Block 4 Tutorial

Myth and Reason

- First I'd like us to look at a couple of texts which highlight the complex relationship between philosophy and myth.

- As you read these, think about the relationship between myth and reason: are myth and reason **separate** or **competing**, or something else?

Plato

Meno

- The first passage is from Plato's *Meno*, a dialogue between Socrates and a rather dim young aristocrat called Meno.

- They're discussing the difference between knowledge and 'true opinion'.

- How does Socrates use myth here?

98 MENO: ... It seems that must be right; which leaves me wondering, Socrates: If that's the case, why on earth is knowledge so much more valuable than correct opinion, and why are they treated as two different things?

99 SOCRATES: Well, you know why it is you're wondering about it. Shall I tell you?

100 MENO: Go ahead.

101 SOCRATES: It's because you haven't pondered Daedalus's statues. Maybe you haven't got any up there in Thessaly.

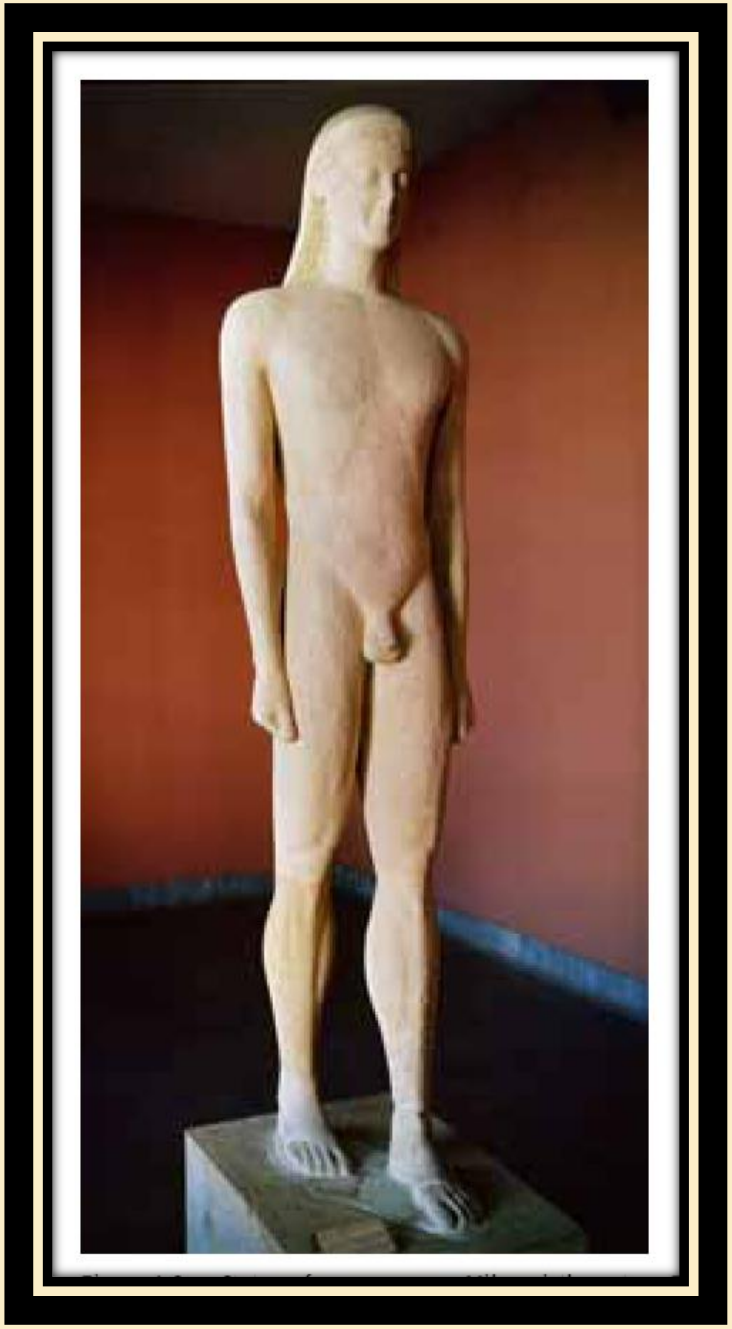
102 MENO: What have they got to do with it?

103 SOCRATES: Well, they're the same: if they aren't shackled, they escape – they scamper away. But if they're shackled, they stay put.

104 MENO: What are you getting at?

105 SOCRATES: If you own an original Daedalus, unshackled, it's not worth all that much ... because it doesn't stay put. But if you've got one that's shackled, it's very valuable. Because they're really lovely pieces of work. It's the same with true opinions. True opinions, as long as they stay put, are a fine thing and do us a whole lot of good. Only, they tend not to stay put for very long. They're always scampering away from a person's soul. So they are not very valuable until you shackle them by figuring out what makes them true. And then, once they're shackled, they turn into knowledge, and become stable and fixed. So that's why knowledge is a more valuable thing than correct opinion, and that's how knowledge differs from a correct opinion: by a shackle.

Socrates' scampering statues could have been inspired by a common statue pose in sixth century BC, which put one foot in front of the other as if the statue was going to step forward.



Discussion questions

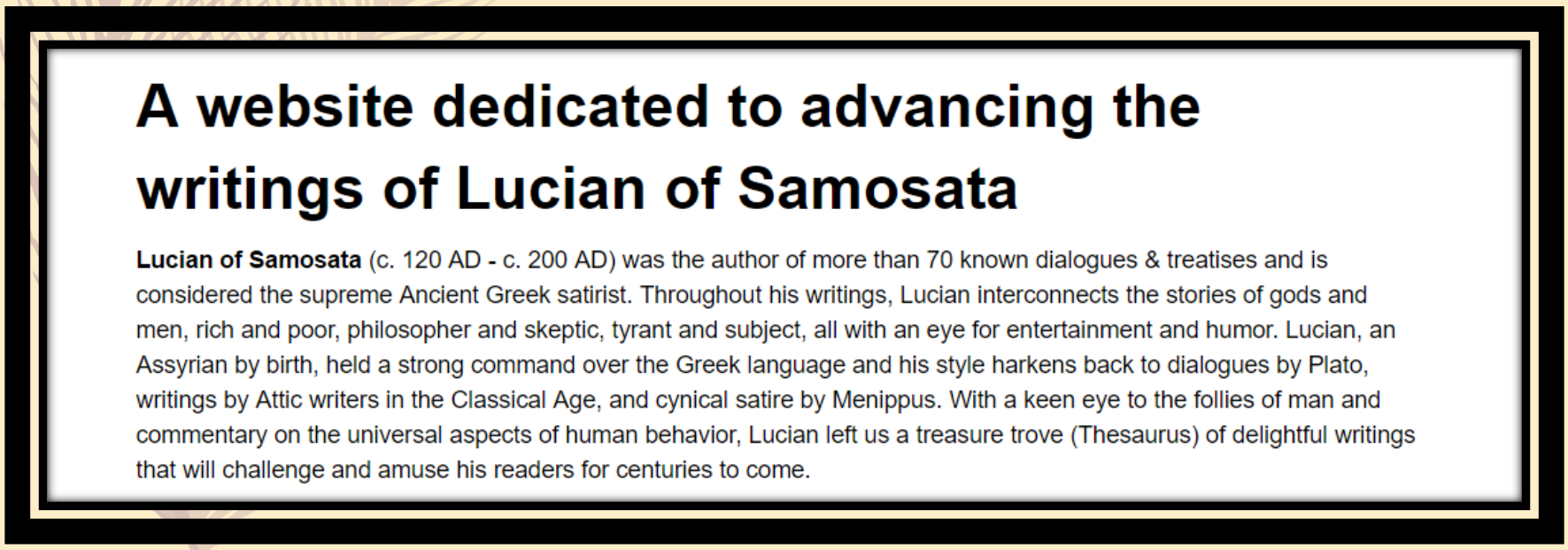
- Do you find anything contradictory in Socrates' use of myth to explain a philosophical point?
- Is there an element of humour here, or mockery?
- Is this an effective way of presenting complex ideas?

Lucian

Icaromenippus

– Our second passage comes from the 2nd century AD writer Lucian of Samosata.

– http://lucianofsamosata.info/



- I'll show you a couple of short extracts from his *Icaromenippus,* a comic dialogue between a man called Menippus and his friend.

- Menippus has just told his friend that he has been up to heaven to see Zeus, and his friend is skeptical…

- How does Lucian use myth in this passage?

- *Fr*. But tell me how you were uplifted, and where you got your mighty tall ladder. There is hardly enough of Ganymede in your looks to suggest that you were carried off by the eagle for a cupbearer.

- *Me*. I see you are bent on making a jest of it. Well, it *is* extraordinary; you could not be expected to see that it is not a romance. The fact is, I needed neither ladder nor amorous eagle; I had wings of my own.

- *Fr*. Stranger and stranger! this beats Daedalus. What, you turned into a hawk or a crow on the sly?

- *Me*. Now that is not a bad shot; it was Daedalus's wing trick that I tried.

- *Fr*. Well, talk of foolhardiness! did you like the idea of falling into the sea, and giving us a *Mare Menippeum* after the precedent of the *Icarium*?

- *Me*. No fear. Icarus's feathers were fastened with wax, and of course, directly the sun warmed this, he moulted and fell. No wax for me, thank you.

- *Fr*. How did you manage, then? I declare I shall be believing you soon, if you go on like this.

- *Me*. Well, I caught a fine eagle, and also a particularly powerful vulture, and cut off their wings above the shoulder-joint. . . . But no; if you are not in a hurry, I may as well give you the enterprise from the beginning.

Discussion questions

- Obviously this is a satire: but whom, or what, is Lucian mocking here?
- What does this passage suggest about contemporary views of, or uses of, myth?

- Next, Menippus explains why he chose to seek out Zeus…

- How does Lucian use philosophy in this passage?

I found my first problem in what wise men call the universal order; I could not tell how it came into being, who made it, what was its beginning, or what its end. But my next step, which was the examination of details, landed me in yet worse perplexity. I found the stars dotted quite casually about the sky, and I wanted to know what the sun was. Especially the phenomena of the moon struck me as extraordinary, and quite passed my comprehension; there must be some mystery to account for those many phases, I conjectured. Nor could I feel any greater certainty about such things as the passage of lightning, the roll of thunder, the descent of rain and snow and hail.

In this state of mind, the best I could think of was to get at the truth of it all from the people called philosophers; they of course would be able to give it me. So I selected the best of them, if solemnity of visage, pallor of complexion and length of beard are any criterion--for there could not be a moment's doubt of their soaring words and heaven-high thoughts--and in their hands I placed myself. For a considerable sum down, and more to be paid when they should have perfected me in wisdom, I was to be made an airy metaphysician and instructed in the order of the universe. Unfortunately, so far from dispelling my previous ignorance, they perplexed me more and more, with their daily drenches of beginnings and ends, atoms and voids, matters and forms. My greatest difficulty was that, though they differed among themselves, and all they said was full of inconsistency and contradiction, they expected me to believe them, each pulling me in his own direction….

Discussion questions

- How well has Lucian summarised the problems of Greek philosophy here?
- Does the emphasis on payments to the philosophical schools remind you of anything you've read?

The rest of the dialogue

- You can find the full translation here:
- http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl3/wl309.htm
- In the remainder of the dialogue, Menippus visits Olympus (via a rest-stop on the Moon) to complain to Zeus about the philosophers. Zeus sympathises, and (after giving Menippus a tour and inviting him to dinner) resolves to destroy all the philosophers with his thunderbolt – just as soon as normal business resumes in Olympus after the holidays!

What do these two examples tell us about myth and reason?

Myth and reason

- Both writers combine myth and reason, using the myth of Daedalus and Icarus as a starting point.
- Plato uses myth as a way to convey an idea in terms that would engage the imagination.
- Lucian gives us an absurd scenario in which the gods decide to annihilate the philosophers ‘and their logic with them’ for the sin of being incompetent and annoying.
- Neither text is meant to be taken seriously: the combination of myth and reason is used to emphasise the bizarre or foolish elements of each.