

REFLEXIVE MYTHOLOGY - Michael Bennett (www.michaelbennett.org.uk)

Although reason can motivate us it is not the most powerful of motivators. As Eagleton (2009: 109) says reason 'does not go all the way down. It is not wall to wall.' It needs to draw on energies 'more tenacious, and less fragile than itself ...' Having developed the idea of a sense of the sacred that can be secular and also based on communicative rationality, we are left with the problem of determining by what means can we make this notion sufficiently attractive to persuade people to make a moral investment in this view of the sacred whilst simultaneously not infringing the demands of communicative rationality. Abstract ideas do not sell themselves. We need to consider in greater detail how myths might help us in this task.

Before we subject myths to the critical analysis that will enable us to consider them as having the potential to provide a reflexive form of moral motivation let us consider the features and functions that are characteristic of traditional myths. Myths are essentially stories and this narrative form is what differentiates them from theologies (which are forms of argumentation) and other religious practices such as liturgies and rituals. The narrative basis of myth recounts chronological sequences of events that are linked and have a rationality that appeals to the lived experience of the audience and to their imagination. By stirring and involving the emotions mythic stories capture our attention and enable and seduce us into recognising the relevance of the myth to us and thereby secure our identification and attachment. Myths are intimate and we become the story. The narrative form of a myth must be open and not too specific so that it is broad enough to appeal to the experience of many in the audience. Also the plot and character development must provide a higher level of meaning and coherence than is to be found in the everyday life of the audience. This narrative structure, along with the usage of a plethora of rhetorical devices, enables the audience to intimately identify with the story and may stimulate within them a psychological catharsis sufficient to learn some lessons for life which, in turn, can enhance moral motivation.

In order to obtain this process of psychological transformation in the audience, traditional myths draw from a range of standard devices and features. A myth typically involves either a moral or sacred story which has been handed down from generation to generation and claims a universal significance. The main characters take the super-human form of gods, spirits,

heroes and other such fantastic beings. There is a fluid ease of access between the differing realities and conceptions of time of both the supernatural and the human worlds. Schilbrack (2002a: 92) identifies four different levels at which myths operate. At the psychological level myths provide a paradigm for life stages and roles. The sociological level of myth addresses such social divisions as gender, class and power, and can provide either legitimation or criticism of such divisions. Metaphysically, myths articulate differences such as being and non-being, and at the cosmological level they create a map and a picture of the universe. The end effect being that the individual is able to find a meaning and purpose to his life by placing his personal story within the larger narrative frame of the myth.

Despite their huge potential for moral motivation, myths in their traditional form are of no use to us in a post-metaphysical world. In short, they break many of the essential rules of community rationality. Thus, they are not subject to verification through discourse and neither are they tested against the validity claims of truth, justice and authenticity. More specifically, traditional myths make a fatal cognitive confusion between nature and culture by failing to conceptually differentiate between language and world. The magical relation between names and their objects confuses the internal semantic relationship between different aspects of language with the external causal relationship between objects. The symbolic or representational aspect of language is unavailable to mythic consciousness because language and world become fused. 'Thus a linguistically constituted worldview can be identified with the world-order itself to such an extent that it cannot be perceived as an interpretation of the world that are subject to error and open to criticism. In this respect the confusion of nature and culture takes on the significance of a reification of worldview.' (Habermas 1997: 50)

It is essential to break the power that traditional myths possess whereby the identification by the believer with the myth is gained illegitimately through this hidden, unconscious and false fusion between language and world. This ideological power that traditional myths articulate through various forms of rhetorical devices and social control, follows the logical mistake that Vaihinger (1965: 90) warns us against whereby myths (or, using Vaihinger's term 'fictions') are paraded as hypotheses (that falsely claim to provide testable statements about reality) or dogmas (which claim to be reality). 'In other words, we must not become attached to these fictions as though they were the essential thing, but we must recognise them as fictions and be content with this knowledge, and refuse to allow ourselves to be enticed and confused by the illusory questions and illusory problems arising out of them.'

Only if we avoid this confusion is it possible for us to develop the idea of an external world that is independent of any particular symbolic representation of it. This development is a prerequisite for the creation of an individual consciousness and subjectivity that is based on an internal world that knows itself to be separate from the external world. This, in turn, also becomes dependent upon a form of selfhood that has the resilience to maintain a coherent conception of the self despite having become distanced and alienated from the comfort of the total embrace of a mythic worldview and thereby forced to come to terms with the resulting cognitive and emotional states of ambivalence, ambiguity, paradox, irony and contradiction. The demise of traditional myths creates the necessity for a conceptual outlook that is, and knows itself to be, reflexive just as it requires a similar psychological and emotional reflexivity in the human subject.

This seemingly fatal blow to the relevance of mythology, that is, the 'seeing-through' of the spellbinding power of myths to the hidden and inherent falsehood of a myth's ontological claim by reflexive subjects should, at one level, encourage us to abandon the world of myths altogether. But, my argument is that this very process of conscious deconstruction creates the new possibility for a conscious reconstruction of a new idea of a myth that *knows itself to be a fiction and is held self-consciously and reflexively*. Such mythical worldviews would have to operate within the parameters set by commutative rationality. By this I do not mean that they become a form of argument. Rather the descriptive and explanatory aspects of a mythical narrative would be subject to critical examination.

It is not an accident that my consideration of the sacred is followed by an investigation into the mythological. There has been a long historical link between them because, if the narrative form of the myth is the best way to gain the attachment and identification of an audience, it is natural to expect that this symbolic form would be closely associated with that part of life in which we invest the highest value, that is, the sacred. The mythic form can be used to express all aspects of life from sports celebrities to national heroes, but it comes into its own when we are required to venerate that which has supreme value. As Ricoeur (1969: 5) indicates, during the process in which myth historically lost its pretension to explanatory power in the face of competition from theology and then science, through the development of their symbolic function myths gained the 'power of discovery and revealing the bond between man and what he considers sacred.'

For more on reflexive myths see the articles on the power of myths to persuade and erotic identification.

References

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