

# Smoltification and the Art of Living: A Reader

---

 18forty.org/articles/smoltification-and-the-art-of-living-a-reader/

| *Your faith was strong but you needed proof...*

| – Leonard Cohen

Chanukah comes at a particularly vulnerable point in the cycle of time. It's a time of lengthening nights and shortened days, and it's not surprising that we celebrate at precisely the point in which we have the least of it. Our bodies are catching up to the new reality of winter coats and our hearts to the diminished sunshine of the new regime. For many of us, winter hits harder at precisely this point. We are all immigrants of sorts at this juncture, memories of summerland fading in our minds but still alive enough to make us resent the coming cold.

In the natural world—for those of us imprisoned in concrete jungles and suburban hinterlands—there is a meeting point that parallels this phenomenon: the estuary. Estuaries are where freshwaters meet the sea, the sea receiving the new bounty, always unsatisfied. When salmon move from the freshwater to the sea, they go through a process of inner change called smoltification. You'll read more about this process in the reader, but it is my humble opinion that Chanukah helps us with our own smoltification of sorts, as we too adjust to the new reality that we are.

This is part of the story of rationality as well, as we emerge from the clear sun of summer into the heady nights of winter, the mythological power of light and dark become more powerful than ever. As our most recent guest, Rabbi Dr. Sam Lebens, the brilliant heart and mind himself points out, it's a mistake for us to conceptualize myth and rationality as enemies. More often than not, myth, mysticism, and rationality are close neighbors and lovers, not the enemies we often assume them to be. As we think about this relationship, and the relationship by which we can more comfortably move between the world of light and summer to the dark world of winter, we turn also to an original rationalist, Plato, and consider the complex ways that myth, rationality, and meaning all come together in his long literary afterlife.

We are all immigrants in this era, immigrants to Spaceship Earth and to whatever land and lore in which we currently find ourselves entangled. We are immigrants to the sea, the salty waters of our lives still stinging, and we are immigrants to the freshwater as well, shocked by how sweet life can be at times. As we try to make sense of it all, and find light in astounding layers of darkness, we turn to three articles for a sense of meaning. "The Psychological Immigrant", "A Healing Estuary," and "Why Philosophy Needs Myth." Let us turn to these teachings with an open heart, and like a lonely Jew before a lit *menorah*, let's open our eyes a bit more to the light – together.

# The Psychological Immigrant

PT [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/choice-and-rebirth/202008/the-psychological-immigrant](https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/choice-and-rebirth/202008/the-psychological-immigrant)

Source: Armand Khoury/Unsplash

For as long as individuals have been leaving organized religion, faith communities, academics, mental health professionals, and folks in general have been racking their brains with the following questions:

- *Why* do some people leave religion or their faith community of origin?
- *Why* do some exiters seemingly adjust well to their new reality while others have a really difficult time rebuilding post-disaffiliation?

Opinions and theories on this matter are as plentiful and as varied as the amount of people engaged in these conversations. Some folks believe that only those with past adverse experiences ultimately end up leaving. Some posit that those who have left are doomed to a life of misery, while others claim that leaving is the ultimate path toward healing and self-actualization. Some even argue that there is a so-called hierarchy of justified (and less justified) reasons for leaving the fold.

The reality on the ground is way more complex and nuanced than any generalizable opinion uttered or theme identified; each and every individual who leaves, or contemplates leaving, has a unique lived experience, with personalized challenges and with their own narrative as to why they disaffiliated.

A [recent study](#) by Engelman et al. that surveyed 206 formerly [Orthodox Jewish](#) individuals, looks at [Orthodox Jewish disaffiliation](#) in a novel way, through the lens of immigration psychology, with an emphasis on religious disaffiliates who have left a covenantal religion. The authors operationally define a "covenantal religion" as:

"...one built upon theological foundations regarding social expectations of personal beliefs and public comportment. These expectations include ways of dressing, eating, speaking, [gender](#) roles, and family hierarchies. A large part of the life of covenantal communities is conducted separately from the larger society and from other religious groups. The behaviour restrictions of covenantal communities are mostly absent in the larger society and community members may speak a language different from the majority culture. Examples of covenantal traditions may include some Latter-day Saints, Amish, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim, Sikh, and Orthodox Jews. We posit that covenantal communities institute formal and informal barriers to keep community members from integrating into the society at large. If a community member does not behave within the permissible bounds and rules of that community, that person may be shunned and ostracized."

Similar to the immigrant experience, transitioning out of a covenantal religious community is often associated with [stress](#), [loneliness](#), and isolation, poor physical and psychological health, lack of formal [education](#), loss of livelihood and financial difficulties, lack of literacy

in the native language, lack of familial and social support, and an overall difficulty adjusting to a new reality and environment.

Thus, the authors hypothesized that the experiences, processes, motivations, challenges, and outcomes of individuals exiting covenantal groups will, to some degree, mirror that of many migrants.

More specifically, inspired by findings in immigration psychology, they applied a theoretical framework often used in the study of human migration—the push-and-pull factors theory—to test whether individual scores on the push-pull paradigm will correlate with healthier outcomes.

**Push factors:** aspects that motivate the individual to leave their community or geographic location, such as familial dysfunction, abuse, shunning, restrictions, discrimination, hypocrisy, lack of happiness, feeling unsafe, etc. In immigration psychology, these are generally correlated with poorer outcomes.

**Pull factors:** aspects of the outside world or new geographic location that are attractive to the individual, such as increased autonomy, more diversity, and greater access to resources and different lifestyles. In immigration psychology, these are generally found to correlate with healthier outcomes.

Additionally, the researchers measured goal accomplishment—whether the individual believes that they successfully accomplished the goal(s) they had expected by disaffiliating. Findings in immigration psychology suggest that one's perception or belief that they successfully accomplished goals, which results in increased self-efficacy, is associated with healthier outcomes.

The authors collected responses on a wide number of measures. However, for the sake of this relatively short blog post, in summary, the researchers looked at individual scores on 1) push factors, 2) pull factors, and 3) goals met, in order to see whether they correlate with, or can predict, scores on 1) psychological and emotional wellness, 2) perceived stress, 3) loneliness, and 4) overall health post-disaffiliation.

Finally, the authors also investigated potential gender differences.

### **Main findings:**

- Push factors were significantly correlated with lower scores on psychological and emotional wellness, increased loneliness, and poorer overall health, even after controlling for personality type. Based on the intrinsically-adverse nature of push factors, it's no surprise that those experiences were associated with poorer, long-term outcomes.
- Surprisingly, unlike in the study of immigration psychology, pull factors were not significantly correlated with any of the outcome measures.
- Overall, women scored higher than men on both push and pull factors. However, there were no effects of gender on outcome measures.

- Having goals of disaffiliating met was associated with lower levels of perceived stress, decreased loneliness, and better overall health.
- 70% of participants reported that religion was of low-to-no importance to them.
- 87% of respondents reported that they left Orthodox Judaism because they no longer believed in its teachings, with significantly more men than women reporting loss of faith in a God as a motivation for leaving.
- Disaffiliating women put a higher priority on the lack of gender equality in their former communities as a motivator for disaffiliation.
- Desire for autonomy as a motivator for disaffiliating was consistent with previous research showing that individuals disaffiliated from Orthodox Jewish communities in pursuit of autonomy.
- 50% reported that they currently had either satisfactory or close relationships with religious family members.
- Men and women reported different trajectories for leaving their communities, suggesting a more accelerated disaffiliation process for men.
- 25% of males and 30% of females reported that they had experienced an unwanted sexual encounter within Orthodox Jewish communities.

### **Major takeaways:**

First, it's worth noting and celebrating the groundbreaking application of the push-and-pull theoretical framework, originally used in immigration psychology, to better understand the lived experience of religious disaffiliation from a covenantal community. This novel model opens a new portal for future research and validates what many disaffiliates have been reporting for decades—feeling like an immigrant in their own country of birth.

Second, the most stunning finding in this study is the overwhelmingly-significant relationship between having goals of disaffiliation met and lower levels of perceived stress, decreased loneliness, and better overall health.

This suggests that a major factor contributing to an overall healthier quality of life post-disaffiliation is the individual's perception of having met their goal(s). Those who reported not having met their goals also reported overall poorer, long-term outcomes.

Here's the simple equation: Accomplishing one's goals of disaffiliating = increased self-efficacy = healthier self-image = overall better and long-term outcomes

### **A message to individuals (religious disaffiliates) who haven't yet—or who perceive that they haven't yet—accomplished their goals of disaffiliating:**

Maybe you've left the fold to get away from something rather than to run toward something. Maybe your future-oriented goals aren't yet concrete or formulated. Maybe there's some work to do and some time to pass before future goals will be, or can be,

accomplished.

I invite you to realize how massive of a goal you've already accomplished. Leaving, and even entertaining that possibility on a cognitive level, is a major goal accomplishment in and of itself. Most people don't even allow that thought into their consciousness. By the mere fact that you've opened up this new portal in your mind, let alone disaffiliated, you already have self-efficacy, resilience, and more courage than most.

Part of figuring out what we want our future to look like is shedding the past. The latter part is just as, if not more, important than the former. Figuring out what we no longer want to do or be is a vital part in figuring out what we do want to do or be. In life, we are constantly shedding old layers and beliefs, rebuilding, and reorienting.

When for most of our lives we've been made to doubt and suppress our personhood, thoughts, desires, needs, wants, and dreams, it becomes easy to allow others to re-frame our massive wins as losses and failures. Know that you have chosen to go down a path less traveled in an effort to protect and preserve your well-being and authenticity, and to hopefully create a better-for-you future. That is a goal accomplishment of epic proportions, 100% worth celebrating. No doubt the road ahead feels and is bumpy, but if you successfully pulled this off, you are absolutely capable and worthy of accomplishing further goals and building a bright, new future for yourself.

## References

Engelman, J., Milstein, G., Schonfeld, I. S., Grubbs, J. B. (2020). Leaving a covenantal religion: Orthodox Jewish disaffiliation from an immigration psychology perspective. *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture*, 23(2), 153-172.

Frankenthaler, L. (2004). Leaving Ultra-orthodox Judaism: Defection as Deconversion. [Master's thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem].

Lee, E. S. (1966). A Theory of Migration. *Demography*, 3(1), 47–57.

Ravenstein, E. G. (1889). The Laws of Migration. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 52(2), 241–305.

# Meghan Roekle, PsyD

---

 [meghanroekle.com/news/2019/1/28/a-healing-estuary](https://meghanroekle.com/news/2019/1/28/a-healing-estuary)

Meghan Roekle

January 28, 2019

Estuaries are partly enclosed coastal waters, in which river water is mixed with seawater. These bodies are beautifully diverse (think Chesapeake Bay & Lake Pontchartrain), with a unique mix of plant and animal life.

They act as transition areas for salmon and other marine life—salmon eggs are laid in the freshwater, and the brackish estuary provides a transitional place for the young ‘fry,’ helping them adjust to the saltwater over time.

The estuary is where the salmon move from homey/cozy freshwater to tasting the saltiness of the ocean, and they go through an internal change called smoltification—a mysterious alchemical process in which their internal environment is completely rebuilt.

This process, along with caterpillars turning into butterflies and frogs regrowing legs (and a billion other mysteries in our biological reality) doesn’t make sense from a materialist worldview—the worldview that says things are separate, operate themselves, and are disconnected from the rest of life, with one DNA packet per separate, solid life form.

But major internal change—this kind of smoltification process—including completely new shapes & operating systems, is more the norm than the exception in nature. And it is actually the norm for us humans (though we are taught the materialist worldview that we are nouns, instead of verbs).

It is the natural process of evolution—a radical transformation in which our whole being alters, finding a much bigger space to occupy, as we drop old constrictions (limiting beliefs) in our system. And this evolutionary process is built into us, just like the salmon.

But it takes some healing, some time in the brackish waters—letting go of old patterns, old internal systems...eating some salt, as it were.

The word healing literally means ‘returning to wholeness,’ like returning to the ocean. But our transition—this healing into our expansion—takes an internal, physical transmutation.

And it takes an estuary.

Monks & nuns & many healers & spiritual teachers know this. They value time to find truth & real healing— because they know that it’s necessary (not because they didn’t try to find a loophole, just like the rest of us!),

In some zen practices, meditation is considered a ‘mixing practice’—meeting the density of thought and tension in the body with stillness/silence/pure awareness—‘mixing’ pure silence with our inner conditioning, over time.

In this way, the monastery or meditation house can be seen as an estuary—a safe place to metabolize the ‘salt’ of our conditioning and transform our inner being. A place to heal, to let in the vastness of our true nature.

There's no rushing at the meditation house. The salmon don't rush either. They take on a little bit of seawater at a time, swimming with the changes, and right alongside their brothers and sisters.

We humans tend to avoid our natural healing, our transmutation—due to stories of fear, installed in our childhoods.

We attempt to skip over it, rushing to the ocean prematurely (more my style!). Or we avoid our pain & healing work. Or we fall for the commercialized estuary (think yoga & self care culture ...some of it is great...and some of it is selling you on a product or an experience being your healing, instead of the inside job that it is).

None of this is natural.

But swimming in brackish water—i.e. meeting your pain, your inner constrictions—*is* natural.

And there is so much potential (and even pleasure) in meeting that pain, that salty stuff.

Salmon live in the *ocean!* This is a huge amount of expansion. And truly, meeting your own inner pain is the key to your expansion...and your expansion is infinite.

Some of the deepest, most satisfying moments of my life were in turning toward my pain, toward that which was brackish, realizing after I had metabolized it, that a new ocean view was mine.

Today—a biting cold Sunday in Chicago—I'm taking the morning slow with my dog and my oat milk cappuccino. It's been two days of inner healing work, as some old beliefs were triggered on a date. Though I have been active, I've created little estuaries all weekend—meditation/silence, dancing, baking 'cookies of joy' from St Hildegard, and receiving virtual cuddles from many friends.

Any time I needed to meet pain in my system—to 'smoltify' (Try Kiran Trace's 'Alchemy' meditation. [Link below](#))—I gave it to myself, including a sweet little cry at the hardware store yesterday, as some old heart pain was metabolized. My heart expanded as I met the pain—and I fell in love with all the dudes at the store (they were so helpful & kind I couldn't bear it!).

The feeling of expanded love was my ocean view... with the salt running down my cheeks.

But I've had challenges with this, as have my clients. We have a whole culture of rushing & avoiding. We rush everything. And we distract with everything.

And there is very little trust in the natural expansion built into our bodies, our being.

But salmon want to go to the ocean. And so do we.

And we can actually savor our healing, our transformation. We can have some nice long swims in our own, self-made estuaries. It doesn't need to be a monastery. Nor does it mean crying at a hardware store.

Rather, we welcome/accept a little salt/pain/tension/fear at a time. We sit with it, get curious about it. We see if it's really as scary as our mind tells us.

Taste it for yourself. Dive into the pockets of pain in your body you are avoiding.

And then come back out and have some tea. Find something comfy. Have a dance. Cuddle yourself in your favorite sweatshirt and slippers.

Saltwater. Freshwater. Saltwater. Freshwater.

An ancient, natural mixing practice you were built for.

---

If you'd like to learn these tools directly, come join my new Awake Body, Quiet Mind group, starting February 5th. Four Tuesdays from 10:30-12:00 in a healing estuary.

Learn more & sign up here: <https://meghanroekle.com/take-action/>

I've mentioned Kiran Trace many times. She is my core teacher and her meditations and tools are powerful. Try her Awareness, Acceptance & Alchemy meditations for your own 'smoltification' here: <https://kirantrace.com/shop/>

Jeff Foster is a master of welcoming pain, heartbreak, depression...you name it. Check out some of his writings here: <http://www.lifewithoutacentre.com/the-wordless-library>

## **Subscribe**

---


Sign up to receive new blog posts, resources, event news

We respect your privacy.

Thank you!



# Was Plato a mythmaker or the mythbuster of Western thought?

 [aeon.co/essays/was-plato-a-mythmaker-or-the-mythbuster-of-western-thought](https://aeon.co/essays/was-plato-a-mythmaker-or-the-mythbuster-of-western-thought)

Tae-Yeoun Keum

i

## Why philosophy needs myth

Some see Plato as a pure rationalist, others as a fantastical mythmaker. His deft use of stories tells a more complex tale

by Tae-Yeoun Keum + BIO

3,900 words  Save

 Listen here

Brought to you by [Curio](#), an Aeon partner

Listen to more Aeon Essays [here](#)

[Syndicate this Essay.](#)

In 1872, at the age of 28, Friedrich Nietzsche announced himself to the world with *The Birth of Tragedy*, an elegiac account of the alienation of Western culture from its spiritual foundations. According to Nietzsche, the ancient Greeks had once mastered a healthy cultural balance between the ‘Apollonian’ impulse toward rational control and the ‘Dionysian’ desire for ecstatic surrender. From the 5th century BCE onward, however, Western intellectual culture has consistently skewed in favour of Apollonian rationalism to the neglect of the Dionysian – an imbalance from which it has never recovered.

The primary villain of this story was Plato, whom Nietzsche accused of setting philosophy on its rationalist track. Plato’s immortalisation of his teacher, Socrates, amounted to nothing less than a morbid obsession with intellectual martyrdom. His Theory of the Forms taught generations of philosophers to seek truth in metaphysical abstractions, while devaluing lived experiences in the physical world. Plato’s intellectual revolution, in particular, was born out of the destruction of myth. In his wake, philosophy had been left ‘stripped of myth’ and starved of cultural roots. Modern culture, for Nietzsche, continued to languish in the shadow of Plato’s legacy, still grappling with its ‘loss of myth, the loss of a mythical home, a mythical, maternal womb’.

Seven decades later, at the end of the Second World War, Karl Popper mounted what would become, after Nietzsche, the second-most famous attack on Plato in modern philosophy. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Popper suggested that Plato had provided Western thought with its first blueprint of the ‘closed society’. In the *Republic*, Plato envisioned an ideal city that prioritises the harmony of the collective over the freedom of individuals, the preservation of the status quo over innovation, and the

authority of intellectual gatekeepers over democracy and truth. The toxic influence of Plato's political vision, Popper argued, could be traced through the history of philosophy, all the way to Nazi Germany and other forms of contemporary totalitarianism.

Like Nietzsche, Popper blamed Plato for setting Western philosophy on the wrong course. He did so, however, for precisely the opposite reason. Popper's Plato was no rationalist. Rather, Popper boiled down the difference between open and closed societies to the difference between a culture of criticism and a culture of myth. Plato, as the first and the greatest of the enemies of the open society, had advocated the suppression of free criticism in order to establish an 'arrested state', sustained by myths and deception. Pointing to the *Republic's* controversial foundation narrative, the Myth of Metals, Popper credited Plato with writing an 'exact counterpart' to 'the modern myth of Blood and Soil'.

Who was right? Was Plato a short-sighted rationalist, who led philosophy astray by unmooring it from a more authentic, mythic past? Or was he a devious mythmaker, who introduced an uneasy current of irrationalism into the citadel of reason? How could he be both? Put differently: was Plato to blame for steering philosophy away from myth, or for bringing it closer to myth?

Neither *The Birth of Tragedy* nor *The Open Society* is celebrated today for its author's fidelity to historical accuracy. Nonetheless, both remain iconic because Nietzsche and Popper were each on to something resonant about the relationship between myth and philosophy, and the curious symbolic role of Plato in our inherited understandings of that relationship.

To some extent, both their critiques were right, in the fractured way everyone is a little right in the parable about the blind men and the elephant. Plato continues to be celebrated as a figure who set philosophy on a rational foundation by isolating a distinctly rigorous, critical mode of reasoning from the clutches of myth and received wisdom. And yet, his dialogues are also run through with myths of his own invention: the Myth of Metals, the *Symposium's* account of the origin of love, and the stories about the afterlife which close the *Phaedo*, *Gorgias* and *Republic*.

Squaring both these aspects of Plato's thought is difficult because we remain wedded to two distinct, but related, ideas in our intellectual heritage. The first is the idea that philosophy is fundamentally opposed to myth. And the second is that it was Plato who first pointed this out.

Concerns about myth are often bound up with concerns about misinformation. But these anxieties go beyond a worry about factual inaccuracies that require correction. Rather, when scholars and commentators designate something as a myth, they are usually grappling with a more existential threat: a symbolically powerful narrative that seems immune to correction altogether, but that, nonetheless, has the power to captivate our imaginations. The language of myth, for instance, has recently been used to talk about frontier imagery in US immigration policy – 'the myth of the border wall' – as well as

nostalgic appeals to a somehow more authentic version of a nation's people – from the 'myth of a "real" America', to the 'myths of Englishness' that made rounds during the Brexit campaign.

One reason myths make us uneasy is that we expect them not to have a place at the heart of the assumptions and beliefs that found modern culture. That is, there is an expectation that we, as a society, ought to have *outgrown* myths.

This expectation stems from an evolutionary account of culture that goes back at least to ancient Greece, when Presocratic thinkers adopted rhetoric that distinguished their methods of investigation from the oral tradition associated with ancient myths about the Olympian deities, by focusing on the unverifiable nature of such stories. But it was in 18th-century Europe that myth came to be seen as a cultural relic that was fundamentally at odds with modern life. As the Enlightenment railed against tradition and superstition, authors such as Pierre Bayle and Bernard de Fontenelle turned their attention to the legacy of Greco-Roman myths.

In preceding centuries, classical mythology had been treated by their Baroque aficionados as part of a timeless heritage, an inherited aesthetic vocabulary that educated individuals had to learn in order to participate in high culture. The Enlightenment critics, by contrast, were eager to question the value of the myths that their predecessors had deemed worthy of valorising in their sculptures, paintings, operas and even ceiling decoration. Instead, Enlightenment authors drew attention to the absurd, often grotesque, features of these same myths. With obvious relish, Bayle detailed the episodes of adultery, incest and cannibalism that littered classical mythology, and mocked the ancient commentators, who had tried to provide allegorical explanations for them. 'They cannot be read,' he judged, 'without feeling pity for those philosophers who used their time so badly.' Fontenelle, for his part, speculated that the Olympian deities of thunder and the seas were merely what the ancient Greeks had conjured up in their imaginations in order to explain natural phenomena that they lacked the scientific knowledge to comprehend.

The course of philosophy can be understood as a trajectory that runs from 'from *mythos* to *logos*'

There was another reason for the Enlightenment re-evaluation of classical mythology. Travel accounts from Asia, North Africa and the New World had introduced European audiences to mythological traditions beyond those of ancient Greece and Rome. As the first comparative mythologists began spotting similarities between classical myths and those from cultures that many Europeans at the time considered barbaric, the former lost much of their traditional lustre. They weren't so special after all.

What emerged from these cultural reappraisals was a formula for conceptualising civilisational progress as a linear trajectory, pointing firmly away from myth. As 18th-century Europeans came to understand it, societies with rich mythological cultures – such as those of Greco-Roman antiquity, but also those of contemporary Indigenous peoples in

the New World and elsewhere – occupied a ‘primitive’ stage of culture. By comparison, their own enlightened society had successfully shed its myths and superstitions in favour of more rigorous ways of thinking.

A crucial part of this account of cultural evolution was a focus on the cognitive development of the human mind. The path from barbarism to civilisation supposedly also entailed a transformation in the character of thought itself – from the kind of credulous, superstitious mentality it takes to generate and believe in myths, to the Enlightenment mind capable of criticism and the evaluation of arguments.

This model of epistemic development had enduring effects on the self-identity of philosophy. The course of philosophy, to borrow a formulation by the 20th-century classicist Wilhelm Nestle, can be understood in terms of a trajectory that runs from ‘from *mythos* to *logos*’. On this view, philosophers continue the work of breaking away from myth, identifying the ones that remain operative in our thinking and culture, subjecting them to critical interrogation, and replacing them with knowledge that stands up to critical scrutiny.

It was also during the 18th century that Plato came to be adopted as the original champion of philosophy’s long and ongoing battle against myth. In preceding centuries, Europeans would have been more familiar with a rather different portrait of Plato. This was the account of Plato’s thought given by Neoplatonism. Adherents of this wide-ranging philosophical tradition, which first flourished in late antiquity and was revived in Renaissance Italy, saw in Plato’s scattered writings a radically coherent metaphysical system, arranged around a highest, unifying Form of goodness. Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato’s philosophy often had a mystical bent – acquired, in part, as it gradually negotiated for itself a place alongside Christian orthodoxy. In order to reassure Christians, who were wary of granting too much influence to a pagan, Neoplatonists insisted that Plato had been divinely inspired as a prophetic instrument of God’s design for human history. Pointing to Plato’s descriptions of divine poetic inspiration in the *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, they argued that Plato himself was aware of his own role as a vessel of a higher power. Such readings of Plato gained an esoteric flavour. They elevated the role of inspiration over that of reason, and they tended to focus on themes such as enthusiasm, love or – especially in the context of Renaissance humanism – the divine gift of eloquence.

When Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and his associates turned to Plato, however, they often did so in the spirit of a far older interpretive tradition, one that long predated the Neoplatonists. This was academic scepticism, which had been the dominant school of thought in Plato’s Academy from the 4th century BCE – about three generations after Plato’s death – and lasted into the 1st century BCE. Where the coherence of Plato’s metaphysical system was a central tenet of the Neoplatonic tradition, academic sceptics denied that Plato had any system of philosophy at all. Rather, their Plato was the antisystematist par excellence, resisting dogma at all costs in favour of the critical suspension of judgment. Plato’s sceptic interpreters emphasised the mercilessly rigorous nature of Socratic interrogation and the inconclusive endings of some of the early dialogues, which seemed to represent a disavowal of certain knowledge.

Plato's portrayal of the Socratic gadfly helped model an Enlightenment ideal of philosophical citizenship

The sceptic portrait of Plato was especially appealing to Plato's Enlightenment readers, who similarly adopted a principled programme of challenging authority and questioning received knowledge. Plato's critique of Greek mythological tradition, in particular, proved newly resonant. Voltaire praised Plato's portrayal of Socrates as a proto-scientific philosopher persecuted for proving 'that the Moon was not a goddess, and that Mercury was not a god'.

Enlightenment champions of Plato were unwilling, at the same time, to accept the fully sceptic conclusion that certain knowledge was impossible. Eventually, they negotiated a compromise between the Neoplatonist and sceptic accounts of Plato. They accepted that Plato had a coherent philosophical system, and that constructive and certain knowledge was indeed possible. But the path to knowledge was not through revelation or inspiration, but through the kind of critical reason that the academic sceptics so prized.

Plato's Enlightenment readers also took him to be an embodiment of their own political values. His portrayal of the Socratic gadfly helped model an ideal of philosophical citizenship – of citizens as critical thinkers, refusing to take social norms for granted, but instead exposing unfounded pretences to knowledge and the vague and mystifying myths of society.

The dominance and popularity of the Enlightenment portrait of Plato meant that the interpretations that had preceded it largely fell out of sight, and naturally de-emphasised those aspects of Plato's thought that sat poorly with its portrait. This was the process by which the rationalist Plato, so despised by Nietzsche, was created.

For Plato was not just the champion of rational argument that the Enlightenment presented him to be. His dialogues, significantly, contained myths: carefully constructed narrative interludes, woven into the philosophical investigation, that reworked or mimicked existing material from the Greek mythological tradition. We might take, for instance, the Myth of Metals – the myth that Popper compared to Nazi ideology – which tells the story of a race of citizens being crafted beneath the earth. A god, according to the myth, mixed metals into their makeup: gold for those most naturally equipped to be rulers, silver for the assistants to the rulers, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the craftsmen. Plato's first readers would have recognised this myth as an original reinvention of the Hesiodic myth of ages (humans decline in character as they pass through the ages of gold, silver, bronze and iron) and the myth of the founding of Thebes by Cadmus (a race of men is born out of the earth).

Plato's myths tend to be stylistically differentiated from the closely argued investigations that make up the rest of his dialogues. They are often set in fantastical worlds – like the subterranean workshop of the deity in the Myth of Metals, or the eschatological landscapes in Plato's myths about the afterlife – and they are not held to the standards of argument otherwise championed in Plato's work. The myths are simply just-so stories, presented without any attempt to justify them with reasons or facts.

In certain Neoplatonic traditions that celebrated the more mystical aspects of Plato's thought, these myths were considered an important facet of his work. The Enlightenment reinterpretation of Plato, by contrast, had no good way of accounting for them. If Plato is the original liberator of philosophy from myth, his own use of myths seems hypocritical at worst and, at best, a failure to live up to a standard of critical rigour that he himself invented for philosophy. As the 18th-century portrait of the rationalist Plato gained ground, the myths began to be awkwardly ignored, or else dismissed as the vestiges of ancient tradition in the work of a philosopher who paved the eventual path to the age of Enlightenment, without having been fully enlightened himself.

This Enlightenment Plato is, by and large, the one we have inherited today, who coexists uneasily in our imaginations with the mythmaking Plato we encounter when we read his texts. This unresolved tension is a reminder of what gets missed when we take only the most readily available Plato in our heritage for granted. The old Enlightenment narrative can often blind us to the philosophical value of Plato's myths. Popper, for instance, had accused Plato of deploying myths for purely political, propagandistic purposes, which were ultimately at odds with the values of philosophy itself.

Plato was attesting to the power of myth to reshape the stories we take for granted

But what Popper didn't realise was that Plato often turned to myth in ways that were complementary, rather than antithetical, to the kind of critical reasoning exhibited in the more argumentative parts of his writing. Plato's myths end up being a distinct form of philosophical discourse in their own right, exploring aspects of our worldviews that are so deeply ingrained that they are difficult to pick apart solely through critical reason. The Myth of Metals does not just make sweeping claims about what individuals are and are not naturally suited for. It also prompts a philosophical reimagination of the very concept of nature.

The Myth of Metals appears at a particular juncture in Socrates' description of the education of the citizens of the city envisioned in the *Republic*. It is intended to be told to the citizens after they have completed a basic preliminary education in music and gymnastics, at which point they are to be sorted into the various occupational classes of the city. The myth has long been read, along Popperian lines, as a piece of political propaganda appealing to the notion that individuals have natures that, like race, are determined from birth, and equip them better for certain roles in society than others.

But if the myth tells a story built on the idea that the natures of individuals are fixed in a particularly rigid way from birth, it is also a story involving a total reconceptualisation of what it means to be born in the first place. The opening lines of the myth invite the citizens to think of their rearing and education up to this point in their lives as a dream. According to the myth, the citizens have not yet truly lived. They have instead been asleep through the years of their early upbringing, gestating inside the womb of their mother, the earth, while their natures were being formed. Only when this process was complete were they released above ground and made to wake from their long slumber. Citizens are not truly born, the myth suggests, until they have completed the first stage of

their education. The natures of citizens, accordingly, have to be defined, not in terms of the attributes they have at the beginning of their biological lives, but by those they possess at the end of a basic education.

In borrowing from the conventions of Greek mythology to create his own philosophical myths, Plato was attesting to the power of myth to reach, and to reshape, the stories we take for granted about our natural and social world. Such stories, in turn, can provide a stable imaginative framework of values and expectations for organising political experiences in meaningful ways, and can be vital to framing the way we think about our environment and our places in it.

Plato's myths, read without the baggage of the Enlightenment narratives told about him, serve as a reminder that myth did not always stand for the opposite of philosophy. Plato was himself well aware of the dangers of myth. But this awareness was part of a broader appreciation of its power and its possibilities, one that recognised the full range of myth's potential to be both harmful *and* constructive for philosophy and politics. Above all, Plato's understanding of myth stemmed from the position that our worldviews are underpinned by deeper, more elusive narratives that may be more easily accessed and shaped by the mechanisms of myth than those of rational argument. This insight was something that Plato applied to philosophers themselves. As Socrates suggests to his interlocutors in the *Republic*, the long process of educating the philosopher-guardians of their ideal city must be approached 'as if we were at leisure and telling myths'.

Today, we don't take this idea seriously enough, and we focus on myth only in its most pathological forms. One consequence of the Enlightenment idea of civilisational progress is that, when myths do rear their heads in modern society, they seem to suggest that a regression has taken place. Such was the alarmed response in the 20th century when fascism spread around Europe. As Nazi propagandists peddled grand narratives about the destiny of a chosen race of people, kingdoms that would last a thousand years, and even constructed elaborate genealogies around Plato's myth of Atlantis, contemporary commentators diagnosed the phenomenon as a deplorable 'resurgence' of myth in modern politics.

Myths are not monoliths impervious to change, but dynamic stories open to reinterpretation

To be sure, contemporary critics of myth have good reason to argue that these might not be possibilities worth exploring. Postwar attitudes toward myth, shaped by the reckoning with Nazism, have inured us to a kind of anti-myth vigilance: if the horrors of Nazism are the cost of permitting myths to thrive in modern politics, this may be too high a cost to bear, no matter the potential benefits. To borrow a phrase from the 17th-century poet John Dryden, myth may well represent 'a world well lost'. On this view, the stance that we, as a society, ought to be taking toward contemporary forms of myth should either be a principled refusal of acknowledgement – lest doing so legitimises them, or opens the floodgates to further irrationality – or a constant readiness to combat them, whenever they occur, with an arsenal of facts and reasoned arguments.

The lessons of Plato's myths, however, point us to another way. If we remain allergic to the presence of myths in our cultural landscape, we miss the larger point, and risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Plato's insight was that myth is a powerful, enduring force in politics and culture – a point of common ground in both Nietzsche's and Popper's critiques of Plato. Not taking this seriously risks falling into denialism about the very real ways in which such symbolically rich narratives influence our worldviews.

But Plato's own philosophical reinvention of myth also suggests that myths can be reworked in creative ways. Myths are not monoliths impervious to change, but dynamic stories open to reinterpretation every time they are retold. Our inherited aversion to myth not only keeps us from fully appreciating Plato's incisive understanding of myth. It also keeps us from recognising – and learning from – people in our own communities who are already doing the kind of creative work it takes to engage constructively with it.

In the fall of 2016, representatives from more than 300 Native American tribes gathered together at a campsite near Cannon Ball in North Dakota to protest the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The proposed oil pipeline was to run perilously close to land that belonged to the Standing Rock reservation, including under Lake Oahe, the reservation's primary source of water and the site of several locations sacred to the Sioux who live there.

Initially dismissed as routine protesters – as any construction project of that scale is likely to generate – the activist groups themselves came to understand their work differently. They drew upon Native mythological traditions to reframe the significance of the moment, which in turn supplied a new conceptual vocabulary for their self-understanding as a community. A Lakota prophecy foretold of a time when the various tribes would come together in the 'seventh generation' to save their peoples and the Earth from destruction. For the activists at Standing Rock, that moment was now. Their common task was a duty that linked them to their ancestors, who had seen themselves as stewards of the environment. The activists at the makeshift camps by the construction site – the newly anointed Sacred Stone Camp – were not protesters at all: they were water protectors.

The water protectors at Standing Rock are separated a long way, in geography and time, from Plato. Not only was Plato an Athenian, who lived nearly 2.5 millennia ago; he has long been the paradigmatic Dead White Man, the figurehead of an intellectual canon that has excluded the voices of peoples such as those at Sacred Stone Camp.

But Plato's point is that the unlikely insight he shared with the water protectors at Standing Rock is a lesson for philosophers as well. If myths turned out to be an inescapable part of modern life, Plato teaches us not to despair that our Enlightenment expectations of rational progress have gone unmet. Instead, he invites us to make theoretical space for the myths around us, and to remember our own capacity to rework them.