THOTH AND APOLLO.
GREEK MYTHS OF THE ORIGIN OF PHILOSOPHY

ANTHONY PREUS

"Linus, son of Hermes and Urania, composed a poem describing the creation of the world, the courses of the sun and moon, and the growth of animals and plants. His poem begins with the line ‘Time was when all things grew up at once’, and this idea was borrowed by Anaxagoras when he declared that all things were originally together until Mind came and set them in order. Linus died in Euboea, slain by the arrow of Apollo, and this is his epitaph:

Here Theban Linus, whom Urania bore,
The fair-crowned Muse, sleeps on a foreign shore.

And thus it was from the Greeks that philosophy took its rise; its very name refuses to be translated into foreign speech.”

Diogenes Laertius I 4

A. PLATO

First we have to say something about the word "philosophy". From a Hellenic perspective, at least, Plato’s dialogues of Socrates have served as a paradigm case, almost an ostensive definition of “philosophy” since the date of their composition. Although the Pythagoreans may have invented the word, Plato gave it substance -- a conceptual thickness that it has not lost in the intervening 2400 years. Ever since Aristotle, philosophers and historians have interested themselves in the origins of the practice that Plato’s Socrates so completely defines. The result has been the recounting of multiple “origin-myths” that tend to say more about those who tell the stories than about the circumstances leading up to the activity of Socrates, and to Plato's account of that activity. Like all good myths, the accounts of the origin of philosophy have a good deal of truth to them, provided that you look at things from the perspective of the myth-teller. If I say that the story that Thales was the first Greek philosopher is a myth, or that the story that Pythagoras brought philosophy from Egypt to Hellas is a myth, I don’t mean to imply that either one of these stories is literally false or literally true – but that we have to look beyond a literalist reading toward a more profound truth.

---

1 See Monique Dixsaut, Le Naturel Philosophe, especially the Introduction and Chapter 1.
1. The Apollonian Origin of Philosophy

Plato tells us, in the course of his dialogues of Socrates, several stories about the origin of philosophy. Probably the most famous Platonic story of the origin of philosophy is the one that Socrates offers in the Apology, about how Chaerephon went to Delphi to ask the oracle [of Apollo]² whether any one were wiser than Socrates, and the god, through his priestess, responded, no, no human being is wiser than Socrates. Socrates says that he took that as a divine calling, to go around demonstrating that people don’t know what they think they know – and ever since, people who call themselves philosophers have been going around doing that, making themselves a pest to everyone who claims to know something. Thus what I am calling the Apollonian origin of philosophy.

But what does this story mean? Plato doesn’t quite say that no one was a philosopher before Chaerephon came back from Delphi and put a bee in Socrates’ bonnet. Rather, the point of the story in its context is that Socrates is getting across, in mythic form, the idea that the role of philosopher is a divine calling. He has been accused of asebeia, impiety, irreligion, but Socrates tells the jury in reply that no one could or would attempt to practice philosophy were he not called by God to do so – that to practice philosophy in the way that he has been doing it is precisely a pious calling, the expression of his religious faith as we might put it. Were someone to have asked Socrates, has God called others before you to this mission? he might have replied, why would God wait for me? Humanity’s pretense to knowledge probably has been around a long time, and will continue after my death.³

When we look to the dialogues for other indications of Plato’s theory of the origin of philosophy, we find a rather puzzling passage in the Protagoras (342), in the context of an analysis of the poem of Simonides. Socrates says that “there is a very ancient philosophy more cultivated in Lacedaimon and Crete than in any other part of Hellas, and there are more philosophers in those countries than anywhere else in the world.” But of course the Spartans deny that, trying to hide the fact that they (both men and women, incidentally) rule the world by wisdom rather than by force of arms. We discover their philosophy by looking at the terseness of their expressions, a style perfected by Thales, Pittacus, Bias, Solon,

---

² In the context of Apology, Apollo is not named; rather it is “the god at Delphi”. Several authors have noted that the Apology version of the religion of Socrates is consistent with his having been a monotheist of some sort, in which case he would have been guilty as charged of not believing in the deities of the Athenian state, but in another, non-Athenian deity. In any case, Socrates in the Apology evidently believes that the manifestation of divinity present at Delphi is worthy of respect and obedience, and that divine presence is conventionally named “Apollo” though he does not use the name in this context. Alternatively, Socrates has so much respect toward Apollo that he does not use his name, but simply says ὁ θεὸς.

³ Apollo is mentioned at various places in the dialogues. He is credited with the invention of music (Crat. 405A), medicine, archery, and divination (Symp. 197A), education (Laws II 654A etc.), is said to be father of Asclepius (Rep. 408C), and much else.