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The association of fire with punishment for man’s ethical depravity has captured our imagination long before Christianity made the idea of “burning in Hell” its trademark. Poets and philosophers alike time and again have revisited the link between mortality and immorality. In its inception, however, this link is not so linearly punitive as in its later ideological incarnation. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (Hymnus in Cererem), for example, the burning of one’s body is not envisioned as an irreversible punishment of men’s propensity for immorality but as a gift bestowing immortality. Regrettably, human folly, incapable of recognizing the transformative essence of Demeter’s immersion of Demophoön in fire, aborts the event and retains its mortality (h. Cer. 231–274).

It makes more sense to men, blinded by their perceptions, to conceive of fire as a deleterious and punitive expression of mortality—and to that effect immorality—rather than an ontologically beneficial agent of immortality. This conception is best reinforced in Plato’s treatment of the third river in the underworld, the Pyrphlegethon (Πυριφλεγέθων). As suggested by its name, this is “the fire-blazing” stream that carries the souls of those who have committed heinous, yet curable crimes (ἵσιμα μὲν μεγάλα δὲ δόξωσιν ἡμαρτηκέναι ἁμαρτήματα, Phaed. 113E6–7). These souls are left to the mercy of the victims of their wrongdoing to determine whether they are forgiven and thus saved from circling in the fiery river (Phaed. 114A6–B2). The flaming scenes in the Hymn to Demeter and the Phaedo then convey conflicting messages about the role of fire in the process of katharsis. This conflict is further enhanced by the concept of ontogenic fire in the hypostatic architecture of the universe, found in the Chaldaean Oracles.

*I would like to thank John Turner for his warm friendship throughout the years and for inspiring me to pursue this topic. I am also in debt to the students who took my seminars on the Phaedo and Platonic Myth for enriching, with their curiosity, my understanding of the texts, and my colleague David Levenson for providing a friendly ear to this and many other unconventional ideas.
This study examines “the other side” of *katharsis*, that is, the ontological root of the concept of purity and its relation to fire, as found in Plato’s *Phaedo* and further illustrated in the *Chaldaean Oracles*. Although reflecting different conceptual settings, the two texts first and foremost treat the concept of *katharos* and fire as essential characteristics of intelligible existence. This treatment renders the moral interpretation of *katharsis* alone and the punitive role of fire, associated with it, deficient. Is the goal of purification to cure one’s mortality, as in the case of Demophoön, or to penalize one’s immorality as in the case of the parricidal souls in the *Phaedo*? In other words, if fire is an agent of immortality, why does not “burning in Hell” or immersion in the Pyriphegethon make the soul immortal?

1. **THE HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER: A POINT OF DEPARTURE**

The Homeric and Hesiodic overtones of Plato’s account of the afterlife at the end of his not so satisfying attempt at explaining the immortality of soul in the *Phaedo* have long been established.¹ Plato even introduces the subject of the underworld with a quotation from Homer—one of the few occasions on which he charitably enlists the poets’ support.²

In this light, the episode of Demophoön, in its Homeric background, offers an informative starting point for our investigation because it elucidates the ritualistic view of fire as the agent, inducing the qualitative change from mortality to immortality, in the Homeric context Plato evokes in the *Phaedo*.³ The process of this qualitative change is commonly defined as a moral cleansing, purification, or *katharsis* in which the role of fire is interpreted as punitive. Such a moral interpretation of fire, however, overlooks its role as a transformative ontogenic agent and, in Burkert’s words, as mediating access to “a more highly valued realm.”⁴ In this role, fire not only stands at the boundary between the sacred and the profane, but itself is the boundary

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³ Rowe (2007, io3) notes the peculiar lack of strong moralization in the eschatological myth in the *Phaedo* and interprets it as “a mélange, an elaboration of elements from Eleusinian religion and from Pythagoreanism,” heavily subjected to “Plato’s own imagination.”
⁴ Burkert 1985, 76.