Ernst Cassirer

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The Myth of the State

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FELIX MEINER VERLAG
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THE MYTH OF THE STATE

Text und Anmerkungen
bearbeitet von
Maureen Lukay

FELIX MEINER VERLAG
HAMBURG

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INHALT

PART III
THE MYTH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

To
Charles W. Hendel
in friendship and gratitude

FOREWORD

This was the last book written by Professor Ernst Cassirer. It had just been finished and copied from his manuscript a few days before his sudden and untimely death on April 13, 1945.

There is no need to introduce the author or his philosophy. The name and work of Professor Cassirer are already well-known. The place he made for himself in American philosophy during the four years of his life in this country is to be witnessed in the present widespread demand for translations of his writings, which fortunately are appearing in fairly close succession.[1] There is promised also a memorial volume, to which many scholars have contributed and which is to be published in the Library of Living Philosophers (edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp, Northwestern University). An authorized biography too will come out in that same work. There will thus be rich opportunity elsewhere to learn more about the man himself and the significance of his extensive achievements in the world of learning.

But, though no introduction is necessary, a foreword is appropriate to this last book. All who know Locke's »Essay on the Human Understanding« will recall the livelier sense of personal interest they felt when they came to the passage where the author tells how his book came to be written, speaking particularly of those discussions with friends who had besought him to present to the world the thoughts that they had shared in conversation. There is a revealing detail of the same sort to be told about the present work.

Professor Cassirer came to this country from Göteborg, Sweden, in the spring of 1941, a scholar and philosopher of distinction, at the height of his career. He had published a masterly study of the problem of knowledge, ranging over nearly the whole of Western thought.[2] The qualification »nearly« is added because a fourth volume, treating of the subject »from the death of Hegel to the present« – the »present« being the year 1932 – was still in manu|script and actually left behind

[1] The following translations have recently been published: Ernst Cassirer, Rousseau, Kant, Goethe. Two Essays, Engl. transl. by James Gutmann, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall, Jr., Princeton, N. J. 1945; idem, Language and Myth, Engl. transl. by Susanne K. Langer, New York 1946.

[2] Idem, Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit, 3 vols., Berlin 1906, 1907, 1920 [ECW 2–4].

at his departure for America.[3] When we first welcomed him, as Visiting Professor at Yale University, we had no knowledge of that unpublished matter nor, indeed, of many other good things in store for us. What had been published seemed monumental achievement enough. We knew him as a great interpreter of the philosophy of Kant. His studies of the Renaissance[4] and of the eighteenth century[5] were indubitable evidence of historical genius. And since so much of what we knew had treated of the philosophy, science, and culture of periods in the past, we tended to admire him above all as a supremely fine historical scholar. There was another reason for this. We were on the lookout for that kind of scholarship, as something very much needed in philosophy today, and so we paid more attention to it than to those other high qualifications of mind and learning that were soon to be clearly revealed in the teaching and conversation of Professor Cassirer when he was actually working amongst us as a colleague.

Whenever Professor Cassirer treated of any subject he not only passed in review with fine understanding what the preceding philosophers had thought but he also brought together into an original, synoptic view whatever related to the subject from every aspect of human experience – art, literature, religion, science, history. In all that he undertook there was a constant demonstration of the relatedness of the different forms of human knowledge and culture. He possessed, therefore, the genius of philosophical synthesis as well as historical imagination and scholarship. These were the things his colleagues and many appreciative students came to cherish in those rare courses and seminars which he offered successively at Yale and Columbia University.

There had, of course, been some published evidence of the original and systematic thought which we expect of the true philosopher. Two scholars had taken the initiative years ago in producing an English translation of Professor Cassirer's »Substance and Function« and »Einstein's Theory of Relativity«.[6] That very same | year there had

[3] This fourth volume on »The Problem of Knowledge« is being translated into English and will be published by the Yale University Press [Ders., The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel, engl. Übers. v. William H. Woglom/Charles William Hendel, New Haven, Conn. 1950].

[4] For instance, idem, Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance, Leipzig 1927 (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, Vol. X) [ECW 14, S. VII–XI u. 1–220].

[5] Idem, Die Philosophie der Aufklärung, Tübingen 1932 (Grundriß der philosophischen Wissenschaften) [ECW 15] and idem, Goethe und die geschichtliche Welt, Berlin 1932 [ECW 18, S. 355–434].

[6] Idem, Substance and Function, Engl. transl. by William Curtis Swabey/Marie Collins Swabey, Chicago 1923.

appeared in Germany the first of three volumes on the subject of »symbolic forms«.[7] This was his own adventure of ideas. The philosophy of symbolic forms was, in a sense, the fulfilment of Professor Cassirer's ambition as a constructive thinker. It was an elaborate study of the ways in which the world of human experience is articulated through the various modes of symbolizing activity that are characteristic of man. This view amplified the Kantian insight into the role of certain forms of sensuous intuition and logical categories in constituting our world of nature; other forms, it was now argued, have a similar function in constituting the world that man actually experiences and knows. Language, myth, art, religion, history, science, all these forms of cultural expression alike enter into the knowledge man has both of himself and of his total environment. Here was Professor Cassirer's own philosophy of man and existence.

But that philosophy of symbolic forms was little known when Professor Cassirer came over to do his work in American universities. The three volumes in the German were scarcely accessible to the student of philosophy in this country. Besides, the demonstration of this theory involved a detailed examination of a vast body of evidence concerning the diverse forms of culture, and not many scholars had the experience of them or were so comprehensively informed as to be able to appreciate the argument. A brief and simple version of that »philosophical anthropology«, as he called it, was thus very much needed in order to satisfy the interest of an ever-widening circle of friends and students who desired to know his philosophy. He liked his students, too, and his many new associates, and he wanted, for his part, to be better known to them all. So he very modestly, and almost without a word about it, set to work to compose a short essay in English which became his »Essay on Man«.[8]

But in writing that »Essay« the philosopher was also looking beyond the immediate circle of his friends and students. He discerned a universal need of the time. In those wartime days the question »What is man?« had a poignant force that no one could avoid. It was plain to be seen that much more had to be attempted than what Locke had

[7] Idem, Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache, Berlin 1923 [ECW 11]; Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken, Berlin 1925 [ECW 12]; Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis, Berlin 1929 [ECW 13]. See also idem, Naturalistische und humanistische Begründung der Kulturphilosophie, in: Göteborgs Kungliga Vetenskaps- och Vitterhets-Samhälles handlingar, Femte Följden, Ser. A, Vol. VII/3, Göteborg 1939, pp. 1–28 [ECW 22, S. 140–166].

[8] Idem, An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture, New Haven, Conn. 1944 [ECW 23].

undertaken or Kant or many another fine spirit | of that eighteenth century which Professor Cassirer loved so well. Other aspects had to be reckoned with besides the phenomena of the human understanding or reason. In that new »Essay on Man« Professor Cassirer recalled the still unexhausted imperative of wisdom uttered by Socrates: Know thyself. The argument of the book showed the course of that quest for self-knowledge through history and brought us to a better comprehension of the condition of man today. Thus the »Essay« served a large, general purpose as well as meeting the need of his friends. While it communicated to them the essentials of his philosophy of symbolic forms it also contributed to the wisdom of this day about man himself.

Still that was not the whole of Professor Cassirer's concern with the dark, troubled times in which we were living. Most people talked easily about the fact that we were going through a crisis of world history. It was natural to expect a confused welter of ideas in the public mind about the philosophy of history or about the nature of our own civilization. All sorts of quasi-philosophies were likely to spring up in such conditions, inspired by some ideology or the political interests of those who enunciated them. On this occasion, the friends of Professor Cassirer looked to him as the man who could speak with the wisest judgment, since he could interpret the situation of our time in the two great perspectives of history and philosophy. Some of those who were close to him ventured to ask: »Won't you tell the meaning of what is happening today, instead of writing about past history, science, and culture? You have so much knowledge and wisdom – we who are working with you know that so well – but you should give others, too, the benefit of it.« He then set to work, in the winter of 1943–44, on a sketch of a book on the theme »the myth of the state«. The magazine »Fortune« issued in June, 1944, an abbreviated version of what he had so far written. The present book, which was composed subsequently, during the years 1944–45, is the complete realization of this work of occasion begun originally in response to an appeal of his closest friends.

Professor Cassirer had asked me to serve as critic and editor of both the »Essay on Man« and this present book. My responsibility is now all the greater because this work appears posthumously. What I wish to make clear, in giving an accounting here of my friendly office, is that the book is presented practically as it was written by him. This is possible because it was one of his many | remarkable powers that he could, unaided, write English clearly, fluently, and with a nice sense of the meanings of the language.

In the case of the previous work, the »Essay on Man«, it had been the practice of the author to submit a first draft of the book for criti-

cism. He always wanted criticism of his philosophical argument as well as of his use of language. He received any suggested corrections or improvements gratefully. With delicate courtesy he would weigh and appreciate every observation and query. He took it as axiomatic that if a friendly critic could not see the matter clearly or logically as he had presented it, the fault must be his own, an assumption which links him with David Hume, who had the same respect for the mind of his reader. As it happened, indeed, by far the greater number of the suggestions made had to do merely with the need of abbreviation and succinctness. It was necessary, for instance, to limit the generous amplitude of his quotations, for he always wanted to let an author cited speak fully for himself, which not only increased the size of the volume unduly but also diminished proportionately what he himself had to say in it. Aside from such considerations there were merely minor points of criticism and alteration which he always accepted with good grace.

The present work has been prepared for publication in the same fashion as the »Essay on Man«. There is only this difference – that the author himself never saw Part III exactly as it is here presented. The changes that seemed necessary in the text of Parts I and II were practically all scrutinized by him, and most of them we had a chance actually to discuss in person. I hope that in editing the third and last part, without having the comforting assurance of his own final review of it, I have not altered anything that would have mattered to him. I am resting my faith in this respect upon the perfect understanding we had during our all-too-few years of association.

Before finishing the preparation of the text I was appointed, in July, 1945, to serve with the United States Army in England and to teach philosophy at an Army University. The editing of Chapter XVII on Hegel was not in quite satisfactory form at the time of my departure. I wish to acknowledge the kind services of my colleague, Professor Brand Blanshard of Yale University, who looked over the copy and made final corrections before it went to press.

Grateful acknowledgment must also be made for the faithful | and accurate work done by Dr. Friedrich W. Lenz, formerly of New Haven, who verified all the quotations and references and raised many questions about usage which had to be attended to and decided by an editor. Thanks to these services we can be sure that the work has a scholarly character in detail befitting a book issued under the name of Professor Ernst Cassirer.

It would be very much amiss on my part if I did not take this opportunity, on behalf of the friends and the family of Professor Cassirer, to

tell of the generous personal interest shown by Mr. Eugene Arthur Davidson, editor of the Yale University Press, whose relationship to this work is not merely a business one but much more that of fine, sympathetic appreciation. The author would have wanted this said, because that sort of interest was one of the things he was ever grateful for in his American experience.

Charles William Hendel
New Haven, Connecticut
April 13, 1946 |

PART I

WHAT IS MYTH? |

I
The Structure of Mythical Thought

In the last thirty years, in the period between the first and the second World Wars, we have not only passed through a severe crisis of our political and social life but have also been confronted with quite new theoretical problems. We experienced a radical change in the forms of political thought. New questions were raised and new answers were given. Problems that had been unknown to the political thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came suddenly to the fore. Perhaps the most important and the most alarming feature in this development of modern political thought is the appearance of a new power: the power of mythical thought. The preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought in some of our modern political systems is obvious. After a short and violent struggle mythical thought seemed to win a clear and definitive victory. How was this victory possible? How can we account for the new phenomenon that so suddenly appeared on our political horizon and in a sense seemed to reverse all our former ideas of the character of our intellectual and our social life?

If we look at the present state of our cultural life we feel at once that there is a deep chasm between two different fields. When it comes to political action man seems to follow rules quite different from those recognized in all his mere theoretical activities. No one would think of solving a problem of natural science or a technical problem by the methods that are recommended and put into action in the solution of political questions. In the first case we never aim to use anything but rational methods. Rational thought holds its ground here and seems constantly to enlarge its field. Scientific knowledge and technical mastery of nature daily win new and unprecedented victories. But in man's practical and social life the defeat of rational thought seems to be complete and irrevocable. In this domain modern man is supposed to forget everything he has learned in the development of his intellectual life. He is admonished to go back to the first rudi|mentary stages of human culture. Here rational and scientific thought openly confess their breakdown; they surrender to their most dangerous enemy.

In order to find the explanation of this phenomenon that at first sight seems to derange all our thoughts and defy all our logical standards we must begin with the beginning. Nobody can hope to understand the origin, the character, and influence of our modern political myths without first answering a preliminary question. We must know what myth *is* before we can explain how it *works*. Its special effects can only be accounted for if we have attained a clear insight into its general nature.

What does myth mean? And what is its function in man's cultural life? As soon as we raise this question we are plunged into a great battle between conflicting views. In this case the most disconcerting feature is not the lack but the abundance of our empirical material. The problem has been approached from every angle. Both the historical development of mythical thought and its psychological foundations have been carefully studied. Philosophers, ethnologists, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists have their share in these studies. We seem now to be in possession of all the facts; we have a comparative mythology that extends over all the parts of the world and that leads us from the most elementary forms to highly developed and sophisticated conceptions. As regards our *data* the chain seems to be closed; no essential link is missing. But the *theory* of myth is still highly controversial. Every school gives us a different answer; and some of these answers are in flagrant contradiction of each other. A philosophical theory of myth must begin at this point.

Many anthropologists have asserted that myth is, after all, a very simple phenomenon – for which we hardly need a complicated psychological or philosophical explanation. It is simplicity itself; for it is nothing but the sancta simplicitas of the human race. It is not the outcome of reflection or thought nor is it enough to describe it as a product of human imagination. Imagination alone cannot account for all its incongruities and its fantastic and bizarre elements. It is rather the *Urdummheit* of man that is responsible for these absurdities and contradictions. Without this »primeval stupidity« there would be no myth. |

At first sight such an answer may seem to be very plausible; yet as soon as we begin to study the development of mythical thought in human history we are confronted with an important difficulty. Historically we find no great culture that is not dominated by and pervaded with mythical elements. Shall we say that all these cultures – Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Greek – are nothing but so many masks and disguises for man's »primeval stupidity«, that, at bottom, they lack any positive value and significance?

The historians of human civilization could never accept this view. They had to look for a better and more adequate explanation. But their answers were, in most cases, as divergent as their scientific interests. We can perhaps best illustrate their attitude by a simile. There is a scene in Goethe's »Faust« in which we see Faust in the witch's kitchen waiting for her drink by virtue of which he shall regain his youth. Standing before an enchanted glass he suddenly has a wonderful vision. In the glass appears the image of a woman of supernatural beauty. He is enraptured and spellbound; but Mephisto, standing at his side, scoffs at his enthusiasm. He knows better; he knows that what Faust has seen was not the form of a real woman; it was only a creature of his own mind.

We may remember this scene when studying the various theories that, in the nineteenth century, vied with each other in their explanations of the mystery of myth. The Romantic philosophers and poets were the first who had drunk from the magic cup of myth. They felt refreshed and rejuvenated. From now on they saw all things in a new and transformed shape. They could not return to the common world – to the world of the profanum vulgus. To the true romanticist there could be no sharp difference between myth and reality; just as little as there was any separation between poetry and truth. Poetry and truth, myth and reality interpenetrate each other and coincide with each other. »Poetry,« said Novalis, »is what is absolutely and genuinely real. That is the kernel of my philosophy. The more poetic the more true.«[1]

The consequences of this romantic philosophy were drawn by Schelling in his »System of Transcendental Idealism« and, later on, in his »Lectures on the Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation«. There can be no sharper contrast than that between the views | expressed in these lectures and the judgment of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. What we find here is a complete change of all former values. Myth that had occupied the lowest rank was suddenly elevated to the highest dignity. Schelling's system was a »system of identity«. In such a system no clear-cut distinction could be made between the »subjective« and the »objective« world. The universe is a spiritual universe – and this spiritual universe forms a continuous unbroken organic whole. It is a false tendency of thought, a mere abstraction that has led to the separation of the »ideal« from the »real«. They are not opposed

[1] Novalis (Fr. 31), in: Schriften, ed. by Jacob Minor, Jena 1907, Vol. III, p. 11 [»Die Poesie ist das echt absolute Reelle. Dies ist der Kern meiner Philosophie. Je poetischer, je wahrer.«].

the one to the other; they coincide with each other. Starting from this presupposition Schelling developed in his lectures an entirely new conception of the role of myth. It was a synthesis of philosophy, history, myth, poetry, such as had never appeared before.

Later generations took a much more sober view of the character of myth. They were no longer interested in its metaphysics. They approached the problem from the empirical side and tried to solve it by empirical methods. But the old spell was never completely broken. Every scholar still found in myth those objects with which he was most familiar. At bottom the different schools saw in the magic mirror of myth only their own faces. The linguist found in it a world of words and names – the philosopher found a »primitive philosophy« – the psychiatrist a highly complicated and interesting neurotic phenomenon.

From the scientist's point of view there were two different ways to formulate the question. The mythical world could be explained according to the same principles as the theoretical world – the world of the scientist. Or the stress could be laid on the opposite side. Instead of seeking for any similarity between the two worlds, their incommensurability, their radical and irreconcilable difference could be insisted upon. To decide this struggle between the different schools by mere logical criteria was hardly possible. In an important chapter of his »Critique of Pure Reason« Kant deals with a fundamental opposition in the method of scientific interpretation. According to him there are two groups of scholars and scientists. The one is following the principle of »homogeneity«; the other the principle of »specification«. The first endeavors to reduce the most disparate phenomena to a common denominator whereas the other refuses to accept this pretended unity or simi|larity. Instead of emphasizing the common features, it is always looking for the differences. According to the principles of the Kantian philosophy itself both attitudes are not really in conflict with each other. For they do not express any fundamental ontological difference; a difference in the nature and essence of »things in themselves«. They rather represent a twofold interest of human reason. Human knowledge can only attain its end by following both ways and by satisfying both interests. It must act according to two diverse »regulative principles« – the principles of similarity and dissimilarity, of homogeneity and heterogeneity. For the functioning of human reason both maxims are equally indispensable. The logical principle of genera which postulates identity is balanced by another principle, namely, that of species, which requires manifoldness and diversity in things and which prescribes to the understanding that it should pay no less attention to the one than to the other. »This distinction,« says Kant,

»shows itself in the different manner of thought among students of nature, some of them […] being almost averse to heterogeneousness, and always intent on the unity of genera; while others […] are constantly striving to divide nature into so much variety that one might lose almost all hope of being able to distribute its phenomena according to general principles.«[2]

What Kant says here about the study of natural phenomena holds just as much for the study of cultural phenomena. If we trace the various interpretations of mythical thought given by the scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we find striking examples of both attitudes. There were always scholars of high authority who were apt to deny that there is any sharp difference between mythical and scientific thought. Of course the primitive mind is highly inferior to the scientific mind as regards the mere mass of known facts, the bulk of empirical evidence. But as to the interpretation of these facts it is in complete agreement with our own ways of thinking and reasoning. This view is, for instance, maintained in a work that more than any other is representative of the new science of empirical anthropology which began to develop in the second half of the nineteenth century. |

Sir James Frazer's »The Golden Bough« has become a mine of wealth for all sorts of anthropological research. In its fifteen volumes is contained amazing material taken from all parts of the world and from the most heterogeneous sources. But Frazer did not content himself with gathering the phenomena of mythical thought and placing them under general headings. He tried to understand them – and he was convinced that this task was impossible as long as myth was still regarded as an isolated province of human thought. We must, once for all, make an end to this isolation. Man's thought admits of no radical heterogeneity. From the beginning to the end, from the first rudimentary steps to the highest attainments, it remains always the same; it is homogeneous and uniform. Frazer applied this leading principle to the analysis of magic in the first two volumes of his book. According to his theory a man who performs a magic rite does not differ, in principle, from a scientist who in his laboratory makes a physical or chemical experiment. The sorcerer, the medical man of primitive tribes, and the modern scientist think and act upon the same principles. »Wherever sympathetic magic occurs in its pure [and] unadulterated form,« says Frazer, »it assumes that in nature one event follows another nec-

[2] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, Engl. transl. by Friedrich Max Müller, 2 vols., London 1881, Vol. II, pp. 561 f.

essarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency. Thus its fundamental conception is identical with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature. The magician does not doubt that the same causes will always produce the same effects, that the performance of the proper ceremony, accompanied by the appropriate spell, will inevitably be attended by the desired results […] Thus the analogy between the magical and the scientific conceptions of the world is close. In both of them the succession of events is perfectly regular and certain, being determined by immutable laws, the operation of which can be foreseen and calculated precisely, the elements of caprice, of chance, and of accident are banished from the course of nature. […] The fatal flaw of magic lies not in its general assumption of a sequence of events determined by law, but in its total misconception of the nature of the particular laws which govern that sequence. […] [Magical rites] are all mistaken applications of one or other of two great fundamental laws of thought, namely, the association of ideas by similarity and the association of ideas by contiguity in space or time. […] The principles of association are excellent in themselves, and indeed absolutely essential to the working of the human mind. Legitimately applied they yield | science; illegitimately applied they yield magic, the bastard sister of science.«[3]

Frazer was not alone in holding this view. He continued a tradition that goes back to the beginnings of a scientific anthropology in the nineteenth century. In 1871 Sir Edward Burnett Tylor had published his book »Primitive Culture«. But although speaking of primitive culture he refused to accept the idea of a so-called »primitive mind«. According to Tylor there is no essential difference between the savage's mind and the mind of the civilized man. The thoughts of the savage may, at first sight, appear to be bizarre; but they are by no means confused or contradictory. The logic of the savage is, in a sense, impeccable. What makes the great difference between the savage's interpretation of the world and our own conceptions are not the forms of thought, the rules of arguing and reasoning, but the material, the data to which these rules are applied. Once we have understood the character of these data we are in a position to put ourselves in the savage's place – to think his thoughts and to enter into his feelings.

[3] James George Frazer, The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion, 3 vols., London [3]1936, Pt. I in 2 vols.: The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings, Vol. I, pp. 220–222.

According to Tylor the first requisite for a systematic study of the lower races is to lay down a rudimentary definition of religion. We cannot include in this definition the belief in a supreme deity, in a judgment after death, the adoration of idols or the practice of sacrifices. A closer study of the ethnological data convinces us that all these features are not necessary prerequisites. They give us only a special perspective, not a universal aspect of religious life. »[…] such narrow definition has the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them. It seems best to fall back at once on this essential source, and simply to claim, as a minimum definition of Religion, the belief in Spiritual Beings.« The purpose of Tylor's book was to investigate, under the name of Animism, the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy.[4] |

We need not enter here into the details of Tylor's well-known theory of animism; what interests us is not so much the results of Tylor's work as its method. Tylor pushed to extremes the methodological principle that in the »Critique of Pure Reason« had been termed the »principle of homogeneity«. In his book the difference between the primitive mind and the mind of civilized man is almost obliterated. The primitive acts and thinks like a real philosopher. He combines the data of his sense-experience and tries to bring them into a coherent and systematic order. If we accept Tylor's description we must say that between the crudest forms of animism and the most advanced and sophisticated philosophical or theological systems there is only a difference of degree. They have a common starting point and move around the same center. The standing miracle and the standing terror for man – both for the savage and for the philosopher – was at all times the phenomenon of death. Animism and metaphysics are only different attempts to come to terms with the fact of death; to interpret it in a rational and understandable way. The methods of the interpretation are widely divergent; but the end aimed at is always the same. »In the first place, what is it that makes the difference between a living body and a dead one; what causes waking, sleep, trance, disease, death? In the second place, what are those human shapes which appear in dreams and visions? Looking at these two groups of phenomena, the ancient savage philosophers probably made their first step by the obvious

[4] Edward Burnett Tylor, Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom (chap. 11), 2 vols., New York [3]1889, Vol. I, pp. 417–502: p. 424.

inference that every man has two things belonging to him, namely, a life and a phantom. These two are evidently in close connexion with the body, the life as enabling it to feel and think and act, the phantom as being its image or second self; both, also, are perceived to be things separable from the body, the life as able to go away and leave it insensible or dead, the phantom as appearing to people at a distance from it. The second step would seem also easy for savages to make, seeing how extremely difficult civilized men have found it to unmake. It is merely to combine the life and the phantom. As both belong to the body, why should they not also belong to one another, and be manifestations of one and the same soul? Let them then be considered as united, and the result is that well-known conception which may be described as an apparitional-soul, a ghost-soul. […] Far from these world-wide opinions being arbitrary or conventional products, it is seldom even justifiable to consider their uniformity among distant races as proving communication of any sort. They are doctrines answering in the most forcible way | to the plain evidence of men's senses, as interpreted by a fairly consistent and rational primitive philosophy.«[5]

We find the very reverse of this conception in Lévy-Bruhl's well-known description of »primitive mentality«. According to Lévy-Bruhl the task that former theories had set themselves was impossible – a contradiction in terms. It is vain to seek for a common measure between primitive mentality and our own. They do not belong to the same genus; they are radically opposed the one to the other. The rules which to the civilized man seem to be unquestionable and inviolable are entirely unknown and constantly thwarted in primitive thought. The savage's mind is not capable of all those processes of arguing and reasoning that were ascribed to it in Frazer's or Tylor's theories. It is not a logical, but a »prelogical« or a mystic mind. Even the most elementary principles of our logic are openly defied by this mystic mind. The savage lives in a world of his own – in a world which is impermeable to experience and unaccessible to our forms of thought.[6]

How shall we decide this controversy? If Kant was right, we must say that there is no strictly objective criterion to guide us in this decision. For the question is not an ontological or factual but a methodological one. Both the principle of »homogeneity« and the principle of

[5] Ibid., pp. 428 f.

[6] See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures (Introduction), Paris 1910 (Travaux de l'année sociologique); idem, How Natives think, Engl. transl. by Lilian Ada Long Clare, London/New York 1926.

»specification« only describe diverse tendencies of scientific thought and interests of human reason. »When purely regulative principles,« said Kant, »are taken for constitutive, they may become contradictory, as objective principles. If, however, they are taken for *maxims* only, there is no real contradiction, but it is only the different interest of reason which causes different modes of thought. In reality, reason has one interest only, and the conflict of its maxims arises only from a difference and a mutual limitation of the methods, in which that interest is to be satisfied. In this manner one philosopher is influenced more by the interest of *diversity* (according to the principle of specification), another by the interest of *unity* (according to the principle of aggregation). Each believes that he has derived his judgment from his insight into the object, and yet founds it entirely on the greater or smaller attachment to one of the two principles, neither of which rests on objective grounds, but only on an interest of reason, and should therefore be called maxims | rather than principles. […] It is nothing but the twofold interest of reason, one party cherishing the one, another party the other […] But this difference of the two maxims of manifoldness or unity in nature may easily be adjusted, though as long as they are taken for objective knowledge they cause not only disputes, but actually create impediments which hinder the progress of truth, until a means is found of reconciling the contradictory interests, and thus giving satisfaction to reason.«[7]

As a matter of fact it is impossible to come to a clear insight into the character of mythical thought without combining the two seemingly opposite tendencies of thought that are represented by Frazer and Tylor on the one hand and by Lévy-Bruhl on the other. In Tylor's work the savage was described as a »primitive philosopher« who develops a system of metaphysics or theology. Animism was declared to be the groundwork of the philosophy of religion from that of savages to that of civilized man. »[…] although it may at first sight seem to afford but a bare and meagre definition of a minimum of religion, it will be found practically sufficient; for where the root is, the branches will generally be produced.« Animism is, indeed, a »world-wide philosophy, of which belief is the theory and worship is the practice.« It is common to the »ancient savage philosophers« and to the most refined and sophisticated concepts of metaphysical thought.[8]

[7] Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, Vol. II, pp. 571 f. Idem, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, ed. by Albert Görland, Berlin 1913 (Werke, in Gemeinschaft mit Hermann Cohen et al. ed. by Ernst Cassirer, 11 vols., Berlin 1912 ff., Vol. III), p. 455.

[8] Tylor, Primitive Culture, pp. 426 f.

It is obvious that in this description mythical thought has lost one of its principal characteristics. It is thoroughly intellectualized. If we accept its premises we must accept all its conclusions; for these conclusions follow in a completely natural and, indeed, inevitable way from the original data. By virtue of this conception myth becomes, as it were, a chain of syllogisms which follow all the well-known syllogistic rules. What is entirely lost out of sight in this theory is the »irrational« element in myth – the emotional background in which it originates and with which it stands or falls.

On the other hand it is easy to see that Lévy-Bruhl's theory fails in the opposite direction. If this theory were right, any analysis of mythical thought would become impossible. For what is such an analysis but an attempt to understand myth – that is to say, to reduce it to some other known psychological facts or logi|cal principles? If these facts or principles are missing; if there is no point of contact between our own mind and the prelogical or mystic mind, then we have to give up all hopes of finding an approach to the mythical world. This world would forever remain to us a sealed book. But was not Lévy-Bruhl's own theory an endeavor to read this book, to decipher the hieroglyphs of myth? We cannot expect, indeed, any one-to-one correspondence between our logical forms of thought and the forms of mythical thought. But if there were no connection at all, if they were moving on entirely different planes, every attempt to understand myth would be doomed to failure.

And there are still other reasons that convince us that the description of primitive mentality given in the works of Lévy-Bruhl[9] remains, in one essential point, inadequate and inconclusive. Lévy-Bruhl admits and emphasizes that there is a close relationship between myth and language. A special part of his work deals with linguistic problems, with the languages spoken by savage tribes. In these languages Lévy-Bruhl finds all those characteristics that he had ascribed to primitive mentality. They too are full of elements that are diametrically opposed to our own modes of thought. But this judgment is not in keeping with our linguistic experience. The best experts in this field, the men who have spent their lives in the investigation of the languages of savage tribes, have come to the opposite conclusion. In modern linguistics the very term and concept of a primitive language has become highly questionable. Antoine Meillet, who has written a book on the languages of the world, has told us that no known idiom can give us the slightest

[9] See also Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, La mentalité primitive, Paris 1922 (Travaux de l'année sociologique), and idem, L'âme primitive, Paris 1927.

idea of what a primitive language may be. Language always shows us a definite and thorough-going logical structure, both in its sound system and in its morphological system. We have no evidence whatever for a »prelogical« language – the only one that, according to Lévy-Bruhl's theory, would correspond to the prelogical state of mind. Of course we must not understand the term »logic« in too narrow a sense. We cannot expect the Aristotelian categories of thought or the elements of our parts-of-speech system, the rules of our Greek and Latin syntax, in languages of aboriginal American tribes. These expectations are bound to fail; but this does not prove that these languages are in | any sense »illogical« or even less logical than ours. If they are unable to express some differences that to us seem to be essential and necessary, on the other hand they often surprise us by the variety and subtlety of distinctions that we do not find in our own languages and that are by no means insignificant. Franz Boas, the great linguist and anthropologist, who died two years ago, in one of his last published essays, »Language and Culture«, wittily remarked that we could read our newspapers with much greater satisfaction if our language, like the Indian idiom Kwakiutl, compelled us to say whether a report is based on self-experience, on inference, or on hearsay, or whether the reporter has dreamed it.[10]

What holds for »primitive« languages holds also for primitive thought. Its structure may seem to us to be strange and paradoxical; but it never lacks a definite logical structure. Even the uncivilized man cannot live in the world without a constant effort to understand that world. And for this purpose he has to develop and to use some general forms or categories of thought. To be sure we cannot accept Tylor's description of the »savage philosopher« who reaches his conclusions in a merely speculative way. The savage is no discursive thinker and no dialectician. Nevertheless we find in him, in an undeveloped and implicit state, the same capability of analysis and synthesis, of discernment and unification, that, according to Plato, constitute and characterize the dialectic art. When studying some very primitive forms of religious and mythical thought – for instance the religion of totemistic societies – we are surprised to find to what a high degree the primitive mind feels the desire and the need to discern and divide, to order and classify the elements of its environment. There is hardly anything that escapes its constant urge for classification. Not only is human society divided into diverse classes, tribes, clans which have different func-

[10] See Roman Jakobson, Franz Boas' Approach to Language, in: International Journal of American Linguistics 10/4 (1944), pp. 188–195.

tions, different customs, different social duties. The same division appears everywhere in nature. The physical world is, in this respect, the exact duplicate and counterpart of the social world. Plants, animals, organic beings and objects of inorganic nature, substances and qualities are equally affected by this classification. The four points of the compass, the North, the East, the South, the West; the different col-| ors, the heavenly bodies – all of them belong to a special class. In some Australian tribes in which all men and women belong either to the Kangaroo clan or to the Snake clan, the clouds are said to belong to the first clan, whereas the sun belongs to the second. All this may seem to us to be entirely arbitrary and fantastic. But we must not forget that every division presupposes a fundamentum divisionis. This leading principle is not given us by the nature of things in themselves. It depends upon our theoretical and practical interests. Obviously these interests are not the same in these first primitive divisions of the world as in our scientific classifications. But that is not the point in question. What matters here is not the content, but the form of classification; and this form is entirely logical. What we find here is by no means a lack of order; it is rather a certain hypertrophy, a preponderance and exuberance of the »classifying instinct«.[11] The results of these first attempts to analyze and systematize the world of sense-experience are far different from ours. But the processes themselves are very similar; they express the same desire of human nature to come to terms with reality, to live in an ordered universe, and to overcome the chaotic state in which things and thoughts have not yet assumed a definite shape and structure. |

[11] Concrete examples of these »primitive« methods of classification are given in my essay »Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken«, Leipzig/Berlin 1922 (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, Vol. I) [ECW 16, S. 3–73]. See also Emile Durkheim/Marcel Mauss, De quelques formes primitives de classification. Contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives, in: L'année sociologique 6 (1903), pp. 1–72.

II
Myth and Language

Tylor's »Primitive Culture« propounded an anthropological theory based upon general biological principles. He was one of the first to apply the principles of Darwin to the cultural world. The maxim »Natura non facit saltus« admits of no exception. It holds just as much for the world of human civilization as for the organic world. The civilized and the uncivilized man belong to the same species – to the species homo sapiens. The fundamental characteristics of this species are the same in every variant. If the theory of evolution is true, we cannot admit any hiatus between the lower and higher stages of human civilization. We pass from the one to the others by very slow and almost imperceptible transitions, and we never find a break of continuity.

A different conception of the process of human civilization had been developed in an essay that was published in 1856 – three years before the appearance of Darwin's book »The Origin of Species«. In »Comparative Mythology«[1] Friedrich Max Müller started from the principle that it is impossible to come to a true understanding of myth so long as we think of it as an isolated phenomenon. Yet, on the other hand, no natural phenomenon, no biological principle can guide us in our investigation. There is no real analogy between natural and cultural phenomena. Human culture must be studied according to specific methods and principles. And where could we find a better guide for this study than in human speech – the element in which man lives, moves and has his being? As a linguist and philologist Müller was convinced that the only scientific approach to a study of myth was a linguistic approach. But this end could not be attained until linguistics itself had found its own way and until grammar and etymology were founded upon a firm scientific basis. It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that this great step was made. | Between language and myth there is not only a close relationship but a real solidarity. If we understand the nature of this solidarity we have found the key to the mythical world.

The discovery of the Sanskrit language and literature was a crucial event in the development of our historical consciousness, and in the

[1] Friedrich Max Müller, Comparative Mythology, in: Oxford Essays, London 1856, pp. 1–87; reprinted in: idem, Selected Essays on Language, Mythology and Religion, 2 vols., London 1881, Vol. I, pp. 299–451.

evolution of all cultural sciences. In its importance and influence it may be compared to the great intellectual revolution brought about through the Copernican system in the field of natural science. The Copernican hypothesis reversed the conception of the cosmic order. The earth was no longer in the center of the universe; it became a »star among stars«. The geocentric conception of the physical world was discarded. In the same sense the acquaintance with Sanskrit literature made an end to that conception of human culture which saw its real and only center in the world of classical antiquity. Henceforward the Greco-Roman world could only be regarded as a single province, a small sector of the universe of human culture. The philosophy of history had to be built upon a new and larger basis. Hegel called the discovery of the common origin of Greek and Sanskrit the discovery of a new world. The students of comparative grammar in the nineteenth century saw their work in the same light. They were convinced that they had found the magic word which alone could open the doors of understanding to the history of human civilization. Comparative philology, declared Müller, has brought the mythological and mythopoeic age of mankind that hitherto was veiled in darkness into the bright light of scientific research and within the pale of documentary history. It has placed in our hands a telescope of such power that, where formerly we could see but nebulous clouds, we now discover distinct forms and outlines; nay, it has given us what we may call contemporary evidence, exhibiting to us the state of thought, language, religion, and civilization at a period when Sanskrit was not yet Sanskrit, Greek not yet Greek, but when both, together with Latin, German, and other Aryan dialects, existed as yet as one undivided language. The mist of mythology will gradually clear away, and enable us to discover, behind the floating clouds of the dawn of thought and language, that real nature which mythology has so long veiled and disguised.[2] |

On the other hand the connection between language and myth which promised a clear and definite solution of the old riddle contained a great difficulty. To be sure, language and myth have a common root, but they are by no means identical in their structure. Language shows us always a strictly logical character; myth seems to defy all logical rules; it is incoherent, capricious, irrational. How can we bring together these two incompatible elements?

To answer this question Müller and other writers belonging to the school of comparative mythology devised a very ingenious scheme.

[2] Ibid., pp. 315, 358 and 449 ff.

Myth, they declared, is, indeed, nothing but one aspect of language; but it is rather its negative than its positive aspect. Myth originates not in its virtues but in its vices. To be sure language is logical and rational, but on the other hand it is also a source of illusions and fallacies. The greatest achievement of language itself is a source of defect. Language consists of general names – but generality always means ambiguity. The polyonymy and synonymy of words are not an accidental feature of language; they follow from its very nature. As most objects have more than one attribute, and as, under different aspects, one or the other attribute might seem more appropriate to the act of denomination, it happened by necessity that most objects, during the early period of human speech, had more than one name. The more ancient a language, the richer it is in synonyms. On the other hand these synonyms, if used constantly, must naturally give rise to a number of homonyms. If we may call the sun by fifty names expressive of different qualities, some of these names will be applicable to other objects also which happen to possess the same qualities. These different objects would then be called by the same name – they would become homonyms. That is the vulnerable point in language – and it is, at the same time, the historical origin of myth. How can we account, asks Müller, for that phase of the human mind which gave birth to the extraordinary stories of gods and heroes – of gorgons and chimaeras – of things that no human eye had ever seen, and that no human mind in a healthy state could ever have conceived? Unless this question can be answered our belief in a regular and consistent progress of the human intellect, through all ages and in all countries, must be given up as a false theory. Yet after the discovery of comparative linguistics we are in a position to avoid this skep|ticism and to remove this stumbling block. We see that the progress of language itself – one of the greatest facts in human civilization – inevitably led to another phenomenon, to the phenomenon of myth. Where two names existed for the same object, two persons could – quite naturally and, indeed, inevitably – spring up out of the two names, and as the same stories could be told of either, they would be represented as brothers and sisters, as parent and child.[3]

If we accept this theory, the difficulty is removed. We can explain very well how the rational activity of human speech has led to the irrationalities and incomprehensibilities of myth. The mind of man always acts in a rational way. Even the primitive mind was a sound and normal mind; but on the other hand, it was an undeveloped and inex-

[3] Ibid., p. 378.

perienced mind. If this inexperienced mind was constantly exposed to a great temptation – to the fallacy and ambiguity of words –, it is not to be wondered at that it succumbed. That is the true source of mythical thought. Language is not only a school of wisdom but also a school of folly. Myth reveals the latter aspect to us; it is nothing but the dark shadow cast by language on the world of human thought.

Mythology is thus represented as pathological both in its origin and in its essence. It is a disease that begins in the field of language and, by a dangerous infection, spreads over the whole body of human civilization. But though it be madness, there is method in it. In Greek mythology, as in many other mythologies, we find, for instance, the story of a great flood by which the human race was destroyed. Only one couple, Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha, were saved from the deluge sent by Zeus over Hellas. They landed on Mount Parnassus and here they were advised by an oracle to cast behind themselves the »bones of their mother«. Deucalion found the true interpretation of the oracle; he picked up stones from the field and cast them behind his back. From these stones there arose the new race of men and women. What is more ridiculous, asks Müller, than this mythological account of the creation of the human race? And yet it becomes easily understandable with the key given us by the science of comparative etymology. The whole story turns out to be a mere pun – a confusion of two homonymous terms – of *λαός* and *λᾶας*.[4] | That, according to this view, is the entire secret of mythology.

If we analyze this theory we find that it is a strange mixture of rationalism and romanticism. The romantic element is obvious, and it seems to be preponderant. Müller speaks in a sense as a pupil of Novalis or Schleiermacher. He rejects the theory that the origin of religion is to be sought in animism or in the worship of the great natural powers. There is, indeed, a natural or physical religion – an adoration of the fire, the sun, the moon, the bright sky – but this physical religion is only a single aspect and a derivative phenomenon. It does not give us the whole and it does not lead us to the first and principal source. The real origin of religion is to be sought in a deeper stratum of thought and feeling. What first fascinated men were not the objects of his surroundings. Even the primitive mind was much more impressed by the great spectacle of nature taken as a whole. Nature was the unknown as distinguished from the known – the infinite as distinguished from the finite. It was this feeling that from the earliest times supplied the impulse to religious thought and language. The immediate percep-

[4] Ibid., p. 310.

tion of the Infinite has from the very beginning formed an ingredient and a necessary complement to all finite knowledge. The rudiments of later mythological, religious, and philosophical expressions were already present in the early pressure of the Infinite upon our senses – and this pressure is the first source and the real origin of all our religious beliefs.[5] Why should we wonder at the ancients, asked Müller, with their language throbbing with life and reveling in color, if instead of the gray outlines of our modern thought, they threw out those living forms of nature, endowed with human powers, nay with powers more than human, inasmuch as the light of the sun was brighter than the light of a human eye, and the roaring of the storms louder than the shouts of a human voice?[6] That sounds very romantic; but we must not allow ourselves to be deceived by Müller's picturesque and romantic style. His theory, taken as a whole, is strictly rationalistic and intellectualistic.

At bottom his conception of myth is not so very far from the | eighteenth century, from the thinkers of the Enlightenment.[7] To be sure he sees no longer in myth and religion a mere arbitrary invention – a trickery of a cunning priesthood. But he agrees that myth, after all, is nothing but a great illusion – not a conscious but an unconscious deception, a deception brought about by the nature of the human mind, and, first and foremost, by the nature of human speech. Myth always remains a pathological case. But we are now in a position to understand the pathology of myth without taking recourse to the hypothesis of an inherent defect of the human mind itself. If language is recognized as the source of myth – then even the incongruities and contradictions of mythical thought are reduced to a universal and objective and thus to a thoroughly rational power.

It added very much to the influence of this doctrine that, with some critical reservations, it was accepted by the philosopher who first endeavored to create a »synthetic philosophy«, a coherent and com-

[5] See idem, Natural Religion. The Gifford Lectures delivered before the University of Glasgow in 1888 (Lect. 5: My Own Definition of Religion), London/New York 1889, pp. 103–140; idem, Physical Religion. The Gifford Lectures delivered before the University of Glasgow in 1890 (Lect. 6: Physical Religion), London/New York 1891, pp. 115–143, esp. »The Natural and the Supernatural«, pp. 119 ff.

[6] Idem, Comparative Mythology, in: Selected Essays, Vol. I, p. 365.

[7] It is a remarkable fact that the first elements of Müller's theory are to be found in the writings of one of the great rationalists. In his satire »Sur l'équivoque« Boileau had propounded the theory that the ambiguity of words is the real source of mythology.

prehensive survey of all activities of the human mind based on strictly empirical principles and on the general theory of evolution. Herbert Spencer found the first and principal source of all religion in ancestor-worship. The first cult, he declared, was not the cult of natural powers, but the cult of the dead.[8] Yet in order to understand the passage from ancestor-worship to the worship of personal gods, we must introduce a new hypothesis. According to Spencer it was the power and the perduring influence of speech that made this step possible, and even necessary. Human speech is metaphorical in its very essence; it is filled with similes and analogies. The primitive mind is unable to understand these similes in a merely metaphorical sense. It takes them for realities and it thinks and acts according to this principle. It is this literal interpretation of metaphorical names that from the first elementary forms of ancestor-worship, from the worship of human beings, led to a worship of plants and animals, and finally of the great powers of nature. In primitive society it is a common and wide-spread habit to name a new-born child after plants, animals, stars or other natural objects. A boy is called »Tiger« or | »Lion«, »Raven« or »Wolf«; a girl is called »Moon« or »Star«. In their origin all these names were nothing but epitheta ornantia, expressing some personal qualities that were attributed to human beings. According to the tendency of the primitive mind to understand all terms in a literal sense, the misinterpretation of these complementary names and metaphorical titles was inevitable. This is the true source of nature-worship. Once »Dawn« had been used as an actual name for a person; the traditions concerning one of such who became noted would, in the mind of the uncritical savage, lead to identification with the dawn; and the adventures would be interpreted in such a manner as the phenomena of the dawn made most feasible. Further, in regions where this name had been borne either by members of adjacent tribes, or by members of the same tribe living at different times, incongruous genealogies and conflicting adventures of the dawn would result.[9]

Here again the phenomenon of myth, the whole pantheon of polytheism is explained as a mere disease. The worship of conspicuous objects, conceived as persons, results from linguistic errors. The grave objections to which such a theory is liable are obvious. Myth is one of the oldest and greatest powers in human civilization. It is closely con-

[8] See Herbert Spencer, The Principles of Sociology (chap. 20), 3 vols., New York [3]1901, Vol. I: The Data of Sociology (The Works: A System of Synthetic Philosophy, Vol. VI), pp. 285 ff.

[9] Ibid. (chap. 22–24), pp. 329–394.

nected with all other human activities – it is inseparable from language, poetry, art and from early historical thought. Even science had to pass through a mythical age before it could reach its logical age: alchemy preceded chemistry, astrology preceded astronomy. If Friedrich Max Müller's and Herbert Spencer's theories were right, we should have to conclude that, after all, the history of human civilization was due to a simple misunderstanding, to a misinterpretation of words and terms. It is not a very satisfactory and plausible hypothesis to think of human culture as the product of a mere illusion – as a juggling with words and a childish play with names. |