Mythopoiesis and the Constitution of the Mytho-State in Plato and Heidegger
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Abstract: Is the state, by that we may loosely take as the ensemble of social practices that pertain to the management and authority of the polity, ever solely a rational construction? Liberal social contract theory, roughly speaking, posits the possibility that rational self-interested beings develop a consensus as to the need and constitution of the state. The state through its various forms and modalities as it evolved from its original constitution-making event is thus taken as inherently legitimate because of its intrinsic reflection of the original consent of the people. In this essay I seek to problematize this notion of the rational state by returning to the ways in which Plato, and more implicitly, Heidegger justifies, legitimizes and operationalizes the state as such. To do so is to first recognize the importance of the role of mythical thought in both Plato and Heidegger. Following the work of Leo Strauss, Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg, I argue that the theorization of the state also involves myth. In particular, following some of Strauss’ insights, rather than reading Plato’s Republic as a repudiation of myth as such, the Platonic “state” may be seen as an instance of, what may be called, mythopoiesis as reflected, for example, in the discussion of noble lie or the myth of Er. While Plato’s Republic provides the ground for the elaboration of the concept of mythopoiesis, Heidegger’s arguments against modern society, technology, and in fact art as aesthetics may perhaps be read as an attack against the very liberal idea of the state as a me-
chanical entity (as in Hobbes). In which case, the turn towards poetic language implicitly prompts the need for (re)establishing what I would call the mytho-state.

We read the nature of the human soul in the nature of the state – we form our political ideals according to our conceptions of the gods.¹ Every rationalist interpretation falsifies the immediacy of life. The myth is no utopia.² The boundary line between myth and logos is imaginary and does not obviate the need to inquire about the logos of myth in the process of working free of the absolutism of reality. Myth itself is a piece of high-carat ‘work of logos.’³ A decisive question for me today is: how can a political system accommodate itself to the technological age, and which political system would this be? I have no answer to this question. I am not convinced that it is democracy.⁴

The idea that the modern nation-state is fundamentally entwined with a mythical imaginary may appear rather odd given that the very promise of modernity was precisely to do away with it. Marxism, for example, rested upon specific material Laws of History that genuinely mitigated the necessity of mythological forces for maintaining the cohesion of state and society.⁵ Science and technology, more generally, being largely per-

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⁵ An important exception in this can be seen in the case of George Sorel. Sorel argued in part that the Marxist understanding of class conflict, historical materialism and communist revolution was much too beholden to the Hegelian conception of history. As such, what was needed to engender action leading to the revolution was precisely a mythical force of the general strike that could not be refuted according to
ceived as neutral spaces for consensual agreement to emerge, were also supposed to become the main tool for the control of individual passions and to do away with the inconsistencies of mythical narration. Leo Strauss made this particular observation in his study of Hobbes where “The mechanistic conception [of man’s appetite] is based on the mechanistic explanation of perception and therewith on the general theory of motion…”6 The idea being that mechanical control over motion would in and of itself meet the requisite conditions needed for the possibility of controlling society as a whole. Liberal theories of state, for the most part, contextualize the state as the product of self-interested rational actions one takes when seeking to depart the state of nature, or more recently in the case of Rawls, an original position devoid of anything that might impinge upon a rationally deliberative strategy for choosing the principles according to which the state is constituted.7 While the state of nature in much of social contract theory may be construed as a mythical and ahistorical heuristic device to illustrate the rationale for the emergence of the sovereign will (Hobbes), the mythical aspects of the origins of the state are usually deemed to fall by the wayside. Myth, as many Enlightenment philosophers have traditionally argued, must be seen as a pre-modern/pre-scientific archaic stage of human existence and collective consciousness with which modernity finally disposes. Progress - whether technical, economic, social and, ultimately, political - was inconsistent with myth as such. Mythology was thus supposed to be the subject of eth-

any rational explanations. For Sorel, then, myth was actually the very opposite of utopian thinking given that utopia was itself the product of rational constructs in the first place. See Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).


societies and not, then, a matter for modern political theory as such.

The problem, nonetheless, remained that the rational/scientific constructions derived from the various Enlightenment projects were lacking in a fundamental manner. Mythical stories of origins were needed to compliment the legitimacy of rule and to effectuate notions of affective community. The inability of rational state theories to explain the organic or affective relationships between the state, sovereign and community itself reflected a deep-seated angst within such rationally conceived constitutions. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, “Myths give answers to why the world is as it is when an empirical case and effect cannot be seen, or when it cannot be remembered.” And as Isaiah Berlin more forcefully puts it,

Myths are not, as enlightenment thinkers believe, false statements about reality corrected by latter rational criticism, nor is poetry mere embellishment of what could easily well be stated in ordinary prose. The myths and poetry of antiquity are a vision of the world as authentic as that of Greek philosophy, or Roman law, or the poetry and culture of our own enlightened age...Each culture expresses its own collective experience, each step on the ladder of human development has its own equally authentic means of expression.

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8 Indeed, Michel Foucault’s work in Society Must Be Defended was an elaborate genealogy of sovereignty that rested in large part on the bringing to light the use of mythical historiography for speaking about the ‘origins’ of nations present in counter-state/counter-enlightenment discourses as seen in the writings of Count Henri de Boulainvilliers. For Foucault, the ever-present war between the sovereign and the aristocracy centered on differing conceptions of the mythical origins traced back to Graeco-Roman and Germanic antiquity. See Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76 (New York: Picador, 2003).
As a consequence of this perceived inadequacy of Enlightenment rationalizations of community, the Romantic Movement in Germany placed much more emphasis upon myths of origins. In particular, the poetic return to Greek antiquity in the Romantic Movement constructed an essential connection between a sense of self of the Germanic nation and its place in Europe. Herder, for example, would assert that “A poet is a creator of a people”\textsuperscript{11} in that the poetic language was the means of reasserting the original unity of the polity. Likewise, Hölderlin, Hegel and Schelling devised a common manifesto entitled the Systemprogram as the aesthetic response to the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy. As Josef Chytry notes, “The eight paragraphs of the Systemprogram consist of two main undertakings: the transformation of metaphysics into praxis through a philosophy of nature (‘giving wings’ to physics), and development of its implications for the ‘work of man’ in the form of a new ‘mythology of reason.’”\textsuperscript{12} Chytry goes on to affirm that one of the primary goals of this manifesto for conceiving the state as the aesthetic state was so that “Reason and poeisis can then be wed as poeisis becomes the ‘teacher of humanity’ that it had been before the original sundering of human consciousness (‘history’) and ‘mythology’ succeeds ‘history.’”\textsuperscript{13}

The German Romantic movement illustrates the deeply felt attempt at combining the rational foundations of the state, nation and individual through an aesthetic turn. However, these aspects of the counter-enlightenment turn towards the poetic/mythic...

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted in Josef Chytry, The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 49.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 126.
were never fully explored in political theory and political philosophy in general throughout the 19th century, with the notable exception of Nietzsche; or at least until the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer in the early part of the 20th century. Cassirer’s theory of symbolic forms was an attempt at understanding the persistence of myths when rational thought should have exuviated their necessity or utility. Indeed, writing in his last major work during the final paroxysm of the Third Reich, Cassirer saw the pathological apogee of the mythical state in modern times as a sort of reversion to an archaic thought process. Cassirer continues to juxtapose rational and mythical thought asserting that in the realm of politics and social life the latter has won out. Mythical thought is taken as a primary state that needs to be overcome and the task of his main work on the relationship between myth and the state - The Myth of the State. Cassirer’s goal is to reconstruct the historical turns in political thought where myth became an inevitable aspect of state formation and social control.

This essay departs from the aforementioned attempt at rethinking the relationship between state formation and practice and myth by instead looking more closely at the ways in which Plato and Martin Heidegger navigate this relationship. To do so I sub-
divide this essay into three parts. In the first part, I briefly and very schematically examine Hans Blumenberg’s concept of myth in order to formulate a working definition of the key ideas at play in theorizing the state. Blumenberg’s approach to myth is revealing in that he does not draw the stark division between rational and mythical thought. Rather, mythical thought is deeply entwined within the constitution of human beings in relation to their environment and thus cannot be removed from any kind of political foundation. Blumenberg’s analysis of myth is then used as the model for looking at the place of myth in the works of Plato and Heidegger, the heart of this essay. Section two turns to Plato and especially the way the Republic conceives of proper constitution of the polity. While Plato is obviously known for his polemics against the Homeric and Hesiodic myth/poetry, I argue, following some of the insights of Leo Strauss and Stanley Rosen that Plato’s Kallipolis is laden with mythical forms and seeks to reestablish a mythical constitution for the polis. Here I pay attention to three main issues in the Republic, the education of the guardians and children, the noble lie, and the myth of Er as textual justification for the establishment of a mythopoiesis of state rule. In the third part of the essay I discuss Martin Heidegger’s later poetic turn and its consequences for the political and the state. In particular, I tease out the implications of Heidegger’s critique of technology as a mode of revealing, its implications for collective or societal dwelling and how the state should then be conceived in the condition of the withdrawal of Being. I argue two points. First, that both Plato and Heidegger, aside from the numerous critiques of the latter against the former, share an important connection when it comes to the importance of mythopoiesis as the defining characteristic for what constitutes the state.
For Heidegger, this turn to myth may be observed with his initial support of National Socialism as the answer to the crisis of modernity. However, the poetic turn in Heidegger represents the construction of an aesthetic state that tilts the political and the state much too far towards the dominance of mythos.

I

Ernst Cassirer admits that a theory of myth is “laden with difficulties.”¹⁻¹⁷ Because, at first glance, “Myth is nontheoretical in its very meaning and essence” and is not amenable to the scientific and empirical forms of truth, the study of myth is fundamentally rooted in a hermeneutics of allegorical readings that early (Stoic) philosophy privileged.¹⁻¹⁸ For Cassirer, however, the form of myth nonetheless, “combines a theoretical element and an element of artistic creation.”¹⁻¹⁹ Myth, then, has a close relationship with poetry and Cassirer quotes F.C. Prescott’s 1927 study Poetry and Myth as arguing that “Ancient myth is the ‘mass’ from which modern poetry has slowly grown by the processes which the evolutionists call differentiation and specialization. The myth-maker’s mind is the prototype; and the mind of the poet...is still essentially mythopoeic.”²⁻²⁰ Cassirer claims there is a fundamental difference between myth and art in general. Following Kant, who asserted that “aesthetic contemplation is ‘entirely indifferent to the existence or nonexistence of its object’,” Cassirer argues that myth is contingent upon a notion of

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¹⁷ Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 73.
¹⁻¹⁸ Ibid., 73-74.
¹⁻¹⁹ Ibid., 75.
²⁻²⁰ Ibid.
belief without which myth “would lose its ground.”\(^{21}\) However, and this is one of the focal points of this essay, the idea of mythopoiesis is precisely the point where belief and poetry merge to form a conceptual apparatus that can be molded into forming the foundation of a state, what one may call the mytho-state. Rather than following Cassirer in drawing a rigid line between mythical thought and rational thought, and where the possibility of the pure rational state becomes a possibility I argue, following the more recent work of Hans Blumenberg, that myth as such can never be fully expiated or transcended through the “triumph of reason.” Indeed, one of the implications of Cassirer’s text, The Myth of the State, is the very possibility of the purely rational state. As he asserts, “As long as these forces, intellectual, ethical, and artistic, are in full strength, myth is tamed and subdued.”\(^{22}\) Contra Cassirer, however, myths are never fully subdued and remain central even in the practice of ‘rational’ liberal democracy.

Hans Blumenberg’s Work on Myth is a magisterial study of the continued importance of mythology for modern civilization and culture. Not satisfied with the traditional framework for understanding myth as a pre-scientific/pre-modern experience of reality that we see, for example, in Cassirer’s work, Blumenberg redefines the terms of the debate to account for the prevalence of mythical stories throughout all ages and societies. Reality, or rather the perception of reality, is never fully conceived within a particular mode of mastery as such; Blumenberg takes reality as an excess, a limit concept, akin to the ‘status naturalis’ that animated social contract theories since Hobbes. What

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Cassirer, The Myth of the State, 298.
Blumenberg calls the “absolutism of reality” reflects the condition of absolute terror in the face of a stark lack of control over man’s embedded environment: “What is here called the absolutism of reality is the totality of what goes with this situational leap, which is inconceivable without superaccomplishment in consequence of a sudden lack of adaptation.”23 This so-called situational leap occurred roughly at the moment when man emerged as a bipedal creature and, as a consequence, for the first time, left the security of the forest for the wide expanse of the savanna. Furthermore, this entailed a dramatic increase in the level of “anxiety” in that the horizon of the world became perceived as essentially unbounded in space and time. Blumenberg’s construct is clearly designed to serve as what he calls a “limit concept.”24 However, the point for Blumenberg is that the particular condition of the absolutism of reality is that myth, the telling of stories about reality, then becomes a ‘solution’ to a biological problem to our being in the world. If we were to imagine a world devoid of myth, as Blumenberg’s reasoning goes, we would have no way of making the necessary distinctions between the powerful (natural, or even, socio-political) forces influencing our daily lives; we would be purely beholden to a persistent fearful state akin to the Hobbesian state of nature.25 Thus the rise of human culture embedded in a primordial myth should be seen as a response to the deep anxiety and potential paralysis felt by us in the face of such awe-inspiring natural forces inherent in the absolutism of reality. Through mythical stories, culture effec-

23 Blumenberg, Work on Myth, 4.
24 Ibid.
tively striates space into knowable forms (though always incomplete), subdivided to make the whole appear much less threatening. As Blumenberg writes,

Panic and paralysis, as the two extremes of anxiety behavior, are dissolved by the appearance of calculable magnitudes to deal with and regulated ways of dealing with them, even if the results of the magical and ritual quid pro quo now and then make a mockery of the intention of gaining the favor of power on behalf of man.26

One of the important implications, in Blumenberg's account is to call into question the Enlightenment proposition of a universal passage from "mythos to logos" (i.e. that myth can be transcended through the progressive percolation of scientific rationality worldwide). This view is based upon the idea that myths inhabit a particular 'epoch' and that 'progress' renders obsolete their social functions. Blumenberg, by contrast, argues for the continued significance of myth given the improbability of finding a "criterion" by which the world becomes fully knowable through science.27 Blumenberg is perhaps more sympathetic of the Romantic critics of the Enlightenment than his earlier work on modernity might have appeared.28 At any rate, in his discussion of the significance of myth, Blumenberg ties the concept of significance, not unlike Heidegger, back to the concrete stipulation of human finitude: "Significance is related to finitude."29 Because of man’s inherent singular mortality and the impossibility of reconciling the infinite spatial and temporal feature of our world, myth invests the subject and the corresponding ob-

26 Blumenberg, Work on Myth, 6.
27 Ibid., 9. As Blumenberg writes, "Man is always on the this side of the absolutism of reality, but he never entirely attains the certainty that he has reached the turning point in his history at which the relative pre-dominance of reality over his consciousness and his fate has turned into the supremacy of the subject."
29 Blumenberg, Work on Myth, 67.
servable events with, in the case of poetry for example, an aesthetic significance. With respect to origins, Blumenberg highlights the concept of significance along the axes of “two antithetical concepts [which] make it possible to clarify ideas of the origin and the originative character of myth: poetry and terror.”30 As Blumenberg notes,

That poets lie is an old saying, and the discoverer of truth in poetry may only be an episode of the late aesthetic metaphysics that wanted art to stop being the mere exercise of imagination. That poets are the earlier stage of the transmission of work on myth that is accessible to us is a phenomenon of foreshortening that is a result of our point of view; above all, it does not mean that the poetry involved in the work on myth must have given myth a mendacious character.31

The key here is the conjunction between myth, poetry and terror in order to tease out political implications. If, as Blumenberg convincingly argues, myth is a functional consequence of the absolutism of reality, as a way of neutralizing the terror associated with the unbounded horizon of existence then the cultural and, by implication, political significance is that mythical narratives are always, necessarily grafted upon any origin of the state. The state is, in a manner of speaking, always inherently the “aesthetic state” - one based in part on a community of judgment and taste.32 In any case, Blumenberg’s analysis is useful for thinking about the role of myth in Plato and Heidegger at those moments when both begin to conceptualize the state as an object, to be fabricated (poiesis) through myth. This is what I call a process of “mythopoiesis.” In the next second I turn to Plato to elaborate on the interrelationship between myth, poiesis and the state.

30 Ibid., 59; emphasis in the original.
31 Ibid., 60.
II

Plato’s Republic is a dialogue on the nature of justice and the regime best suited to ensure it. Book One lays down the challenge to Socrates to defend justice in the face of Thrasymachus’s own emphasis on the universality of power. Thrasymachus took justice to be simply a matter of the will of those within the regime (338c). Laws as such represent the private interests of individuals in power rather than what should be the common good of the polis. Justice is a matter of strength and not knowledge. Moreover, in a move that is rather similar to legal positivism, obedience to the laws of the regime represents the highest form of just action as justice is conflated with positive law. Thrasymachus’s vision of such a polis is remarkable in two senses. On the one hand, it assumes that physical force is sufficient to maintain law and obedience to the state; its emphasis on power as brute force is obvious. On the other hand, Thrasymachus is a rhetorician and the use of language becomes a key factor in controlling the emotions of the city, if not his own anger towards Socrates. Thrasymachus, akin to the sophists, becomes the evident target for Plato’s own polemics against the prevalent practices of twisting language, stories and Homeric poetry for the sake of ruling the polis for a particular interest. Socrates’ aim in the subsequent chapters of the Republic is to confirm the possibility of justice coupled with a particular ideal regime assuring the actualization of the common good in opposition to the primacy of private interest. Throughout the rest of the text, Plato advances an argument for legitimizing knowledge of an ideal regime as

33 See for example Leo Strauss, The City and Man (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 76.
opposed to what experience allows to discern what should be the best regime (i.e. the accumulation of state power as opposed to the virtuous cultivation of the inhabitant’s soul). 34 Or as Allan Bloom puts it in his interpretive essay, “Justice is either what makes a city prosper or it is a virtue of the soul and hence necessary to the happiness of the individual. The question is whether the two possibilities are identical, whether devotion to the common good leads to the health of the soul or whether the man with a healthy soul is devoted to the common good.” 35

For Cassirer, Plato was faced with a need to reinscribe a conception of moderation through reason that was missing in Greek political life which can revitalize the state. 36 The retrieval of moderation, which was lacking even in the great statesmen of Pericles and Miltiades, is intimately correlated with this question of justice. Without justice, without moderation through reason (phronesis), the original problem of the individual’s soul is neglected and results in the baseness of a Thrasymachus. As Cassirer characterizes it, “Only by choosing a ‘good demon’ can a state secure its eudaimonia, its real happiness.” 37 Here Cassirer refers to the myth of Er in Book Ten where Plato allows an individual to choose his or her demon. 38 For Cassirer, this signifies Plato’s unity of thought in that the choice an individual makes and, as a consequence, the choice a state makes must be done rationally. As Cassirer argues, without this constant rational construction of the state, without choosing the ‘good’ demon that connects the soul of

36 Cassirer, The Myth of the State, 75.
37 Ibid., 76.
38 Plato, The Republic of Plato, 300.
the individual to the soul of the state, the state as such cannot maintain itself if it attempts to do so by means of a will to power alone. Thus, Cassirer writes, “Written constitutions or legal charters have no real binding force, if they are not the expression of a constitution that is written in the citizens’ minds. Without this moral support the very strength of the state becomes its inherent danger.”

Cassirer’s argument, in my view, is partially correct with respect to the place of rational thought in constructing the unity of the state and individual. However, one may additionally ask whether the ‘moral support’ that underpins the validity of a constitution of the state, which itself rests upon a deep-seated inscription within “men’s minds,” is a purely rational endeavor rooted in knowledge. Or is there, to put it differently, a necessary ethos of belief, as opposed to acceptance directly through philosophical knowledge, that necessitates the recognition of a particular form of rule among the citizens of the polis? In the Platonic context, is there not a fundamental disjunction between the knowledge of the philosopher and the need to convince the non-philosophers that the rule of the philosopher is inherently just, which as Socrates asserts would be the means of realization of the just city?

The argument here is that Plato’s need to reconcile political power with philosophy, to merge nature with the polis, to convince not only the population of the need for the philosophers to rule but, more importantly, the philosopher to return to the cave to rule the city, all point to a lacuna in the rational dialectical method in the Republic. That lacuna is filled with myth, of which it may be said

39 Cassirer, The Myth of the State, 75; my emphasis.
that the Republic as a whole is the mythopoetic text par excellence. Indeed, Leo Strauss’ reading of the Republic is important for my purposes. Strauss, in a central part of his analysis of the Republic, argues that the paradigmatic figure of the Republic is not simply Socrates but Thrasymachus himself. From the initial agonistic encounter between Socrates and Thrasymachus in Book One Strauss notes areconciliation between the two, to the point where Socrates can count Thrasymachus as his friend.41 Strauss writes,

To bring about the needed change on the part of the city, of the non-philosophers or the multitude, the right kind of persuasion is necessary and sufficient. The right kind of persuasion is supplied by the art of persuasion, the art of Thrasymachus, directed by the philosopher and in the service of philosophy…We are compelled to expel Homer and Sophocles but we must invite Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus justly occupies the central place among the interlocutors of the Republic…[Socrates] lacks the art of taming the many in deed which is only the reverse side of the art of arousing the many to anger, that single art which is the art of Thrasymachus. The many will have to be addressed by Thrasymachus and he who has listened to Socrates will succeed.42

Strauss’s reading of the Republic challenges the canonical assumption that the Socratic conception of the just city was itself construed among the participants of the time as a real possibility. On the contrary, Strauss argues that when Socrates turns to whether the just city is a veritable prospect, Socrates is forced to amend his initial proposition that the rule of the philosophers is the sufficient condition for the just city to emerge.43 Socrates shows that there cannot be a direct movement from the healthy city

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41 Ibid., 178.
42 Strauss, The City and Man, 123-4.
43 Ibid., 126.
to the good city; the city cannot be molded because of the inherent attachment of the
non-philosophers to the previous or ancient laws and customs that would currently con-
stitute the state. The bringing into being of the just city would require a blank slate of
individuals who can be molded and crafted according to the way of life of the philoso-
pher. The result is the Socratic injunction that “All those in the city who happen to be
older than ten they will send out to the country; and taking over their children, they will
rear them – far away from the disposition they now have from their parents – in their
own manners and laws that are such as we described before.” Strauss thus argues
that while the solution to the problem of the creation of the just city is “elegant”, “it
leaves one wondering how the philosophers can compel everyone older than ten to
obey submissively the command decreeing the expulsion and the separation , since
they have cannot yet have trained a warrior class absolutely obedient to them.” As
Strauss reasons then, “The just city is impossible. It is impossible because it is against
nature...The just city is against nature because the equality of the sexes and absolute
communism are against nature.”

Platonism, Strauss shows, cannot be diametrically opposed to poetry tout
court. In the case of the education of the Guardians, Socrates does away with the tra-
ditional model of Achilles for the education of courage. The spiritedness embodied in
Achilles can lead to unbridled anger and a lack of moderation needed to rule the city.

45 Ibid., 220.
46 Strauss, The City and Man, 126.
47 Ibid., 127.
48 Ibid., 97.
Socrates thus turns to a much reduced form of poetry and music which doesn’t rely too much on imitation to cultivate the natural courage of the individual for the purpose of the common good.\textsuperscript{49} But as Allan Bloom explains in his interpretative essay, the kind of poetry that is admitted into the city is one that allows for a tragic sensibility without the pity and fear that accompanies the great Athenian tragic poets which can lead to a lack of moderation (i.e. hubris).\textsuperscript{50} Luc Brisson, in his own lectures on the concept of myth in Platonic thought, points to the discourse of myth in the education of children as a kind of logos itself. He writes, “If logos is understood in its broad sense as ‘discourse’, and if, consequently, it simply designates the fact of making one’s thought manifest…then any myth can be considered as logos.”\textsuperscript{51} Thus, for Brisson, the attempt to create a demarcation between falsifiable and non-falsifiable discourse, the distinction between logos of the philosopher and mythos of the non-philosopher, between truth and opinion, is an attempt at “making the philosopher’s discourse the measure by which the validity of all other discourses, including and especially that of the poet, can be determined.”\textsuperscript{52} Children’s myths need not be ‘true’ in the same sense as philosophical truth. Nonetheless, the point is that there is a remarkable social utility in these myths for controlling the non-philosophical population of the city. Plato obviously places great social importance for the censorship of ‘speech’ for the good of the city. In fact, one could not help see such a

\textsuperscript{49} Plato, The Republic of Plato, 74-75.  
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 358.  
\textsuperscript{51} Luc Brisson, Plato the Myth Maker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 89.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 90.
similar concern with the advent of cinema two-thousand years later when Carl Schmitt would write in his magnus opus Constitutional Theory,

The political problem of influencing the masses through film is so significant that no state can leave this powerful psycho-technical apparatus uncontrolled. The state must remove film from politics, neutralize it. In fact, because the political is unavoidable, the state must place it in the service of the existing order, even if it does not have the courage to use it openly as a means of integrating a social-psychological homogeneity.53

Socrates’s discussion of the censorship of certain myths and their social utility actually prepares the discussion for the importance of the noble lie as a means of ruling and is in fact the clearest evidence for the mythopoietic Platonic polis. The old Phoenician myth that Socrates tells Glaucon conceives of the polis as subdivided into groups: the Guardians meant to rule, the Auxiliaries, the farmers and the craftsmen.54 Though Socrates asserts that all members of the polis are in fact brothers (what about sisters?), the question surrounding the myth is how to explain why certain individuals who may be born in a certain caste of the guardians may be downgraded due to a lack of ability. In other words, the problem of the noble lie centers around the need to convince or persuade, the need to seamlessly etch in men's minds (Cassirer), that nature or God, has chosen based on the type of metal (Gold, Silver, Bronze, etc.) that was placed in the soul of each individual and which results in the condition that some are meant to rule and others to be ruled. Of course, it need not matter whether the myth was true or not; what mattered ultimately for Plato was that the people of the city would accept the ra-

54 Plato, The Republic of Plato, 94.
tionale that certain individuals are in fact destined to rule in order to create a more stable social order. Stanley Rosen makes much of the fact that Socrates’ emphasis on brotherhood (again, but not sisterhood?), on the deep connection between ruling and soldiering, which appears to preclude women from this context, and that the “father” thus appears to be the God originally responsible for the fate of each individual (what Rosen refers to in a similar vein to Strauss’ point “the purification of theology”). Rosen ultimately argues that “By separating the roles of the mother and the father in the manufacture of citizens, Socrates de-eroticizes their origin. As one could put this, poiēsis replaces genesis.” The constitution of the soul is then a matter of fabrication by God and not a matter of the sexual act itself, even between partners of the same class. Rosen doesn’t find the Platonic conception of the noble lie all that convincing; he sees its “value” more as “symbolic” rather than “paradigmatic.” Nonetheless, he admits the evident force of that symbolic value in defining the need to orient the constitution of the state towards a poetic form of myth in the service of social harmony which has led numerous modern theorists to see within Plato a legitimation of tyranny.

Following some of the insights of Rosen’s exegeses of the Republic, there is an important point of contact with the way in which the noble lie operates and the last part of Book Ten, the myth of Er. There is much controversy concerning the reason why the myth was included in the Republic, particularly after Socrates excoriates poetry as es-

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 128.
58 One of the more forceful critiques of Plato with regard to this emphasis on tyranny see volume 1 of Karl R. Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies (New York,: Harper, 1963).
sentially being an imitation of an imitation, aside from the argument for the immortality of the soul. As Rosen conjectures at the end of his book,

In Book Ten, Plato engages in a carnival of retractions, to warn the reader with an eye for irony against taking too seriously the odd proposals that are presented in the main books of the dialogue. To say that these proposals are odd is not to say that they are false but rather to say that the unmitigated truth is too harsh to serve as a paradigm for human affairs. This is why the dialogue ends with a myth.59

Rosen ultimately argues in fact that,

One way to summarize the accomplishment of the Republic is to say that it overcomes the dissolution and destruction of the soul through the concatenation of myths that are not imitation but recollections of the origin. Death is conquered by poetry. The more we think about it, the less the Republic seems to be an attack upon poetry and the more it vindicates philosophy’s need of poetry.60

This need of philosophy for poetry amounts to the acceptance of particular poetic myths in the constitution and maintenance of the state. What Plato ultimately recognizes is that the application of political power and the maintenance of social control must be tied to belief and not simply out of fear of physical force.

One of the interesting features of this question of coercive/technological means of control concerns the Hobbesian revival in Weimar Germany and the ‘hidden’ debate between Strauss and Schmitt over the mythical features of the Hobbesian project.61

60 Ibid., 381.
Both attempted to revive mythical thought to negate the image of the state in term of a massive technological machine which cannot fully create a surfeit of fear necessary to control society, fear being the modern currency for rule. Because a modern mechanistic and rational form of being becomes predictable, calculable, essentially knowable, the mortal God loses its edge to inspire a needed fear of violent death. Nonetheless, when it comes to the great totalitarian projects of the twentieth century, what we see is not simply the dramatic expansion of the technological means for the ever-expansive control of the population, or the brute coercive power of the state; rather, we see a fateful nexus between technology and myth to the extent that fascism and Stalinism were able to construct a veritable killing machine, which continuously produces fear through the propagation of particular forms of myths. Walter Benjamin recognized this clearly in his canonical essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” As Benjamin writes,

The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war…“Fiat ars – pereat mundus,” says Fascism…expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense of perception that has been changed by technology…[Mankind’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.


With this in mind, in the next section I turn to Heidegger’s own critique of technology and his discussion of the poetic. Here I am interesting in asking: what kind of ‘state’ do Heidegger’s writings imply? Obviously there is a significant difference between the modern state and the organization of the ancient polis as conceived by Plato. The polis may be better referred to as a regime, as the encapsulation of a set of rules and practices that did not admit distinctions between itself and a “society”; the state in the case of the polis was the city, in essence, a community. Nonetheless, I believe that the modern attempt at conjoining myth and technology was a need to reassert this organic or communal element to public life that many in early twentieth century Europe believed was being destroyed through individual alienation as a result of modern forms of technology and political-economy. One perceived way to achieve such an organicity of political life was through aesthetics, myth or, as Heidegger would call it: poetry.

III

Martin Heidegger held Plato and Aristotle partly responsible for setting in motion a great obfuscation in metaphysics on the meaning of Being. In part, this was developed in Heidegger’s original text Being and Time where he sought to derive an understanding of Being, temporally or historically. More importantly, Heidegger rebelled against the Cartesian metaphysics of the subject, which divorced the mind from the world. The consequence of such a fateful positing for Heidegger was that an individual was able to ab-
stract himself from the world; she was in fact able to stand above the world, to achieve the Archimedean point, and use the scientific knowledge as a means of transforming nature in the form of mastery. Science was conceived as a violent altercation with nature since everything in the world became perceived in the form of another object always separated from the thinking subject. The violence of the confrontation between science and nature, Heidegger argues in his discussion of Rilke, was ultimately the result of man’s desire to rebel against his finitude. Faced with the inevitable knowledge of death, science permits the ‘outside’ to become calculable for mankind’s ultimate utility. The stark implication for Heidegger, as he shows in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology” is that even other human beings become ensnared as “standing reserve,” no better than material for production. As Heidegger famously writes, “Everywhere everything is ordered to standby, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be called upon for future ordering.” What Heidegger calls “enframing” is defined as the “gathering together of the setting-upon that sets-upon man i.e. challenges him forth, to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing reserve. Enframing means the way of revealing that holds sway in the essence of modern technology and that is itself nothing technological.” In other words, Heidegger laments that the ways in which modern human being understand the meaning of Being is fatefully undermined by a specific mode of revealing truth rooted in instrumentality.

67 Ibid., 325.
If, for Heidegger, the modern world is fundamentally irredeemable, what is Heidegger’s notion of politics in this context? What is his understanding of the role of the state, in particular, and its relationship with a community of people? Dana Villa characterizes the political thinking of the Heidegger of the 1930s “…as the attempt to subsume praxis under a new and postmetaphysical conception of authentic art (techne) or poetry (poiesis). Driven by the need to overcome the subjectivism that had characterized aesthetics since Kant, Heidegger incessantly returns to the question of the ontological status of the work of art and its truth-revealing or world-disclosing capacity.” This is most evidently seen in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” There, Heidegger actually draws points of contact between the ontological status of the work of art, that is the ability of the work of art to become a world with truth revealing capacities, with the way statesmen can found and preserve a polis. In the Introduction to Metaphysics, Heidegger writes, “Unconcealment happens only in so far as it is brought about by the work: the work of the word of poetry, the work of stone in temple and statue, the work of the word as thinking, the work of the polis as the site of history that grounds and preserves all this.” He reiterates this points in the “The Origin of the Work of Art” when he states, “One essential way in which truth establishes itself in the beings it has opened up is truth setting itself into work. Another way in which truth occurs is the act that

founds a political state.” In both quotes Heidegger is pointing to a radically different way of conceptualizing the relationship between the individual, state and poetry: poetry here as a form of poiesis opens up a space for the establishment and preservation of a peoples’ identity.

The period of the early to mid-1930s, which comprised the time-period of Heidegger’s most overt engagement with National Socialism, reflected a perception that there was still the possibility of a man-made, radically new political system, one where the “inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism in the Introduction to Metaphysics remains manifest. This period of Heidegger’s emphasis on the poetic model of “self-production” and “self-formation” for the political and the state is intrinsically nearest to fascism insofar as he forcefully elides any distinction between praxis and poiesis, between means and end, in the goal of establishing what Jean-Luc Nancy refers to as the production of “their own essence as community.” Villa summarizes the implications of this for the concept of the political and that of the state when he writes that,

71 Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 162. It should be specified that Heidegger has a more enlarged sense of the meaning of polis than is traditionally translated as city-state or state. Polis, should be understood rather, as “the name for the site <Stätte>, the Here, within which and as which Being-here is historically. The polis is the site of history, the Here, in which , out of which and for which history happens.”

72 Ibid., 213. Heidegger is arguing against what is “peddled about nowadays [i.e. 1935] as the philosophy of National Socialism…[which] is fishing in these troubled waters of ‘values’ and ‘totalities’” when its central concern should have been “the encounter between global technology and modern humanity…”

73 Quoted in Villa, Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political, 248.

74 Ibid., 249. Villa goes on to argue that in the case of Heidegger his radical emphasis on a poietic/historical model for the political and the state actually places him in ironic proximity to Plato. The passage is worth citing in full: “By presenting the state as a privileged instance of the historical “happening of truth” in the work, Heidegger’s discourse on art broadens and deepens the aestheticist impulse of the tradition. The idea that the state is a work through which the unconcealment of Being “occurs” is…clearly directed against Plato. However, the anti-Platonic thrust of this historicizing move is undercut by the fact that the political community continues to be thought of under the sign of poiesis. Heidegger liberates poieīsis from the closure in which it had been inscribed by substantialist metaphysics—the closure of idea
With this move, a particular modern version of the traditional conflation of art and politics if created. The organicity of the political, originally laid down by Plato’s Republic, takes new and extreme form: the figure of the subject who is simultaneously artist and work absorbs that of the aesthetically integrated state. This subjectivization of the state as artwork trope culminates in the totalitarian will to self-effectuation: the will to the self-creation of a people characterized by full actualization, complete self-presence. The only community capable of achieving such self-presence is one from which plurality, difference, mediation and alienation have been expunged: a community, in other words, that is not a political community at all.75

How does myth return then? Because of Heidegger’s destruction of Western metaphysics back to an original ‘archaic’ mode of revealing through language (the latter Heidegger in particular) myth becomes this singular form of revealing before mythos and logos were separated.76 Recall Heidegger’s argument in “What Calls for Thinking,”

Mythos is what has its essence in its telling – what appears in the unconcealment of its appeal. The mythos is that appeal of foremost and radical concern to all human beings which let man think of what appears, what unfolds…Historians and philologists, by virtue of a prejudice modern rationalism adopted from Platonism, imagine that mythos was destroyed by logos. But nothing religious is ever destroyed by logic: it is destroyed only by the god’s withdrawal.77

and telos. Nevertheless, his idea of a postmetaphysical poïesis, which emphasizes the radical newness of that which is poetically disclosed, remains in extreme tension with the essential plurality of praxis. This opposition comes to the fore in Heidegger’s identification of the strife between world and earth as the essential agon. Authentic politics, as the work that must bring this agon to stand, can only happen in the poetic, world-disclosing speech of founders and preservers. The result…is the ironic reinscription of the quasi-Platonic hierarchy of authentic poetic speech and inauthentic (merely communicative) speech.”78 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 84-5.

But we have seen that the Platonic edifice does not render the distinction between mythos and logos so acute. What we arrive at in Heidegger is the inchoate constitution of a mytho-state, the state founded and preserved in myth, which constitutes a homogenous people, which is the antithesis of a pluralistic liberal-democracy, and which explains why till the his last interview with Der Spiegel, Heidegger never thought that liberal-democracy could be the ‘saving power’ for mankind. Both Plato and Heidegger overemphasize a totalized mythopoietic model that ultimately negates political (in the Arendtian sense) capacity for free subjective action. Moreover, it seems as if Heidegger’s aim is to reduce the nation-state over a given territory into a polis-type arrangement in order to reinforce relations of power and belief in the state. The implication is the creation of a mytho-state qua artwork, unique in its understanding of itself as the rooted/truthful community, which has all the potentialities of becoming tyrannical while demonizing others who are left out of the fictionalizing project.

Conclusion

Both Plato and Heidegger theorize the political and the state in different ways. For Plato, myth proved an important component for social control and as a means of convincing the non-philosophical population of accepting the legitimate claim of philosophers to rule the polis. For Heidegger, the role played by myth, or poetry, is more complicated: it involves the creation of a world in order to preserve a specific history and way of life of a people. However, what connects both Plato and Heidegger is a profound sense that myth is fundamentally imbricated with the political. Thus, thinking about the
role of the state, of state practice, and state-formation, necessitates grappling with the underlying myths that attest to the beliefs that give intelligibility to what should call the mytho-state.