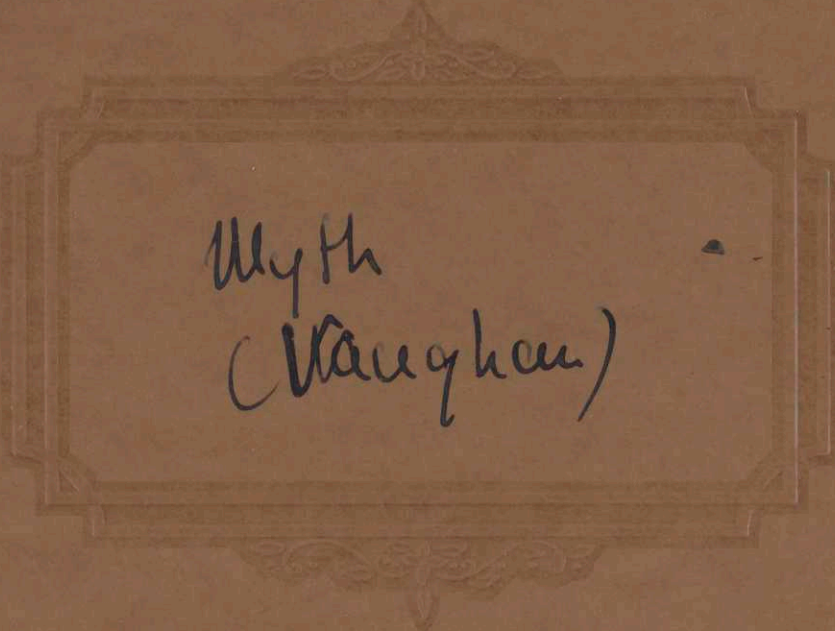


Paper - History of Science 6

1939 June 7



Myth
(Vaughan)

Paper- History of Science 6.

The Role of Myth in Primitive and Rational Society.

Dr. de Santillana
Lacey I couldn't
see you before call at
up and you'll call at
Saturday. My readings
Burnet - E. G.
Hess - Prime Mysterium
Flax - Parmanides
Heidel - Logic of Pre-Socratics
Qualitative Change

Vaughan

June 7, 1939.

A comparative study of myth in primitive and in rational society shows that myth, while retaining the same representational character in rational as in primitive society, undergoes a change from the viewpoint of its functional character. Myth as representational of the objective must clearly remain the same whether found in savage or in civilized society. But defined in terms of its function, as it is by modern anthropologists, myth may be shown to be fundamentally different in its role in primitive and rational societies. For the functional viewpoint of myth in the world of the primitive we may take the work of L. Levy-Bruhl, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, B. Malinowski, and F. Boas. For the role of myth in rational society we may consider the mythical aspect of the philosophy of Plato after first indicating briefly on the basis of F.M. Cornford's work the possible nature of the intellectual transition from a savage society to a civilization like that of ancient Greece.

Now although the anthropologists that we take as representative agree in their functional approach to mythology, their results are rather divergent, especially in the case of Levy-Bruhl, on the one hand, and Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, on the other. Levy-Bruhl takes as his starting point his notion

of the mystical character of the primitive mind. According to this sociologist, the general peculiarity of the primitive collective representations is their mystical character,¹ where we are to understand by "collective representation" a psychological phenomenon of a mixed intellectual, cognitive, and emotional nature participated in by all the members of a given society. This mystical character implies belief in forces and influences and actions which, though non-sensible, are real. Thus, the collective representations represent to the mind of the primitive a given object as being inextricably bound up with mystic properties which are never separated from the object.²

Now in the mystic relations which primitive mentality senses in objects, there is one fundamental element that is never lacking -- all these mystical relations involve a "participation" between persons or objects which form part of a collective representation;³ and in accordance with this, we may lay down as the principle peculiar to primitive mentality the Law of Participation. From the standpoint of this law; in the collective representations of primitive mentality, objects can be both themselves and something other than them-

¹ Lucien Levy-Bruhl, How Natives Think, trans. L. A. Chase, (London, 1926), p. 38.

² Ibid., p. 43.

³ Ibid., p. 76.

selves, and objects give forth and receive mystic powers, qualities, and influences.⁴ This means that the mentality of primitives, being mystic, is also prelogical, and conceives the mystic properties of things under the law of participation without troubling with contradictions intolerable from a logical standpoint.⁵

We are now in a position to see the functional value of myth in Levy-Bruhl's theory. The mystic element surrounding the positive content of the myth is, as we should expect, regarded by Levy-Bruhl as the basis of the myth's social value and power.⁶ In other words, myth is a participational medium, and to act as such is its social function. From this standpoint, myth must be regarded as a product of a more advanced society, since the participation of the individual in the social group is directly felt in the most primitive societies, and correspondingly, in these groups myths are meagre.⁷ Myths are to be thought of, says Levy-Bruhl, as the products of primitive mentality when this mentality is endeavoring to realize a participation no longer felt -- when it has recourse

⁴ Ibid., pp. 76-77.

⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

⁶ Ibid., p. 370.

⁷ Ibid., p. 361.

to intermediaries designed to secure a communion which has ceased to be a reality.⁸ Such is the outstanding French sociologist's view of the function of myth.⁹

Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, however, taken an entirely different standpoint in their discussions of myth; this, of course, is to be expected, inasmuch as Levy-Bruhl's theory is dependent on his more general theory of primitive psychology. According to Radcliffe-Brown, who has investigated the culture of the Andaman Islanders, the myths of this people express the social value of human actions, of the past, and of national phenomena, by the "social value" of an object being understood the way in which it affects the life of society and, consequently, the social sentiments of the individual.¹⁰ In other words, the myths are the concrete expression of the feelings and ideas aroused by things as the result of the way in which these things affect the moral and the social life of the members of society. Moreover, in so expressing the "social value" of things, the primitives explain nature, which is less-known, in terms of what is more-known, namely, society, for the body of social experience is regulated and definite.¹¹ Thus, in

⁸ Ibid., p. 368.

⁹ It should be noted that Levy-Bruhl's theory is opposed to the "explanatory" hypotheses which would account for myths by intellectual activity like our own, though childish. Cf. Ibid., p. 372.

¹⁰ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, The Andaman Islanders, (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 397-98.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 379.

effect, the moral forces met in society are projected into the world of nature and the order of the world is a moral order with moral forces.¹² This projection, of course, is the immediate result of man's experience in society, and is not the result of searching intellectual effort.¹³

We are also given an indication of the relation of myth to science. According to Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation, the myths of the Andaman Islanders take for granted the uniformity of nature, for if a force is once set in action it will continue to act indefinitely; there are here two notions implicit -- 1) the idea of uniformity of nature itself, and 2) the dependence of the present on the past.¹⁴ The myths aim to justify these two conceptions.¹⁵ But it must be noted that these two principles are intensely practical, since they regulate social action;¹⁶ moreover, the myths are certainly not "pre-science". While in their practical life the Andaman Islanders are not

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 381, pp. 384-5. Cf. Anaximander -- "...Into that from which things take their rise they pass away once more, 'as in meet; for they make reparation and satisfaction to one another for their injustice according to the ordering of time."

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 380. Boas, in *The Mind of Primitive Man*, 1st ed., p. 243, remarks that an important change from primitive culture to civilization seems to consist in the gradual elimination of the social associations of sense-impressions and of activities.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

illogical, in their myths they do not always apply logical consistency.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, the Andaman Islander, according to Radcliffe-Brown, has no interest in nature except in so far as it affects directly the social life.¹⁸ So much for the viewpoint of this investigator.

The most persistent student of the primitive myth in recent years has been Bronislaw Malinowski. Like the theories of Levy-Bruhl and Radcliffe-Brown, his interpretations are functional, while at the same time he gives us a more complete picture of the place of myth in the total cultural complex. Myth, on Malinowski's interpretation, is a statement of a reality still practically alive in that its precedent still rules the social life of the natives.¹⁹ The main cultural functions of myth is to sanction by precedent the existing order and to give a pattern of moral values, magical belief, and ritual actions.²⁰

17 Ibid., pp. 396-97.

18 Ibid., p. 379.

19 Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology, (New York, 1926), p. 58. Cf. the same author's "Culture", article, Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences.

20 Ibid., p. 30. Cf. "Culture", article, Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, and the same author's The Foundation of Faith and Morals, (Oxford, 1936), p. 20. This view of myth as a sanction of rite is also expressed by J. E. Harrison, Themis, (Cambridge, 1913), pp. 327-331. Otherwise this study of the social origins is of little relevance to the present subject. Boas, in General Anthropology, ed. Boas, (New York, 1938), also gives this account of rite and myth.

Thus, myth may attach itself to any form of social power or claim, as religion; but its most highly developed form is where it acts as a sanction of magic.²¹

Malinowski thus agrees with Levy-Bruhl and Radcliffe-Brown that myth is not "savage philosophy" or "pre-science".²² But on his views on the place of science and magic, which we have seen has the closest relation to myth, he is opposed to the theories both of Levy-Bruhl and Sir James Frazer. In the first place, Malinowski severely criticizes Levy-Bruhl's theory, and argues that the savage is not entirely mystical, but is rather in possession of a considerable store of knowledge based on experience and constructed by reason.²³ Furthermore, myth itself is the complement, not the substitute, of what is the "science" of the primitive man; the primitives explain, as we do, and this by reference to experience, logic, and common sense.²⁴

Moreover, if myth is thus complementary to science and at the same time a sanction of magic, the theory implies that Sir James Frazer's account of the relation of myth, magic, and religion is at fault. On Frazer's theory, magic is a bastard science inasmuch as it makes the universal assumptions of causality

²¹ Malinowski, "Magic, Science, and Religion," in Science, Religion, and Reality, ed. J. Needham.

²² Ibid., p. 77.

²³ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁴ The Foundations of Faith and Morals, p. 20.

that like produces like and that things contiguous in space are related as cause and effect and then proceeds to misapply these associations of ideas. Religion is regarded as an advance over this bastard science effected over a long period of time by the "better minds". As a general theory of myth, Frazer is not clear.²⁵ Now Malinowski regards this account of magic and science as mistaken. Magic, far from being primitive science, he holds, is the outgrowth of a clear recognition that science has its limits and that human skill is sometimes impotent. Magic comes into play in relation to the unaccountable and adverse influences, whereas the rational knowledge operates in connection with the well-known and ordinary conditions.²⁶ There are no savage races lacking either in the scientific attitude or in science. No art or craft could ever have been invented or maintained without the careful observation of natural process and belief in its regularity as well as the use of reason.²⁷ And if we mean by science a body of rules and conceptions, based on experience and derived from it by logical inferences, exemplified in material achievements and in a fixed form of tradition, the savages have

²⁵ This theory of magic and religion is found in The Golden Bough, abridged ed., (New York, 1923), pp. 10-60. For the rest, this work is not directly applicable to the theory of myth.

²⁶ The Foundations of Faith and Morals, p. 43. Cf. Science, Religion, and Reality, op. cit., p. 31.

²⁷ Science, Religion and Reality, op. cit., p. 21.

the beginnings of science.²⁸ Or even if we mean by science, theoretical laws of knowledge explicitly laid down and subject to control by experiment and rational criticism, there is little doubt that many principles of primitive knowledge are scientific,²⁹ even though not abstracted from their applications.³⁰

Thus, in terms of Malinowski's theory, we have magic and science as distinct, and myth as distinct from either of these, for Malinowski, also, rejects the "explanatory" hypothesis that would make myth the product of the "savage scientist." Primitive man, he concludes from his investigations, has a purely artistic or scientific interest in nature only to a very limited extent. Rather, the interests of the primitive are tuned up with a general pragmatic outlook, and even in the sense in which we have seen the primitive to have science, this science is based on an entirely different attitude from that which produces the myths.

So much for the theory of myth in a primitive society. The role of myth in a rational society must now be considered, but first we may mention briefly one possible hypothesis as to the nature of the transition from primitive to rational society in relation to the function of myth. This hypothesis is offered by

²⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁹ Ibid.,

³⁰ It is interesting to note that Boas independently defends the science of primitive man in much the same terms in his article "Anthropology" in Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Boas, however, unfortunately gives us nowhere a general theory of myth.

F. M. Cornford.³¹ In the first place, we must accept Levy-Bruhl's notion of mysticism in primitive society, at least for the most undeveloped groups. In the most primitive society we have a real identification of Custom and Nature. Accordingly, there is here no need for representation either in myth, religion, or science, and what magic there is is "sympathetic", without a really distinct, objectified sphere for operation regarded as separate. But from this condition arises the situation where we do get a real representation. In this most primitive state we have the individual and the collective consciousness undifferentiated, but if they somehow lose their mystical identity we have an object for the first representation. Now in terms of a totemic society, we may further visualize the rise of a consciousness of distinction between the totemic object and its corresponding human objectification. Where there was originally one pool of force or mana, which is itself the very first religious representation -- a representation of the collective consciousness, there is a division into two pools. The magical continuum parts into two pools of human and non-human force, and when this has occurred we may have a polydaemonism of (1) the daemon of the social group united by blood kinship,

³¹ From Religion to Philosophy, (London, 1912), ch. 3.

(2) the local spirit of fertility, (3) the daemon of a magical fraternity, which consists of their collective powers or super-human mana, and (4) the daemon of a natural element, which is the non-human counterpart of (3), or the mana of a natural element. Now in such a situation we still have a primitive society. It is the next stage of the evolution that is really important for the growth of rational society.

In connection with this development it is the daemon, or the mana of the natural element that is important; for here only the old provinces of moira, which is simply part of the negative aspect of the first religious representation of the collective consciousness, and which is to become of the greatest importance in the development of science, may remain undisturbed. Further, the character of the Olympian God, which is the outgrowth of the nature-daemon, is such that he may allow the development of science by his very removal. Without the bond of union that ties the Mystery God to his function, the Olympian may drift away from his province, and nature is left free for the rational operations of science in terms of concepts that were long laid down, such as moira. This new science, or philosophy, to which the Olympian theology will give rise will be dominated by the conception of "spatial externality",

moira
just as mana-had dominated the Gods. Further, it will move towards materialism, since it has no real idea of life as an inward and spontaneous principle, though the physie with which we start is the old element of supernatural living power, in other words, the continuum of matter powered with vital force which had been the vehicle of magical sympathy. Thus, the movement from religion to philosophy is essentially a removal of an overgrowth of rationally and socially useless gods, and a restatement, now for the first time in rational terms, of the projection of the collective consciousness.³² This fundamental point will recur again after we consider the role of myth in Plato and his dialogue Parmenides, both as representative of thought in rational society.

J. A. Stewart and K. Reinhardt have given us what are perhaps the best general treatments of the function of myth in Plato.³³ According to Stewart, the fundamental appeal of the Platonic myth is directed to the non-logical, but basic, part

³² Gilbert Murray, The Five Stages of Greek Religion, (Oxford, 1925), pp. 34-44 gives a somewhat more superficial hypothesis of the rise of religion. He is not concerned with the growth of science.

³³ P. Frutiger, Les Mythes de Platon (Paris, 1930), pp. 178-229 gives us a much less general treatment. He rejects any "general formula" for the myths and apparently would not accept the interpretation of Stewart and Reinhardt which makes the Platonic myth essentially a transcendental science.

of our nature that exercises itself practically in value-judgments.³⁴ In short, the myths arouse and regulate transcendental feeling, the effect produced in consciousness by "the persistence in us of that primeval condition from which we are sprung, when Life was still as sound asleep as Death, and there was no Time yet."³⁵ Now in this "primeval condition", the operative principle is the basic principle of our nature, the "Vegetative Part of the Soul", which makes the assumption on which our conduct and science rests and which therefore science cannot question -- the assumption that life is worth living.³⁶ Thus, Transcendental Feeling is at once the sense of Timeless Being overshadowing us and the conviction that life is good,³⁷ and it is regulative of conduct and science.

More specifically, the function of Platonic myth is as follows. In ordinary life, Sense and Understanding make claim to be the measure of truth and of good and bad; but they leave out the secret plan of the universe which is understood, but cannot be rationally explained, by the other "part of the soul." This secret plan can only be given in a Vision, a Vision which reveals that the faculties of our moral and intellectual constitution are determined by causes which in turn are shown to be

³⁴ J. A. Stewart, The Myths of Plato, (London, 1905), p. 21.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

determined by the Universal Plan.³⁸ Now this Vision shows us that the Universe is the work of a wise and good God so that we have produced in us a mood of good hope, and as producing this mood, the Platonic myth regulates transcendental Feeling for the service of conduct and science.³⁹ In Aetiological Myth, accordingly, the Categories of the Understanding and the Moral Virtues are deduced from a Plan of the Universe, while in Eschatological Myth the "Ideas of Reason", Soul, Cosmos, and God are set forth as the justification for the hope at the basis of all our life -- that life is good.⁴⁰ And thus, by setting forth the a priori conditions of conduct and knowledge as expressions of the hope that guides us, the myths have the reciprocal action of inducing and regulating Transcendental Feeling for the service of conduct and knowledge. And the ideas which myth adduces are "true" in the sense that man's life would come to naught if he did not act as if they were true. Thus, since these ideas cannot be grasped by the Scientific Understanding and are not strictly to be had on the basis of science, which cannot reach the Cosmos,⁴¹ Plato uses myth, and to complement science in this way is the function of myth.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 42-3.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 50.

Karl Reinhardt gives us a similar, though somewhat less specific, account.⁴² On his view also, myth is a passage beyond science. According to Reinhardt, in Plato's system it is only by our soul that we know the cosmos, and the soul projects the universe as something knowable, so that we have a circular process. The logos of the soul is the logos of the universe, but only the inner logos can be known. Thus, like the Pre-Socratics, Plato is setting forth images, but is doing it consciously. Myth and dialectic are related in that dialectic is a resolving principle and myth is a forming principle. The relation of myth to idea, further, is that of content and form, and also that of forming and looking. And he who looks at ideas may become a dialectitian. Dialectic, moreover, becomes that which frees the myth, for causality is suppressed in the realm of knowing and understanding and unfolds itself in the realm of the soul, whose function in myth we have just seen. The causality of the soul is quite different from scientific causality, and the language of the soul is myth.

The limit of dialectic, moreover, is only exceptionally reached through dialectic itself; usually the completion is through myth. Thus, the myth gives to the wise the roots, while the clever are satisfied with the leaves. It is myth that reminds

⁴² Karl Reinhardt, Platons Mythen

us of the roots -- the myth is the vegetative spirit of the tree which is the soul. In short, the myths are "nutritive memories" unbelievable to the clever but believable to the wise.

Such is briefly Reinhardt's conception of the specific place of myth in Plato's philosophy. It remains now only to add briefly a comparative note on myths in rational society, as seen also in Plato's Parmenides, and myth in primitive society. We find in rational society myth functioning in a manner reversed from its place in the primitive world. Whereas for the primitive, myth is an unconscious complement to science which gives us what is truly known, in the rational society, as seen in Plato's use of myth, the myth consciously goes beyond dialectic, which gives us only an incomplete, closed representational system. Thus, though myth and science may be alike in their static aspect of representation, myth in rational society as functional goes beyond science to give us a representational "as-if" picture. While science subsumes myth in the primitive society, in the rational society myth operates as a flight beyond dialectic to strive for some sort of representation that science cannot give. Thus, myth in rational society undergoes a reversal of its original function.

Finally, we may note briefly the relation of the thought of Plato's Parmenides to primitive representation. Parmenidean

thought, and consequently the Parmenides, may be taken as a geometrical statement of the old representation (vide supra). In other words, the representation that was mythical is not swept away by science, but becomes rationalized by dialectic. Parmenides, and Plato in the Parmenides, are thus giving us a reasoned, geometrical representation of the first representation, and in so doing are returning (without knowing it) to the same object of representation as primitive mythical thought dealt with. But now the function of myth as it operated in savage society has been removed. Myth is therefore left to reverse its role by transcending science; and as fulfilling this function we see it in Plato as representative of the rational society.

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