκληρα δὲ καὶ ἀπλᾶ καὶ ἀτρεμή καὶ εὐδαίμονα φάσματα μυούμενοί τε καὶ ἐποπτεύοντες ἐν αὐγῇ καθαρῇ.⁶³

At that time Beauty was shining *bright*, when with a blessed chorus they *saw* a blissful and divine *sight* ... and were initiated into the mysteries ... initiated into and *beholding* in the pure *sunlight* the perfect, simple, calm and happy *apparitions*.

Plato could not be more obvious in his allusion to the Eleusinian Mysteries here, as we find the motifs of sight, bright light, initiation, blessedness and purification all in one passage.⁶⁴ Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* too is full of such language of vision:⁶⁵

ὃς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικὰ παιδαγωγῇ, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὁρθῶς τὰ καλὰ, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰὼν τῶν ἐρωτικῶν ἐξαίφνης κατόψεται τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν.⁶⁶

When someone has thus far been educated in the mysteries of love, having correctly *beheld* one beautiful thing after another, approaching the *culmination* of his dealings with love, he *suddenly sees* some wondrous, beautiful form.

63 *Phdr.* 250b-c.

64 Burkert 1985, 324; Evans 1993, 197-198; Farrell 1999, 93; Lebeck 1972, 272.

65 Evans 2006, 18; Farrell 1999, 126-127; Kranz 1926, 446; Riedweg 1987, 22-26.

66 *Smp.* 210e.

This series of visuals leading up to a sudden and overwhelming revelation has traditionally been connected with the Eleusinian Mysteries and demonstrates the imagistic nature of the cult. By presenting the theory of forms as precisely such an intense religious experience, which could never be adequately described in rational terms alone, Plato aims to evoke the appropriate feelings of awe and reverence in his listeners that will lead them to desire knowledge of the forms.⁶⁷

A final example may be taken from Plato's Myth of the Cave in the *Republic*, which is thought by some to refer to a cave at the sanctuary of Eleusis which was associated with the underworld deities, where perhaps the initiates were led before ascending to the bright light of the Telesterion.⁶⁸ The following passage describes the experience of one of the prisoners after leaving the cave:

καὶ πρῶτον μὲν τὰς σκιὰς ἂν ῥᾶστα καθορᾶ ... ἐκ δὲ τούτων τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν οὐρανὸν νύκτωρ ἂν ῥᾶρον θεάσασαιτο, προσβλέπων τὸ τῶν ἄστρον τε καὶ σελήνης φῶς ... τελευταῖον δὴ οἶμαι τὸν ἥλιον, ... αὐτὸν καθ' αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ χώρᾳ δύναιτ' ἂν κατιδεῖν καὶ θεάσασθαι οἷός ἐστιν.⁶⁹

And first he would most easily *see* the shadows ... and from these he would *behold* the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night *looking* at the *light* of the stars and the moon ... and finally I suppose he would be able to *look* at the *sun* itself, by itself and in its own place, and *see* what it is like.

In all these examples Plato describes the experience of gaining knowledge of the forms as the visual ritual of beholding wondrous sights and bright light, which took place in the Telesterion at Eleusis.⁷⁰ Since the forms in themselves were not necessarily visual, but rather abstract concepts, we may wonder why Plato repeatedly chose to use this particular religious metaphor. The most obvious reason is the strong emotional impact of images, conjured by the sensuous language of the Eleusinians. Since people by nature associate the good with light and beauty, and the bad with darkness and unattractiveness, it makes sense for Plato to want his readers to associate philosophy and the forms with

67 Edmonds 2017, 202–203.

68 Clinton 1992, 16–19; Cornford 1945, 227; Farrell 1999, 96–97.

69 *R.* 516a–b.

70 Evans 1993, 193, 197; Farrell 1999, 67, 92; Boyancé 1962 points out how this use of the Eleusinian 'illumination' motif, and of the Eleusinian mysteries in general, as a metaphor for obtaining intellectual knowledge later became more commonplace, applied amongst others by Aristotle and Philo of Alexandria.

the former, and the unphilosophical and ignorant with the latter, ensuring that they feel more affinity for the philosophical 'good' and are therefore more likely to follow his advice. This contrast is most clearly depicted in the Myth of the Cave, where the prisoners spend their life in darkness, ignorant of reality, until after ascending into the light they can behold the true forms: philosophical knowledge, here, is a bright and beautiful enlightenment, whereas a lack thereof is a dark and gloomy prison.⁷¹ Moreover, by making his entire description of the philosophical process a journey from darkness into the light, perfused with religious terms of vision, Plato actually presents the myth as a religious experience itself, alike to that of Eleusis:⁷² the listener is guided by the text through different stages of emotions (fear, wonder, disbelief) toward a feeling of enlightenment and excitement triggered by the description of the forms as religious visions. In this way Plato tries to demonstrate the intimate, overwhelming nature of acquiring knowledge of the forms: one does not merely understand the forms in an intellectual way, but experiences some sort of direct acquaintance with them, an almost physical contact that affects the senses, as the divine vision in the *epopteia* affected the senses of the Eleusinian initiates.

The final Eleusinian motif that I will discuss is that of the *mystagogos*. The procession from Athens to Eleusis for the Greater Mysteries was led by a kind of religious leader or guide: this *mystagogos*, who had himself seen the revelations in the Telesterion many times, guided the initiates through the preparatory rituals. Plato refers to this custom, for example, at two points in Diotima's speech:

πρῶτον μὲν, ἔὰν ὀρθῶς ἡγῆται ὁ ἡγούμενος, ἐνὸς αὐτὸν σώματος ἑρᾶν καὶ ἑνταῦθα γεννᾶν λόγους καλοῦς.⁷³

First, if one is led correctly by his *leader*, he will love one body and engender beautiful words therein.

71 Whether or not Plato intended this story as a reference to the previously discussed Orphic/Pythagorean doctrine of the body as a prison, it conveys the same meaning: the body and its desires restrain our soul and prevent it from gaining true knowledge (of the forms): we must escape the corporeal and follow the immortal, divine aspect of our soul.

72 Farrell 1999, 65, 69–70, 99, 128, 136. The same technique is used, as we have seen, in the *Symposium* and, to an extent, in the *Phaedrus*.

73 *Smp.* 210a.

τοῦτο γὰρ δὴ ἐστὶ τὸ ὀρθῶς ἐπὶ τὰ ἐρωτικά ἰέναι ἢ ὑπ' ἄλλου ἄγεσθαι.⁷⁴

For this is the correct way to approach, or be *led by another*, to matters of love.

In fact, Diotima herself, who as we have seen makes elaborate use of Eleusinian mystery language in her speech, is presented as a *mystagogos* by Socrates:

διὰ ταῦτά τοι, ὦ Διοτίμα, ὅπερ νυνδὴ εἶπον, παρὰ σέ ἤκω, γνοῦς ὅτι διδασκάλων δέομαι.⁷⁵

For this reason, Diotima, as I just mentioned, I have come to you, knowing that I needed a *teacher*.

In her role as *mystagogos*, Diotima purifies Socrates of his false beliefs through an *elenchos* and leads him towards knowledge of the forms through an account of the different steps on the Ladder of Love, just as the Eleusinian guide led the initiates to the *epopteia* through the various rituals.⁷⁶ Plato's choice of a female *mystagogos* may be either to associate her with the female-centered cult at Eleusis, or to signal the unconventional nature of her message. Diotima's name emphasizes her role as *mystagogos*: Μαντινικῆς Διοτίμας seems to suggest 'Zeus-honored mantic' and has strong religious connotations.⁷⁷ By extension, Socrates also serves as a *mystagogos*, namely to the attendees of Agathon's symposium, and Plato serves as a *mystagogos* to us, his readers.⁷⁸ As we see in the case of Diotima, the attribution of religious characteristics to a speaker gives them a numinous quality designed to evoke reverence in the listener. This means that Diotima does not need to present any actual arguments for her claims: her doctrine will be accepted on the basis of her inspired wisdom. Putting his words in the mouth of such a character and assuming for himself too the status of *mystagogos* transfers some of this 'mystic authority' to Plato. Another example of the *mystagogos* motif can be found in the *Republic*, where one of the prisoners is forcibly dragged out of the cave into the light (515e) and subsequently returns to attempt the same with his fellow prisoners:

74 Smp. 211c.

75 Smp. 207c.

76 Casadesús 2016, 14, 16; Evans 1993, 98-99, 101, 137; Evans 2006, 18-19; Farrell 1999, 88, 120; Kranz 1926, 445-446.

77 Evans 2006, 8; Robinson 1998, 137.

78 Evans 1993, 154-155; Evans 2006, 19.

καὶ τὸν ἐπιχειροῦντα λύειν τε καὶ ἀνάγειν, εἴ πως ἐν ταῖς χερσὶ δύναιντο λαβεῖν
καὶ ἀποκτείνειν, ἀποκτείνουσι ἄν;⁷⁹

And if they could somehow lay hands on and kill this man who was trying
to *release* them and *lead them up*, would they not do so?

The concepts of ‘release’ and ‘ascent’ are presented inside the murky cave to show the benefits of following the *mystagogos*. This passage, forming both a reference to Socrates’ tragic fate and a warning about the difficulties of trying to enlighten the ignorant, perhaps explains why Plato repeatedly chooses to present his theory of forms as a religious myth or initiation instead of a dialectical account: so as not to evoke any suspicion or aversion for his theories, but rather the reverence, hope, wonder and awe that were felt by the initiates at Eleusis. In this way, as Edelstein phrases it, “the inner core of man’s existence receives the commands of the intellect in terms that are adequate to its irrational nature”.⁸⁰

5 Conclusion

Having discussed the relevant examples of Plato’s use of the Orphic/Pythagorean motifs of the body as prison, reincarnation, and afterlife rewards and punishment, as well as examples of his use of the Eleusinian motifs of stages of rituals, visual experience, and the *mystagogos*, we may draw several conclusions. It appears that Plato used the Orphic/Pythagorean motifs mainly in eschatological contexts such as discussions about the immortality of the soul and its fate upon death, whereas the Eleusinian motifs mainly appear in relation to the theory of Forms. This may be explained by the nature of the cults: Orphism/Pythagoreanism has a strong focus on the afterlife journey, while the Eleusinian Mysteries are more concerned with the process toward ‘beholding the divine’.

I have argued that the explanations commonly provided for Plato’s adoption of religious motifs are subject to doubt. Due to the relative paucity and obscurity of the Orphic/Pythagorean references, his criticism on the cult elsewhere in the texts, and the presence of a dialectical approach to the same topics, it seems implausible that Plato uses Orphic/Pythagorean mystery language to give authority to his texts, to make his theories more appealing and

79 Pl. R. 517a.

80 Edelstein 1949, 477.

comprehensible to the public by aligning them with familiar doctrines, or to cover areas which were beyond the scope of dialectical or scientific inquiry. In the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries, however, due to the renown of the cult, the relative frequency of the references and their prominence in some of the dialogues, the latter two of these explanations can be applied to some instances of Eleusinian metaphor and language, but not all.

As has become evident, we may infer, along with Edelstein, a much simpler reason for Plato's use of the mystery cults, one that can be applied to all examples adduced of both mystery cults in every relevant dialogue: emotional appeal. The religious references often consist of graphic descriptions or sensuous language, which conjure up evocative images in the mind of the listener or reader, who is thereby the more gravely affected.

Plato's understanding of the effect of religious motifs on man's passions shows his insight into the human psyche, indicating his proficiency not only as a philosopher but also as a psychologist: "it is the saving grace of Plato's intellectualism that it can do justice to the emotions without infringing upon the prerogatives of reason".⁸¹ The philosopher's tactic of borrowing religious motifs is fittingly described by Despland with a musical metaphor: Plato has taken a familiar song and rewritten it in a different key, so that "the tune is recognizable, but its character, its tone, its impact are entirely changed".⁸² He attempts to affect his audience in a manner similar to that of the mystery cults, by appealing to their emotions, and for that means appeals to their doctrines and language, even while the content of his message is different: philosophy rather than religion, and knowledge rather than divinity.⁸³

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81 Edelstein 1949, 476.

82 Despland 1985, 204.

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