Caring for Myth: Heidegger, Plato, and the Myth of Cura

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In Heidegger’s meditation on Heraclitus’ Fragment B 50, and speaking with his usual sensitivity and sympathy to the thought of the presocratics, Heidegger has occasion to say, “Ought we now to place λόγος, ἐν πάντα and Ζεύς all together, and even assert that Heraclitus teaches pantheism? Heraclitus does not teach this or any doctrine (Lehre). As a thinker, he gives us only to think.” To modern ears, the idea of a thinker or philosopher without a “doctrine” may seem strange; we seem to have learned to look for nothing else in the writings of a thinker but his or her “doctrine.” But Heidegger, in his studies of Heraclitus and the other presocratics, makes a plausible case that once upon a time it was a possibility taken up by a number of the great thinkers of antiquity. Yet if this is true of Heraclitus, it would seem that it would be at least as true, if not more so, of Plato, who never writes in his own person, whose dialogues never present abstract “arguments” but always portray conversations among specific people with particular personalities, carefully placed in one context or another. Never in any dialogue is the suggestion made that what Socrates says (or Parmenides, or Timaeus, or Diotima, or Aspasia, or the Eleatic Stranger, or the Athenian Stranger) can be taken as “Plato’s doctrine,” though later scholars, more exclusively attuned to detecting “doctrines,” have often taken it as such. On the contrary, by placing all the speeches of the dialogues in concrete contexts with specific speakers, Plato invites us
to reflect on the character of all speech, including, especially, the speech of philosophy, as a responding to the exigencies of the concrete human situation, as responding, that is, to the call of the every day, to Being as it "happens." That response, as the dialogues show in imitation of real life, is wonderfully varied and complex. If philosophic speech presented only "arguments" and "doctrines," then it would truly be "abstract," a pale and skeletal shade of the richness of life itself. In avoidance of that abstraction, Plato includes in his dialogues speech as variegated as the speech of life: arguments, to be sure, but also dramatic encounters, poetry, narrative, comic asides, and myth. Plato thus invites us again to hear the speech of the dialogues as the deep and thoughtful response to the call of life itself, of Being. So to repeat, of no philosopher would it seem to be more true than of Plato that he "does not teach any doctrine, but gives us only to think."

Yet Heidegger, for the most part and particularly in his published work on Plato, seems not to have appreciated this poetic character of Plato's work and thought. To the contrary, he entitles his one published work directly on Plato Plato's Doctrine (Lehre) of Truth: With a Letter on Humanism. In this work, as the title suggests, Heidegger virtually ignores the poetic character of the cave analogy and straightforwardly interprets it not simply as "Socrates' discussion of truth in the cave analogy" or even as "Socrates' doctrine of truth in the Republic," but as "Plato's doctrine of truth." In so doing, he ignores the rich depth of Plato's complex dramatic portrayal adumbrated above in favor of an abstract account of "Plato's doctrine." As a number of others, including myself, have observed, one of the enduring puzzles about Heidegger is that one so exquisitely sensitive to the poetic character of language should fail to attend to the poetic thinking of that philosopher of all philosophers who most fully integrated the poetic into his thought. As Heidegger's great student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, once so poignantly put it in discussing Heidegger's often remarkable sensitivity to the Greeks, "Only the thought-event of the Platonic dialogues—the first philosophical text that we still have—remained inaccessible to this impatient questioner in spite of all the momentum behind his appropriations."

In what follows, as a means of calling attention to one aspect of Heidegger's reading of Plato, I shall focus on the use of myth in both thinkers. To that end, I shall consider Heidegger's one use of myth in his great early work, Being and Time, and contrast that use with several of Plato's myths which, I shall argue, speak to similar themes but in an even richer way. I shall then close with some observations about the later Heidegger's occasional greater sensitivity to mythological thinking.