

Joshua J. Reynolds

**IN
THE
BEGINNING**

(A SERIOUS SATIRE ON MYTH,
PHILOSOPHY, AND BELIEF)

Windowless I Publishing

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SAMPLE

Silly Master, Myths Are for Masses!

“I must interrupt you right there, Plato. As you recall, I studied in your university for almost twenty years. Upon graduating with highest honors, I traveled extensively, went on to establish my own university, and even tutored the future king of the known world, Alexander the Great! So you can believe *me*: What this discussion desperately needs is the common-sense, factual approach of a mature intellectual with experience.”

“Well, well. If it isn’t the physician’s son, Aristotle of Stagira – the sure cure for insomnia! People, haven’t you heard how, as a youth, this ‘intellectual’ recklessly blew his father’s inheritance on flashy clothes and jewelry, fine food, prostitutes, and booze? Later, he got kicked out of the army and sold drugs before entering college, where he often quarreled with the headmaster, yours truly. This pot-bellied sack of wine also betrayed his homeland to Alexander’s father, King Philip. None of this is to mention the bastard son he had with an unfortunately-named slave, Herpyllis. A man of experience... to say the least!”

"I was young and on the sauce. Tough times build character, right? But you, Master Plato... You're one to complain about style! I have always had a problem knowing when to take you seriously, and when to brush off your explanations as pseudo-educational pop entertainment - you know, the sort of smut one finds on cable channels supposedly devoted to history. So your cosmology is merely 'plausible', is it? Bah! For all your inspiration, you still won't literally state your meaning!"

"I was literal just now in reviewing your career!"

"I see. Then I'll just have to take you literally about true Beauty, Equality, and Peanut-buttery-ness existing all alone in some separate, superior realm of existence. Personally, I don't think such things can exist unless they are *in* something physical. But, hey... I get it, Plato. I do. Your ideas are sexier than mine. Yet, for that reason, they're just the sort of thing that can seduce dopey college kids into declaring a worthless major and regretting it for the rest of their lives. Philosophy departments won't stop them. So how about you and I think more responsibly, okay?"

"Look, Aristotle. I get it. It's personal. You have it out for me. And well, quite frankly, I couldn't care less. So it's probably better for the crowd to answer you today. I'd rather go grab a beer."

"What. Ever. Plato. Bye bye. Hmm... Hey! Speaking of college kids... You there! What about you?"

"Who, me?"

"Yeah you, man. What is your name?"

"I'm Moronocles, sir."

"Moronocles, is it? You're here with Timon, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Look. How would you like the privilege of chatting with a philosopher of my stature?"

"Uhm... well... uh... To be honest, Aristotle, sir... I was just heading to the can. I kinda have to go."

"Nonsense! Certainly you don't think anything could be more important than philosophy, do you?"

"Ehm... no, I guess? But I should warn you, sir: I am horrible at judging the quality of citrus."

"You're what?"

"Never mind. Thank Zeus he sent the clouds today."

"Excellent. What say you, then, Moronocles? Hasn't Master Plato invented this story about Atlantis simply to validate his political ideals? I mean, he admitted that it's not meant to be taken as historical truth. Did he not?"

"Huh? What? Plato said that? I thought he said that Critias said that his sources said that the Atlantis story was entirely true! So there you have it."

"No, no, no! Don't you see? His tale criticizes *modern-day* Athens and its empire, which he recasts as decadent Atlantis. At the same time, Plato praises the Athenians' current enemy, the anti-democratic Spartans, by attributing their socio-political structure to the heroic, *prehistoric* Athens that he imagines."

"But why would Plato lie? It wouldn't be very noble of him. I'm sure if all that had been his meaning, Aristotle, then he would have just said so."

"Well, I'll tell you, Moronocles. Myths are flexible. Unlike truth, storytellers can give them whatever shape and purpose they wish - always without fear of rational refutation. As it happens, evidence and common sense don't rank highly in mythology. Do you play poker, son?"

"Every Friday night, sir. I have this really nice set of chips that..."

"We're talking about myth, Moronocles. Remember?"

"I do now."

"Anyway, like wild cards in a game of poker, myths lack a set value, unlike, say, face cards and truth. Thus, debaters have no choice but to deal with whatever impact a myth has on a discussion, which often proves considerable. It's dirty, but that's just how the game's played."

"Yeah... Poker is fun, Aristotle."

"Moronocles!"

"Jeez! Sorry! What can I say? Plato's account seemed credible to me. I trust him."

"Well, you and Plato should beware. You all should. As I said, myths are flexible. So, future storytellers could distort your tales for their own purposes. A couple thousand years from now, some corrupt, materialistic empire across the Atlantic might mistake Atlantis as the good guy and impose upon the myth their own values, technologies, and aspirations. A paradise island, shrouded in mystery, awaiting rediscovery at the bottom of the sea - that could be just the sort of thing a collapsing civilization needs to escape the emptiness of its existence."

"I know! I would like nothing more than for archaeologists to find Atlantis in my lifetime!"

"Ugh. Look, Moronocles. May I return to this future civilization and *their* Atlantis obsession?"

"Yes, please."

"So, perhaps all this will manifest as simple symbolism - say, names of cities, structures, organizations, and the like. Or, it might generate harmless popular entertainment - you know, adventure fiction about lost treasure or profound secrets to be discovered, or even a bikini-clad, mermaid princess to be seduced."

"Oh yeah! Mermaid babes!"

"But myth also spawns mania and superstition. Imagine, if you will, wasteful global expeditions to search for

this fantasy island's ruins. Or occultist movements of folks who identify as reincarnated Atlanteans. Or perhaps psychic attempts to communicate with spirits of Atlantis. Even racist and nationalistic ideologies that cast Atlantis as the home of an original 'super race' of human beings! All this and more could happen, so powerful is the disposition to believe."

"Well, people want to believe, Aristotle."

"Yes. I suppose that all humans seek a special mental connection to the world. Not all, however, demonstrate equal intellectual ability in their attempts. Perhaps, then, myth might be allowed some authority there. But at least Plato should spare us trained scientists these embarrassing fantasies about the beginning of the universe."

"Fantasies? That's low."

"Nor can we tolerate further gibberish about a supposed divine craftsman. I mean, either the universe had a creator-designer or it didn't. So which is it? And don't say it 'likely' had one, or that Plato's divine craftsman represents some sort of deeper, evasive truth. I shall put matters simply. The universe had no beginning. It has always existed and will continue to do so forever."

"Huh? No beginning? But how? I don't get it."

"That's right. Mythologists paint amusing pictures, plausible only to themselves and child-like audiences. But such accounts fail to hold meaning for adults who use their senses and reason. For instance, you, Moronocles, assume that the first of all things were the gods, themselves immortal. Why, then, I ask, are the gods immortal?"

"Well, Hesiod says it's because they eat nectar and ambrosia. You see, Aristotle, we humans have a different sort of diet, as Hippocrates explained. We wouldn't even know where to find nectar and ambrosia... well, maybe

Whole Foods sells it. But anyway, since we don't partake in such divine feasts, we all will die one day."

"Moronocles, your belief fails to stand up to scrutiny."

"You'd be surprised how often I'm told that."

"Yes, well, think. Just think. If the gods eat nectar and ambrosia simply for pleasure... Do you follow so far?"

"Sure. If they eat the stuff for pleasure..."

"Then nectar and ambrosia can't be the cause of their immortality. After all, whatever is eaten for pleasure is not necessary for existence."

"Uh huh."

"But if the gods eat the stuff to maintain their existence, then they could not be immortal."

"They couldn't?"

"No. Because without the special diet they would die. And beings subject to death are by definition *mortal*."

"So you mean that nectar and ambrosia have dubious health benefits, kind of like alternative medicine?"

"Not quite, Moronocles. My main point is that myths serve to placate the child-minded public - to keep them in line, as Plato admits. So why resort to them in present company? Our primitive predecessors have passed down a tradition of myth that views the heavens as divine. Who am I to quarrel with our forefathers?"

"Why, you're Aristotle, of course!"

"Yes, I am Aristotle. But look, the heavens are perfect, so I am happy to call them divine. But I refuse to accept the absurdities our ancestors spewed about gods. We must instead strive for precise, scientific answers to the questions that perplex us here today. Our investigation, in turn, should begin from none other than the perceptible facts - regardless, Plato, of their ever-changing nature."

About the Author

Joshua J. Reynolds holds a PhD in Classics from Princeton and a BA in Philosophy from Arizona State. For over a decade, he spent his time in an academic bubble, floating from university to university, teaching students vitally important skills, such as Greek and Latin grammar. The bubble finally burst in 2010, dumping Joshua out somewhere near Atlanta, Georgia. He has existed there ever since. Joshua enjoys fashioning written words to express unfashionable ideas – that, and creating noise that almost qualifies as prog rock. He has neither cat nor dog.