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## Plato: The Philosopher as Prenate

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### ABSTRACT

Two formerly unrelated academic fields, prenatal science and mythological studies, are quietly merging under the heading of a new theory: *mythobiogenesis*. One need not be a philologist to tease out the meaning of the word: *Myth* has a *biological genesis*. According to this conceptual model, much of what we call mythology, fairy tales, and sacred scripture derives from a fundamental impulse to retell in culturally specific ways the universal intrauterine experience of life before birth.

Plato himself has provided an example of such a narrative. His written record of his intrauterine experience is contained in one of his later dialogues, the *Critias* (1), a text which includes the famous story of Atlantis. The Atlantis myth, I shall argue, is pure embryology, recounting in symbolic language Plato's development from ovulation through fertilization, implantation, differentiation, organogenesis, and gestation.

The idea that consciousness could be present at the level of a single cell is a stumbling block to the western science tradition which typically describes consciousness as no more than an emergent property of matter.

And yet, many eastern spiritual traditions take non-local consciousness (a state of awareness independent of the body) for granted. The *Yoga-Sūtra* of Patañjali (2), a fourth century Sanskrit text, describes pure awareness as independent from the fundamental qualities of nature. Similarly, the *Bardo Thodol* (or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*) (3) follows the path of human psyche as it survives physical death reemerging with a new social identity attached to a reincarnated human being.

East and West are not easily reconciled but there is movement in this direction. Some one hundred years ago, Otto Rank (4) faced outright hostility (particularly from his mentor, Freud) for suggesting that consciousness is very much present at birth with lifelong consequences arising from that primal trauma. Psychiatrists and psychologists who regress patients to birth and pre-birth times often report experiences that appear to go back even as far as conception lending credibility to S. Cosier's theoretical model in which consciousness resides in the cell nucleus (5). And researchers such as Jon RG and Troya GN Turner-Groot (6) direct us to look for prebirth memories arising *before* conception when an individual's consciousness is energetically attracted to that of the Mother-to-be.

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With this in mind, consider: Atlantis may not be a place at all, so best to stop looking for it. Instead, look to Plato who, though unaware of the theory of *mythobiogenesis*, is profoundly under its influence.

**Keywords: Plato, Atlantis, cell, prenatal, consciousness, myth, mythobiogenesis, embryology, conception, organogenesis**

## Introduction

As a mythologist, I study ancient stories in the attempt to understand vanished civilizations, the monsters that frightened them, and the gods who brought them comfort. In particular, I like to compare and correlate sacred texts from one culture with those of another and to explain how some themes seem to be universal across the centuries and across borders. It was in the course of these academic pursuits that I found myself inching toward the prenatal science community and a point of intersection I call *mythobiogenesis*. I perceived that the narrative structure of many archaic supernatural accounts unfold in the same way as the human body unfolds in its biologic development from ovum to neonate. Subsequently, I devoted many years making the necessary correlations until at last a theory could be advanced which might reasonably account for the parallel “narratives.”

We remember our lives at the cellular level. We tell of the experience in stories.

As it will become apparent, Plato has left us a biologically driven narrative, a remarkable written record of his experience as a zygote. The account is contained in one of his later dialogues, the *Critias*, and in particular his telling of the story of Atlantis. The premise can be stated simply: The story of Atlantis is pure embryology, start to finish. Not just any embryo, but Plato, himself, recounting his development from ovulation through organogenesis.

An audience of academic mythologists is not always prepared to consider the possibility that some of their favorite stories—let alone a Platonic dialogue—arise from interactions among human cells. A certain level of receptivity, however, may be anticipated from the researchers and practitioners in the field of prenatal psychology for whom the issue of prenatal consciousness, while ever mysterious, is far less controversial. Mythobiogenesis provides an evidentiary trail linking the pre-nate with postnatal cultural productions and is consistent with an ever-expanding definition of human consciousness. After all, it has been over one hundred years since Sabina Spielrein (7), a Viennese analyst in Freud’s circle, argued for a “psychology of conception,” with the simple proposition that conception is no mere event but, rather, an experience. R. D. Laing picked up the thread of the argument in his book *The Facts of Life* in which he dared to write that it “seems to me credible... that all our experience in our life cycle from cell one is absorbed and stored from the beginning, perhaps especially in the beginning” (8), an idea supported by S. Cosier’s speculative conclusions that consciousness is present at the level of a single cell (5). Jon RG and Troya GN Turner-Groot draw on their Whole-Self Prebirth Psychology model in presenting a non-local condition of human awareness, independent of brain function, in which prebirth memories arise “when my consciousness was energetically attracted to my Mother’s consciousness even before conception” (6). That idea, while in opposition to the empiricist ethic of western science, is in perfect accord with the Buddhist and Hindu traditions and the idea that consciousness emerges in a field of awareness before conception is taken for granted in the *Bardo Thodol*. Sometimes called *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (3), the *Bardo* is essentially a script for a monk to read aloud in guiding a “soul” from its leave-taking in death to a point of entry which is no less than conception in the upper fallopian tract of its future mother (9).

In the western tradition, such questions are approached not by monks, but by scientists.

Stanislav Grof, M.D. (10) administered LSD to his unidentified subject in the course of diagnostic and therapeutic research and that patient's experience is reported here in his own words:

"The most interesting sequences of this session were yet to come. My consciousness became less and less differentiated, and I started experiencing a strange excitement that was dissimilar to anything I have ever felt in my life. The middle part of my back was generating rhythmical impulses, and I had the feeling of being propelled through space and time toward some unknown goal; I had a very vague awareness of the final destination, but the mission appeared to be one of utmost importance. After some time, I was able to recognize to my great surprise that I was a spermatozoid and that the explosive regular impulses were generated by a biological pacemaker and transmitted to a long flagella flashing in vibratory movements. I was involved in a hectic super-race toward the source of some chemical messages that had an enticing and irresistible quality. By then I realized that the goal was to reach the egg, penetrate it, and impregnate. (p.195)

According to Dr. Thomas Verny:

"Psychiatrists and psychologists who regress patients regularly to birth and pre-birth times through drugs, hypnosis, free association or other means often report on experiences that appear to go back even as far as conception. Such accounts as the following are not uncommon: *"I am a sphere, a ball, a balloon, I am hollow, I have no arms, no legs no teeth, I don't feel myself to have a front or back, up or down. I float, I sly, I spin, Sensations come from everywhere. It is as though I am a spherical eye."* (11: p. 190)

This returns our discussion to Plato who described "primordial man," that is to say our most distant ancestor, as a *"rounded whole, with back and sides forming a circle"* (12: p.23). That is not his strangest claim about the first humans. They were *doubles*. They had four hands, four legs, four eyes. This phenotypical anomaly so irritated Zeus (again, according to Plato), that he split them in half. Not once, but *twice*.

Consider meiosis I and meiosis II which is so consistent with the idea of a perfectly round individual being halved and halved again. "The first meiotic division is a reduction division because the chromosome number is reduced from diploid to haploid... the **second meiotic division** follows the first division without a normal interphase" (13: p. 14).

But, as Plato's account is about to begin, we'll need something to make sense of the journey. We'll need a new word to account for what happened to Plato and what he, in turn, did to us.

## **Mythobiogenesis**

The author devised this word because there is none other to describe how the cells transmit a record of events and encode them in the imagery of the culture and the people to whom they are directed. Break down this neologism and you see it literally means that myths have a biological origin, that a myth is a biologically driven narrative. This faculty of mind, mythobiogenesis, is fully operative in Athens' famous son, Plato, in one of his last dialogues, the *Critias*

## **Atlantis**

Told in the language of anachronism and metaphor, Atlantis is the story of a human being and his *unconsciously recalled* experience of ovulation, fertilization, cell cleavage, cellular

differentiation, gastrulation, and organogenesis. More specifically, it is about Plato himself in the hours, minutes, and seconds before, during, and after conception in his mother's womb. Plato and his island are one.

Here's a good place to start: An egg receives a sexual gamete from the male, and they fuse.

According to my theory, that egg becomes, in Plato's retelling, an island. And Clito lives alone on this island as well she should and must because she is really a mature ovum at the point of ovulation. And that little male gamete? He becomes nothing less than Poseidon. Poseidon marries Clito. They are one.

So, Poseidon, in his role as a vastly inflated sperm cell, seals the island against further entry, to make it "inaccessible to man" (15: p.1218), behavior which is rigorously consistent with that of a successful sperm cell at the point of fertilization: Sperm fuses with egg and suddenly it's all about territory. The egg/island is sealed off, certainly, in lipids which repel further advancement by sperm cells which might result in polyspermy. Poseidon hates polyspermy.

Plato's myth is distinguished from other myths because we know its author. But Plato's is only one of hundreds of origin stories, legends, and even fairy tales which are culturally specific but derive from a scenario written in the cells. One difference? Plato's version typically places the sperm in the role of hero or, in this case, god. But that is because his culture is patriarchal and frankly misogynistic. Let's compare:

### **Briar Rose**

Some readers know this more familiarly as "Sleeping Beauty" (14). Apply the principles of mythobiogenesis to the sweet children's favorite and its disguise falls away to reveal the outlines of cellular reproduction. Briar Rose, under a spell, is, like Clito, "husband high." You know the big moment, when the Prince kisses the comatose virgin and she wakes and marries him. Cells are less romantic. Mammalian eggs arrest at metaphase of the second meiotic division. *Sperm break this arrest by inducing a series of  $Ca^{2+}$  spikes that last for several hours* [emphasis mine]. During this time cell cycle resumption is induced . . .  $Ca^{2+}$  spiking is both the necessary and solely sufficient sperm signal to induce full egg activation" (16).

Modern research tends to view the egg as much more than a passive receiver of a male sex cell. Prof. Grigori Brekhman, in his wave theory, "has shown that conception is a multiple-level coordinated action between mother and the unborn. He has also shown how this communication takes place on a multiple level during pregnancy" (17: p.303, 18: p.589). Paul Wassarman's research also indicates a far more proactive role for the ovum, suggesting that gametes from both the female and the male "recognize one another." Moreover, the egg coat "serves as a sophisticated biological security system that screens incoming sperm, selects only those compatible with fertilization and development, prepares sperm for fusion with the egg and later protects the resulting embryo from polyspermy" (19: p. 78).

And that's the beauty of this "Sleeping Beauty." In this version, the hero doesn't succeed because he was the alpha male. He breaks through the barrier of the famous "briars" because the briars recognize him and they open wide to admit him, closing after him. This represents the "sophisticated biological security system" described in Wassarman's research.

Sometimes, when biology masquerades as story, it leaves out the role of the sperm altogether as in the case of the Biblical Flood.

### **Noah's ark may be a lot smaller than you imagine.**

It's nonsense, of course. A boat which holds the entire genome of the entire planet earth which drifts along the waters until it finds a safe landing on Mount Ararat (20).

Reinterpreted in the light of mythobiogenesis, this story resonates with clarity and logic. The ark is, of course, a cell; specifically, it is a fertilized sex cell and yes it does contain the entire genome of the entire planet earth because its cargo is DNA, pure and simple, and DNA can make just about anything that walks, swims, or flies and other things that do nothing but respire. This “ark” doesn’t land on Mt. Ararat. It lands in a nutrient-rich uterine lining where it will not only prosper, but it will also *multiply*. And again, “God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them: ‘Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth” (21).

Multiply, Lord? No command is more welcome to a conceptus at conception.

Plato, likewise, is multiplying. “He then begot five twin births of male offspring and divided the whole isle of Atlantis into ten parts (15: p.1216). Simply put, the story of Atlantis at this point in the story is about mitosis, mitosis, and only mitosis. Atlantis/Plato grows by twinning in the only way mammals know how to incarnate: One becomes two. Two four. Four eight. The theory suggests that we are now at the point of Plato’s odd narrative which corresponds directly to cell cleavage, proliferation, and organogenesis. Plato tells us that God appoints the first twins as king over their brethren then send the others out to their various kingdoms where they will have relative, if limited, autonomy. “The rest he made princes granting each of them the sovereignty over a large population and the lordship of wide lands (15: p.1218). Now the “twins” take on separate kingdoms/functions and that means cell differentiation which is best defined this way: “[A] process whereby initial populations of genetically equivalent cells give rise to phenotypically different types of cells” (22).

Plato’s fantastic vision of kings subordinate to an even greater king powerfully expresses the hierarchy of function of the lower brain over the autonomic functions of the nervous system. In biology, we are well aware of the role of neurotransmitters carrying two-way signals from neuron to neuron and making the leap over synaptic clefts (17: p.30). Plato reproduces the image as a bunch of little princes gathered round a column and splashing ceremonial bulls’ blood against it. How does that do for an analogue to a neurotransmitter “splashing” against the spinal column, messages being carried from the distant limbs to the processing centers of the brain (23: p.47).

### **Plato the Prenatal Philosopher**

Plato had more than a little love for hierarchy, and I think it derives directly from his experience as a zygote. He wants, and we want, cardiac function, digestion, and respiration to be subject to a higher power, medulla oblongata (24).

And that’s how it is for Plato and the greater society he imagines. Everyone is in their place just as cells must differentiate to serve specific systems in the “republic” of the human body. For Plato (in his *Republic*), the best government functions as a human body. Society therefore fails when the individual members fail to remember their assigned functions. We know this illiberal idea as his “myth of the metals.”

“Citizens, we shall say to them in our tale, you are brothers, yet God has framed you differently. Some of you have the power of command, and in the composition of these he has mingled gold... others he has made of silver, to be auxiliaries; others who are to be husbandmen and craftsmen he has composed of brass and iron.” (25: p. 303)

Why is Plato compelled to reproduce his intrauterine experience, an experience which was apparently preverbal, silent and without accompanying image? That is how mythobiogenesis works. The event, in this case gamete convergence, is fleshed out with visual elements borrowed from everyday life. For example, the zona pellucida, that “water-hating lipid” surrounding the zygote at conception, is variously described as “pitch” (Noah), “briars” (Briar Rose), or “alternating rings of land and sea” (Atlantis). The point is that the image must make manifest a prenatal experience, or in the words of Ludwig Janus, “the essential elements of human history can be understood as an effort

to continuously change the world so that it corresponds as much as possible with the conditions of the womb world” (26). And that would include our myths.

The *Critias* breaks off in midsentence. But Plato knows he has said enough. He speaks of the decline in quality of those descendants of those first kings. In other words, his vision continues beyond embryology to the death of the cells themselves. After all, mitosis is a grand engine of growth, but it has its limits. One day, as Plato trembled to witness, cells simply stop dividing. Yes, the *Critias* breaks off in midsentence because life breaks off in midsentence.

## Epilogue

Some ideas are born before we are. In that sense, John Locke may have gotten it backward. He insisted that each human comes into this world as *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which a dominant society and local culture will leave its mark (27). But consciousness certainly does not wait until adolescence opens its third eye, nor does it receive its spark with the trauma of birth (the idea advanced by Otto Rank in the past century).

Carl Jung would have us advance upon that horizon of sentience and move it back further still. His words still have power to shock.

It has even been suggested in psychoanalytical circles that the trauma par excellence is the birth-experience itself—nay more, psychoanalysts even claim to have probed back to memories of intra-uterine origin. Here Western reason reaches its limit, unfortunately. I say “unfortunately,” because one rather wishes that Freudian psychoanalysis could have happily pursued these so-called intra-uterine experiences still further back . . . It is true that with the equipment of our existing biological ideas such a venture would not have been crowned with success; it would have needed a wholly different kind of philosophical preparation from that based on current scientific assumptions. But, had the journey been consistently pursued, it would undoubtedly have led to the postulate of a pre-uterine existence, a true *Bardo* life, if only it had been possible to find at least some trace of an experiencing subject (28).

In Plato, we have found “some trace of an experiencing subject.” Contrary to John Locke’s scientific rationalism, Plato comes into this world already carrying his chief idea and ready to lay chalk to tablet. The *tabula rasa* is not Plato, but the culture awaiting him.

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