Introduction

While the nature of myth might be transformed over time, the need for it continues to be felt. The need that humans feel for a narrative to explain the beginnings of the universe or the origins of humankind has in no way diminished. All that has changed is that we require a story that conforms to the expectations of our own 'scientific' culture, that is, to what we know or claim to know. To refuse to call that story a myth is perhaps legitimate if one employs a narrow definition by which myths would contain monstrous, supernatural, or grossly implausible elements. It would also appear legitimate to resist a definition of myth that is so broad that every discourse is counted as a myth. Yet between these poles there will nevertheless remain in our scientific culture narratives of a somewhat speculative nature, which may easily be found grossly implausible by subsequent generations. Strictly speaking, it will never be the accuracy of the narrative that science can test. A coroner's inquest seeks to determine a narrative that will explain the death of an individual, often a death that has gone unnoticed, while the forensic evidence can only produce results of a variety of tests applied well after that death. If it is to be worthy of belief, the narrative must be consistent with the test results; but it will be consistent at best. Even so, we need the story. The press needs it to satisfy the incurable desire of readers for an explanatory narrative, and the family of the deceased need it in a very personal way, for it may help them to apportion blame and to alleviate the grief at their loss. They need a story that will satisfy them, and the need may extend well beyond any data the inquest can provide. For some, satisfaction will require the whole story of life and death. It is one of the myths of philosophy that only maximal truth is maximally satisfying.¹

One area in which public policy seems to need a story of a recognizably mythical type is in setting out the ethics of embryonic stem-cell research. These issues are intimately bound up with questions about the origins of life and of the living organism, and also about the origin of the human being and his status in relation to other animals. Most of those who would affirm that a human being should be treated differently from other mammals have some non-scientific narrative lurking at the back of their minds that provides the foundation for regarding ourselves as somehow special; so too those who affirm that a fully human creature has been produced as soon as an embryo has been created. Choosing a different story might produce a
different picture: perhaps it is the cells from a rib-bone that we should refuse to transplant, since according to the common heritage of Judaism and Christianity any rib-bone is potentially another Eve! A scientist might respond that belief must track the empirical evidence, not common heritage, but even in this case, though it is clear that the empirical evidence points in a very different direction, there is not yet enough of it to avoid a narrative about the origins of life on Earth and the evolution of the human species. We have now entered into an issue about which the philosopher might be expected to have some special expertise, namely the issue of the relationship between philosophy (understood as the pursuit of understanding) and myth.

The relationship between philosophy and myth has long been a complex one. As Eugenio Benitez points out in his article, in the very act of demythologising, Presocratics such as Heraclitus and Empedocles made use of the materials of myth, in particular the name and associations of the Greek gods. Plato and many other philosophical writers, including the young Aristotle and Heraclides of Pontus, made use of myth-like narratives presumably with the thought that they illustrated and somehow supported their beliefs. In Roman times Cicero concluded his *On the Republic* with the so-called *Dream of Scipio*, while the best of Plutarch's dialogues mythologized using both Greek and Egyptian materials. In later antiquity Neoplatonists drew on myth-like materials from Platonic, Homeric, Orphic, and Chaldaean sources, while Christian philosophy added its own narrative to those of Jewish philosophy, whose best-known representative had been Philo of Alexandria. Even the quest for eternal truths did not eliminate one's ability to employ the temporal sequences of myth, for the temporal and sequential story can supply an image of what is always concurrently the case, as is well illustrated in the sixth century Platonist Olympiodorus' study of the myth of Plato's *Gorgias* at *On the Gorgias* 46-50.

While myth seeks an explanatory narrative, it is more characteristic of philosophy to seek an explanatory theory. Even so, philosophy is conducted by humans, and it has to communicate its ideas to humans. The ease with which humans visualize events unfolding means that narrative has certain advantages in the exposition of ideas. The ordinary person's comprehension of an electrical process will be enhanced by a diagram that enables them to follow a process through from one end to the other. The diagram, if one likes, *tells a story*, in much the same way that an ancient Greek vase might tell a story. The diagram's story will be helpful even when the process involves alternating rather than direct current--even though, that is, the
concept of a passage from one end of the circuit to the other is fundamentally flawed. So the didactic value of myth for representing complex ideas ensures that it is not easily abandoned.

It is one of philosophy's myths that subsequent philosophy is a footnote to Plato. In a sense this is a *foundation* myth, tracing what philosophy continues to do back to a key early figure. It might also be, for some, a kind of *Golden Age* myth, looking back to the age when the real issues were being sorted out. It is not meant to strike us as wholly credible, but to have a kernel of truth from which we may learn. In that way it is still current and compelling, as evidenced by Simon Blackburn's appeal to it in his recent account of Plato's *Republic* for the Allen & Unwin *Books that Shook the World* series. This myth has special credibility with regard to philosophy and myth, for the way that Plato once used myth to illustrate and reinforce his conclusions remains highly influential among those philosophers who wish to employ myth's services.

We see here that myths *about philosophy* can be important to philosophy. The final sentence of the last paragraph should perhaps have referred to "those Western philosophers". Even to two editors who operate in Eastern Australia, it is easy to assume that the 'philosophy' that we talk of is essentially a European phenomenon. Even here the stories told have more to do with our European links than any others. A recent book by Sydney Mathematician Jim Franklin, engagingly entitled *Corrupting the Youth* in a manner than cannot help but evoke the trial of Socrates, purports to deal with the history of philosophy in Australia. A kind of bibliography (435-40) lists the contributions made by Australian-based philosophers (among them both Guest Editors of this Issue) to the study of DWOMs (Dead, White, Overseas Males), just to show how independent we really are, reinforcing and further developing the foundation mythology of philosophy here. A large slice of the book deals with a crisis in philosophy at the University of Sydney, which at one stage had two separate Departments, of 'Traditional and Modern' and of 'General' philosophy, the one in the Modern Analytic traditions of the UK and North America, the other looking towards the Europeans, and especially Louis Althusser, for its *raison d’être*. The book tells of a crushing moment when a student in philosophy made a visit to France, paid a visit to Althusser, and returned to report that he had never heard of his faithful followers (as they thought) in Sydney. It is a wonderful story, but as the former Supervisor of that student, Harold Tarrant, can easily recall, his primary studies were with the
Department of Greek. It is unlikely that his reports would have caused much despondency among the Althusserians. The retelling of the story has moulded it to fit the myth that was required, and it will now go on to shape Australian philosophers' memory of events in the future.

Myths regarding philosophers have a long history. Writing under the Roman Empire, Diogenes Laertius, upon whose Lives of the Philosophers Nietzsche once cut his teeth, relied on material that has been chosen for reasons that have more to do with illustration and entertainment than they do with history. It has recently been shown in some detail that much of his narrative concerning Presocratic philosophers, and above all the various alternative accounts of their deaths, relate mainly to facets of their philosophy. They are the kind of material that might have been expected in a comic parody rather than a history, and serve to help us visualize how a philosopher's doctrine might have been acted out upon the stage of life. Of course, there are a few sceptics who suspect that Presocratic philosophy is nothing but an Aristotelian myth, a story on which to found his own metaphysics. But that is not an issue to be resolved here!

So philosophy has its own myths. This remains a constant regardless of the definitions of myth and of philosophy that one cares to propose. Many a philosopher would propose definitions that artificially separated them. Others would see them reconciled, and some indeed would theorize about myth, generating what one might call a theory of myth, even though it is rather to those who nowadays fall outside the label 'philosopher', such as Freud or Jung in psychology, or Lévi-Strauss in anthropology. Indeed the relationship between philosophy and myth is richest where philosophy casts its net the widest, so as to include as many of those prominent intellectuals and cult figures who often appear today to stand at the fringes.

We here perpetuate our own myth by seeing this relationship as something of a footnote to Plato. The issue was not designed in quite that fashion, but not all myths are designed anyhow. Since the Greek term philosophia originally meant a search for wisdom, and since it can readily be appreciated that myth and wisdom have a complex relationship, it is not difficult to begin the story in ancient Greece. We hope this volume will reveal the debt that subsequent thinkers about myth owe to Plato, both those who readily make use of Platonic mythology and those who oppose it (as many of the authors point out, there is ambivalence towards myth even in Plato).
We begin, as is appropriate to a narrative, at the beginning. Luc Brisson argues that the very concept of a myth, as we now understand it, originated with Plato. He then shows how Plato, despite his own misgivings about myth, paved the way for the "vast drama" of more or less philosophical myths about metaphysics, God and the soul, which develops in the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the Sethean Gospels. The next few articles follow a similar pattern, filling out a picture of the way that Plato's mythmaking influenced later philosophy.

Whereas Brisson concentrates on the influence of Plato's metaphysical myths, Harold Tarrant takes up the particular history of a perennially tantalising legend: the story of Atlantis. Tarrant is particularly interested in the relation between history and myth, between things that really happened and the way in which a narrative is said to be true. Through an examination of the views about Atlantis found among Plato's successors, including especially the Neoplatonic philosophers, Tarrant shows how the cultural importance of inspirational myths can influence the way we interpret even the activity of history, so that it becomes, not so much an account of the literal past, but a symbol of deeper truth.

Like Tarrant, Jacob Howland is concerned with the relation between myth and narrative, but rather than look at the cultural implications of myth, Howland examines the need for myth in making certain insights of moral psychology available. Through an examination of the Platonic myth of Gyges' ring and the Kierkegaardian myth of Agnes and the Merman, Howland argues that the "sympathetic imagination" required to understand myth will alone reveal the essence of "radical injustice", since this is just the sort of understanding lacking in a radically unjust psyche. Howland's article has an interesting implication about the relation between philosophy and myth. Many people, quite a few of them philosophers, think that a longing for myth, except where no other sort of account is available, is indicative of an irrational need that truth cannot satisfy. If Howland is right, however, we can describe at least some instances in which assiduous avoidance of myths is driven by an irrational pathology: the desire to persist in radical injustice.

John Bussanich's article introducing Eric Voegelin's philosophy of myth is the hinge point of this volume. Because of Voegelin's concern with the myths of ancient civilisations, including Egypt, Greece and Western Asia, his philosophy of myth touches on many of the themes mentioned, in a different context, in the articles by Brisson and Tarrant (including the Atlantis myth). Because Voegelin thought that in
Plato's myths "the psyche has reached the critical consciousness of the methods by which it symbolizes its own experiences," he comes close to stating the realisation described by Howland, in which the power of sympathetic imagination is necessary for self-knowledge. At the same time, Voegelin's account of myth takes us into territory that exemplifies modern philosophical preoccupations--the relation of myth to reality and knowledge--and suggests, as some other articles in this volume do, that the idea of scientific rationality is "itself a product of the mythical imagination."

All of the subsequent articles in this volume deal in one way or another with the relation of myth to knowledge and reality, and the question of the extent to which science or a scientific procedure (like Platonic dialectic) employ myth. Martin McAvoy takes up this question through Aristotle. Following Aristotle (Metaphysics A.2.982b11), McAvoy associates wondering with myth, and claims that both remain an essential element in philosophy, since both (and here he harks back to Plato and Socrates) remind us of the human condition of ignorance. The passage in Aristotle is controversial, of course. Some say that Aristotle's aim is to distinguish philosophy from myth, rather than to associate them. Nevertheless, in his claim that the philosophical attitude of wonder is a condition both of beginning philosophy and of continuing it, McAvoy might enlist the support of no less a philosopher than Martin Heidegger, who, paraphrasing this same passage, states that amazement/wonder (to thaumazein) is "the place from which philosophising comes and which continuously determines the course of philosophising."

Evanthia Speliotis proceeds in a different direction from McAvoy. She looks not so much at the conditioning of philosophy by myth as the usefulness of myths, in the form of verbal pictures, to the dialectical activity of philosophy. Speliotis takes up an important feature of Platonic mythmaking that is alluded to, but not fully discussed in preceding articles: the way in which myths can be like (eikos) unto the things they describe. In popular accounts the myth of Plato's Timaeus is referred to as a "likely story" (eikos muthos), where that phrase is treated as, at worst, "just a likely story" or, often, as the only slightly better "probable story". What the popular accounts all fail to note is the importance of like-ness, and the corresponding originality of the eikastic, in Platonic mythmaking. Speliotis shows how the Platonic distinction between a semblance (eikon) and an apparition (phantasma) enables Plato to "de-mystify" and even "de-mythologise" myth. Thus, he is able to employ myth again as a useful beginning, an orientation towards logos. Eikastic myths, therefore, are
extremely useful, for beings like us, who progress dialectically towards knowledge. Indeed, because we must always picture things to ourselves, myths are an indispensable part of our progress.

The orientation towards myth that Speliotis provides is supplemented by Eugenio Benitez in the final article of this volume. Benitez sets aside the political, theological and merely narrative functions of myth in order to examine the function of myths in conveying our thought from appearance to reality. In this context the distinction between eikastic and fantastic myths is crucial: only eikastic myths can lead us to see how things really are. Benitez examines this function of myth in order to show how even the "Two-Worlds" view, commonly associated with Plato, presents a myth about how things really are, a myth that is at the same time like and non-identical to reality. Myths, to be useful, must always be recognised as myths. In this way, Plato can be seen as a champion of both myth and science.

It will be seen, then, that although all of these articles touch in a significant way on Plato's myths, they describe deep philosophical concerns about the relation of myth to reality, culture, psychology, religion and thinking. In that way they can be used to begin a philosophical consideration about the importance of myth, temporary or not, to human life, society, and understanding. They are supplemented by Jacques Duvoisin's review of Nyusztay's challenging book linking the myths of ancient and modern dramatists, and by Svetla Slaveva-Griffin's bibliographic review, which will assist the reader to select further reading on many of the topics covered.

Harold Tarrant
Eugenio Benitez
1 See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X.7 1072b31-1073a3. Aristotle states that, "the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God is in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's essential actuality is life most good and eternal" (Ross translation). See Also *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8 1178b23-32: "We assume the gods to be above all other beings blessed and happy ... Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness" (Ross Translation).

2 As David Hume observed in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the evidence for the origins of life and the universe is limited to what we have been able so far to discover in this small corner of the universe; hardly enough for a stable inference: "But, allowing that we were to take the operations of one part of nature upon another, for the foundation of our judgment concerning the origin of the whole, (which never can be admitted,) yet why select so minute, so weak, so bounded a principle, as the reason and design of animals is found to be upon this planet? ... So far from admitting ... that the operations of a part can afford us any just conclusion concerning the origin of the whole, I will not allow any one part to form a rule for another part, if the latter be very remote from the former. ... A very small part of this great system, during a very short time, is very imperfectly discovered to us; and do we then pronounce decisively concerning the origin of the whole?" David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Edinburgh: A. Black and W. Tait, 1854, ed. Norman Kemp Smith, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947, pp. 148-149.

3 The source of this myth is Alfred North Whitehead's comment that, "The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them." (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* II.1.1)

4 See Simon Blackburn, *Plato's Republic: A Biography*. London: Allen and Unwin (Books that Shook the World series), 2006, p. 1; Martin McAvoy, in his article later in this volume, suggests that Blackburn's view of philosophy itself is a (current) myth, the dominant one perhaps.


6 See Franklin, p. 305: "Embarrassingly, Geoffrey Harris, a student of both the Sydney University Philosophy Department and the Aquinas Academy, visited Paris, secured an interview with Althusser, and brought back bad news for his Australian disciples. He had never heard of them, and when their interpretation of his work was explained to him he denounced it as a travesty." Franklin at very least should have explained that Harris' studies in philosophy at Sydney University were with the Traditional and Modern Department, where Althusser was not held in
regard, and that Geoffrey was scarcely the person from whom Althusser could have expected a balanced account of the Sydney reading of his works.

7 Ava Chitwood, *Death by Philosophy*, Ann Arbor 2004; this carefully researched book might possibly be seen as 'overkill', but our main problem with it is that the author appears to see the non-historical stories illustrating the philosophies of Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Democritus as a reason for Diogenes to rise rather than fall in our estimation.

8 For the latter see Stephen H. Daniel, *Myth and Modern Philosophy*, Philadelphia 1990, 3: "Myth has come to mean so many different things that any initial definition that I might propose would surely be too broad or too narrow to serve any useful purpose." One might argue that a philosopher ought perhaps to be prepared to define his terms, but that would require a definition of philosophy.


10 See Benitez, this volume, note 2.

11 The Editors are grateful to Alison L.S. Harwood for the references to Heidegger, and her translations of him, above and in this note. Heidegger quotes and then paraphrases Aristotle in his introductory lecture, Cerisy-la-Salle/Normandy, August 1955: "That is to say, through amazement, today as well as at first, men reach the commanding [beherrschend] outlet of philosophising' (the place from which philosophising comes and which continuously determines the course of philosophising)” (Heidegger, M, *Was ist das--die Philosophie?* 11. Aufl., Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 2003, p.25). In a much earlier lecture (Kriegsnotsemester 1919, Freiburg), Heidegger refers to the same passage, though his point there seems to be slightly different, and somewhat weaker. He says: "Questioning comportment is motivated, one may say, by a wanting-to-discover and wanting-to-know. It is sparked by a drive towards knowledge, and this arises from *thaumazein*, amazement and astonishment” (Heidegger, M, "Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem", in *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 56/57 [Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie], Heimbüchel, B [Hrsg.], 2. durchgesehene u. ergänzte Aufl., Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, pp. 66-67). In the 1919 lecture Heidegger only makes mention of amazement/wonder (*thaumazein*) as the source of questioning comportment (not specifically philosophy), whereas in the 1955 lecture, amazement also "continuously determines... philosophising". It is this latter, stronger position about wonder (and myth) that McAvoy asserts.