

## **EROTIC IDENTIFICATION - Michael Bennett ([www.michaelbennett.org.uk](http://www.michaelbennett.org.uk))**

We have investigated various ways in which myths can assist us in our moral motivation by means of their ability to persuade us to engage in moral and ethical actions. Perhaps the most important means of persuasion is the one that I shall now address, that is, the power of myths to generate erotic identification.

The key to understanding the fact that myths can entice, involve and persuade us lies in their ability to stir our desires and connect them with a mythic hero, value or object. This is a process of erotic identification and expresses the *movement of love* in a variety of ways. The first aspect of erotic identification I wish to consider is what we might call 'creative imagination' which refers to the need to develop our psychological inner space. To be able to make connections with mythic narratives that are both meaningful to us and can be held reflexively, we need a well-developed imaginative capacity that can operate on three levels. It needs to be able to connect the human subject on the *horizontal* level to the myths themselves and to other people through the movement of desire and erotic identification. On the *vertical* axis our imagination has to translate the myth so that it can connect internally to our own thoughts, feelings and desires. At the *reflexive* or ironic level our psyche has to be able to tolerate the ambivalence that necessarily arises when we resist the pull of eros to over-identify with a myth.

We need, therefore, to validate and respect the value and importance of a creative imagination which thrives on a rich and extensive reservoir of symbols and metaphors that represent a psychological internalisation of the images that myths provide and can thereby enable both identification with the myth and a corresponding psychological motivation. It is essential that we understand this inner space to be a form of 'imagination' which is not to be confused with 'fantasies' or 'daydreams'. Hillman can be our guide here. A fascination with dreams and visions represents a naive fixation on the beautiful interior imagery of illusions and visions. 'Dreams, inscapes, and visions are not creative; they are but aspects of reflection ....' (1972: 85) A mind preoccupied with such fantasies is just receiving and copying that which reaches it from a reading of mythic narratives; it has not yet engaged in any psychic labour to creatively transform daydreams 'into scenic inscapes wherein one can enter and which are peopled with vivid figures with whom one can converse and feel, and touch their presence.' This is creative imagination or, what Hillman calls, 'psychological insearch'.

Transforming fantasy into imagination involves a great amount of effort and is a creative process that is exemplified by the arts. But it is not an art form as such because its purpose is not to be externalised into aesthetic productions or performances. Instead the creative imagination has the function of connecting us to the mythic life which is essentially *moral* and *ethical*.

The inner world of the creative imagination, or the 'imaginal', (see article on the imaginal self) is therefore neither simple fantasy nor artistic performance. We have a tendency to undervalue the importance of our internal imagery, often denigrating it to being a mere 'reflection' of an external reality, or a consequence of the influence of our emotions or instincts. We overlook the positive role played by the imagination in stimulating our desires, shaping our feelings, colouring our cognitions and connecting us to others in our relationships. If we learn to pay attention to our internal imagery and invest it with *psychological faith* then this internal move of love or eros transforms mere images into living presences. We re-mythologise ourselves so that our imagination can connect with powers, heroes, gods and other archetypal figures that we find in mythic narratives and thereby enable an erotic identification between our imagination (and self) and the universal values to be found in myths. Psychological faith enables a self to give credit to the reality and power of the images that feed the imagination. This love of images, which invests them with presence and vitality, 'gives one an increasing conviction of having, and then of being, an interior reality of deep significance transcending one's personal life.' (Hillman 1989: 86) As our psychological competency with regard to personal authenticity and reflexivity matures, we feel we can trust our imagination and free it from an over-controlling ego-consciousness. The inner world begins to take care of itself and develops an imaginal response to psychological problems through an inner reflexive identification with the process of mythic narratives. When faced with inner darkness we move forward by trusting our imagination and living the story.

When we have faith in our imagination and permit it's population with mythic and archetypal characters and stories, we need to be clear that this is not a form of possession. We are neither insane nor are we out of control. We do not need to disavow the relevance of the intellect and analytical thinking in our actions, but an empowered imagination does give us the choice not to be dominated by an instrumental ego-consciousness. Through our imagination we can endow an object with desire; we can let eros connect us to it; we can let the imagination roam

and be delighted, but we do not have to act out the fantasy. *A re-mythologised mind frees the imagination but does not become its slave.*

If we do not have faith in our imagination our inner world remains pale and deadened, and becomes prey to the personal meaninglessness. It is the very act of paying attention to images that invests them with life and meaning. I agree with Hillman (1972: 54) that this process is the movement of love or eros. It is the attention given by love that transforms mere images into presences and gives them life. But it is more than this. Through desire eros brings to life the imagination itself. This flame of desire awakens psyche to begin its work of psychological labour to produce the insights and self-awareness that enables the heat and light of eros to warm and enlighten us without burning and blinding us. Our own life and imagination 'become psyche through love and ... it is eros which engenders psyche.' (Hillman: 54)

We began this investigation into erotic connection by considering how the erotic links with the psychological to develop a creative imagination. This was a deliberate attempt to ensure that when we discuss the erotic we do not lose sight of its intrinsic connection with the psyche. Having established this caveat let us consider what we mean by erotic connection. In using the term 'erotic' we are always at risk of it being reduced to sexual desire. This is too limiting. From Plato to the present day we also see eros as that part of our psyche that needs and desires to overcome the 'unbridgeable' gulf between self and other - be it an other person, an other being or an other object. As Agathon says 'it is love who empties us of the spirit of estrangement and fills us with the spirit of kinship.' (Plato 1951: 710) Eros represents a yearning to join that which is experienced as separate and to leave the dark and dank prison of aloneness and isolation. It is a longing in a direction beyond the self and toward the Other. The movement of eros thereby represents a movement toward the freedom of making a connection with otherness. It attempts to overcome the stubbornness of otherness through love and thereby refuses to be dominated by it. By projectively endowing the other with attractive qualities we bring it to life for ourselves (and also for the self of the other) and our desire gives us a reason for doing something. This, as Wollheim (1999: 14) says, is not just a reason for 'doing something rather than nothing' but a reason for choosing between different possible actions. Through desire we are not just pushing ourselves towards the other, we are being *pulled* towards it through the pleasure of attraction.

The pleasure that is created by the pull and push of attraction as the gulf between self and other diminishes is not simply the unrestrained gratification of sexual desire. It is not the satiation of the imperial demands of an infant nor is it the pseudo-satisfaction of the compulsive need of an addict. The pleasure of attraction and union is shaped by the process we considered when discussing the creative imagination, wherein we have a dialectical relationship between the raw desire of eros which is reconfigured in interaction by the labour of the psyche. The flame of eros ignites and awakens the psyche who in turn transforms this raw energy and educates it into a mature form of love. The pleasure achieved is not the fusion of two inflamed passions, it is rather one wherein two souls can meet and each can recognise the soul of the other and thereby identify with it whilst understanding that the other is also a separate entity. It is the pleasure of the togetherness of separate individual entities. 'In erotic union we can experience that form of mutual recognition in which both partners lose themselves in each other without loss of self; they lose self-consciousness without loss of awareness.' (Benjamin 1988: 29)

Erotic connection is not the same as romantic love. In the latter, we see a mutual desire to fuse with the other and become one. By this path we don't, in fact, relieve the yearning to overcome separation by connecting with others, rather we dissolve or obliterate the difference between self and other. Both romantic love and erotic identification may be blind to the imperfections of the other. But the former is blind because the other, when perceived through the lens of romance, no longer exists as a separate self. The latter is blind only in the sense that it refuses to be dazzled by surface phenomena because it knows that wherever eros makes a connection it also stimulates the awakening of psyche such that the relationship of love has a solid psychological foundation that enables mutual autonomy and authenticity. This perception of the nature of the erotic also influences how we interpret the role of beauty as a source of erotic attraction. Hillman (1972: 101-2) cautions us against both the sexual and the heroic approach to beauty. We have already made clear that the erotic is not the same as the sexual and a concentration on the latter involves the danger of regressing eros to a purely instinctual level and leaves us prone to the dangerous allures of Aphrodite. For Hillman, the heroic aspect of beauty represents the *merely aesthetic* approach which produces 'embellishment rather than a meaning' and involves a puer or immature avoidance of the ugliness of the shadow side of our selfhood and the corresponding psychological need to understand, interpret and reintegrate the aesthetically unattractive into a mature identity. It is therefore the erotic connection with, and attraction to, the *beauty of the psyche* (or the soul)

that provides us with a source of motivation to work through the emotional and psychological difficulties that bedevil us in our life's journey. Only the beauty of Psyche can outshine the seductive power of Aphrodite. It is our appreciation of the beauty of psychological events and transformations that encourages us to take the risk of subjecting ourselves to the difficult path of seeking personal autonomy and authenticity. 'By being touched, moved, and opened by the experiences of the soul, one discovers that what goes on is not only interesting and meaningful, necessary and acceptable, but that it is attractive, lovable, and beautiful.'

(Hillman: 102) Seen from this angle, the process of erotic identification with myths replicates the nature of our own internal psychological development. Our individual need to reach psychological maturity is assisted and educated by our attraction to the psychological beauty we find (in ourselves and others) in the experience of such events as insight, self-awareness, empathy, authenticity and love. The role of mythic heroes, narratives and metaphors is to provide us with universal and archetypal characters who represent our emotional trials and tribulations on a grand scale and show us how our problems can be surmounted.

The best example of the nature of the erotic connections within a psychological frame is, of course, our understanding of transference and countertransference in psychotherapeutic relationships. For many, the key to understanding of psychotherapy and the key to the success of such interventions lies in the notion of erotic transference. Mann (1997: 9-10) sums this up admirably:

the emergence of the erotic transference signifies the patient's deepest wish for growth. Like those in love, patients wish to be known and understood, to change what they do not like about themselves, to alter what makes them unlovable. Through the erotic, light is shone on the deepest recesses of the psyche. The fundamental nature of the erotic is that it is psychically binding and connects individuals at the most intimate and deepest levels. The erotic transference, therefore, is potentially the most powerful and positive quality in the therapeutic process. ... The erotic transference can be said to signify the emergence of the desire to find a 'new transformational object' that will facilitate intrapsychic changes.

Psychotherapy in most of its guises except, perhaps, the behavioural, involves a particularly detailed and analytically cogent understanding of erotic connection through its usage of the concept of transference. But it only represents an intensified version of the erotic connections that accompany us throughout all those parts of our life where we make human connection.

Although eros is ubiquitous, my particular interest is the movement of eros in relation to the sacred. With my earlier analysis of commutative rationality I attempted to show how we could reasonably talk about the proposition that there are quasi-transcendental universals that are immanent in communication. From this I argued that there was not only a need to develop a concept of the sacred, but that it was possible to do so on a secular basis and that communicative rationality provided the foundation for such a project. However, we recognised that reason itself was an insufficient source of motivation for moral action that was tied to a recognition of a sacred that was secular. Hence our current investigation into the ability of myths to supply moral motivation has produced the realisation that *erotic connection is the primary (but not the only) engine of such motivation*. Through our understanding of the movement of eros we know that it cannot be confined to any of the following misconceptions: sexual desire, romantic love or beauty. I want, therefore, to bring this discussion of eros round to the notion that *eros provides us with a connection to the secular sacred and thereby enhances our motivation to act morally*.

However, connecting eros to the sacred is not a new phenomenon, what I am really describing is a re-connection because before the long processes of de-mythologisation, disenchantment and sexualisation, eros was firmly operating in the realm of the sacred. This is a well-documented historical process which need not be rehearsed here. But I think there is a benefit to be gained in a brief look at the tail-end of this trend as it has shown itself in recent times. Giddens, in his theory of the sequestration of experience, offers an insight into how eros became privatised into sexuality and rendered more manageable. From this perspective, 'sexuality', in the modern sense of the term, was invented when sexual behaviour lost its link to the wider context of erotic connection and became the property of the individual. More particularly it became the property of the body and lost its link with the psyche and the imaginal. The ethical response to sexual transgressions shifted from guilt to shame as sexuality became associated with self-identity. The concealment of sexual behaviour within the private sphere was a function of its association with the increasing importance of intimacy. Sexuality became closely associated with self-identity and separated from reproduction. The *erotic collapsed into the sexual and was sequestered into private experience*. As a consequence, our erotic connection to the cosmos and the sacred was substantially diminished leaving us distanced from the wider existential questions that life poses for us. Bloom (1998: 133), in observing American students, noticed that the erotic

yearning for a deeper connection had completely disappeared. 'The sex lives of our students and their reflection on them disarm such longing and make it incomprehensible to them. The reduction has robbed eros of its divinatory powers'

I believe that this reduction of eros to sexuality is a key cause of the destruction of the link between eros and mythological narratives which can encourage a moral motivation that is supported by a secular sense of the sacred. Although the degree and extent of social transformation required to re-establish this link is enormous and would include substantial and complex social, psychological, economic and cultural change, my particular interest has been concentrated on, as a first step, trying to establish a viable conception of a secular sacred and a reflexive mythology in order to show that such theoretical constructions are possible. I do not have the skill to create compelling mythological stories that would reengage erotic connection, but I do believe that they are critically necessary for any kind of moral re-engagement.

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See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.

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