COLLOQUIUM 7
ON NAMES AND CONCEPTS:
MYTHICAL AND LOGICAL THINKING IN PLATO’S SYMPOSIUM
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ABSTRACT
This essay is a discussion of the relation between myth and logos in which the rationality of myth is stressed without reducing it to a prehistory of logos. Rather, myth and logos are regarded as complementary: Myth is an addressing speech about something which is regarded as an overwhelming power, and logos is the attempt to elucidate the very meaning of what has been mythically addressed. The discussion refers to Plato’s Symposium. It concentrates on a phrase articulated by Socrates (Symposium 199d) in which the word eros is doubled for the purpose of indicating its mythical and logical sense. According to the concluding reflections, the relation of myth and logos can be conceived as a hermeneutical one. Both are related to each other as text and interpretation.

I
The genesis of philosophy has often been identified with the step from myth to logos. Poetry, oral and anonymous as well as written and artificial, was replaced by thought and investigation. The world was no longer inhabited by powers which mostly were imagined as human-like or animal-like figures. Instead of this the world became calculable and transparent, accessible in its structure and order.

Although—or even because—this view has become so popular,¹ it has often been doubted. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno have stated in their Dialectic of Enlightenment that the distinction between myth and logos cannot be made strictly if myth has to be regarded as the prehistory of logos. If logos has a prehistory the rationality of logos must also be performed in myth, and, as Horkheimer and Adorno suspect, the irrational elements of myth may therefore also be embedded in logos. In a comparable manner but with a different intention, Hans Blumenberg has stressed the rationality of myth. Myth, according to Blumenberg is one of the ef-

¹ This—at least academic—popularity was supported by Wilhelm Nestle’s book Vom Mythos zum Logos (1940 Stuttgart).
ffective forms of logos itself (Blumenberg 1979, 34).² In myth, the distance from the world which is essential for logos is already gained and established. There is no essential difference between articulating the world by giving names to powers and appearances and conceiving the world by determining its plurality and, thereby, finding an intelligible order.

The objections against a rigid distinction between myth and logos are, at least to some degree, plausible. The step from myth to logos could not have been made if myth and logos were completely different from each other. But nevertheless there is a difference, and this difference has to be maintained.³ Otherwise the two words, “myth” and “logos,” would in principle have the same meaning. And, what is more important, otherwise there would be no difference between poetry and philosophy at all. Of course, one could say, as Nietzsche does in The Birth of Tragedy, that this difference is a result of misunderstanding. What is called philosophy would, according to Nietzsche, be only a derived form of poetry which as such had not been understood in the philosophical tradition beginning with Socrates and thus with Plato. But if this were the case, no critical or conceptual knowledge of poetry would ever be possible—a knowledge we prove to have already when we find more or less convincing answers to the question of what poetry is. Although there are reflections on poetry in poetry itself, without this question the nature or essence of poetical language would remain concealed. The question however cannot emerge from an illusion. Every question as to what something essentially is indicates that this thing has lost its former self-evidence. Thus the question as such indicates a point of view outside the subject put into question. The loss of self-evidence is always a fact which cannot be doubted.

So the difference between myth and logos has to be maintained. But on the other hand it cannot be maintained strictly—as if each were completely different from the other. If they have something in common and, at the same time, are different, one could understand and possibly explain why they do not exclude each other. Then, the change from myth to logos would not be an absolute one—as if myth had been completely replaced by logos or had been completely transformed into it. There would be a change, but what had been changed would at the same time remain. It

² Cf. also Blumenberg 1979, 18: “Der Mythos selbst ist ein Stück hochkarätiger Arbeit des Logos.”
³ As to this conviction, I agree with Ernst Cassirer; see his Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken (1925) in Gesammelte Werke, vol. 12. Hamburg 2002, esp. pages 28-29. But the concept of myth that will be developed in the following differs from Cassirer’s insofar as myth is not regarded as the unity of language and world.