

COMMITTEE VI
The Universe and Its Origin:
From Ancient Myth to Present Reality
and Fantasy

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DISCUSSION REMARKS

by

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Raphael Patai's
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Professor Patai's illuminating paper ends with the observation that there is a parallel between the mental processes underlying myths of origin as well as mythological cosmologies and those inducing scientific theories concerning the origins and the structure of the universe. To supplement his comments I should like to dwell briefly on some further points.

The similarity in motivation between science and mythology rests of course, first of all, on the common drive of curiosity. There is however more than that involved. It is not only the desire to acquire knowledge, but also the need to take the edge off the unknown and mysterious, thus rendering the universe somewhat less menacing and awesome. This is done in both science and mythology to a large extent by using analogies borrowed from the familiar environment around or within us. As a result not only our comprehension of strange phenomena is facilitated and enhanced, but those phenomena themselves become in their turn more familiar and acquire a certain intimacy. The sense of potential danger inherent in objects or movements which have the appearance of a different order of existence is thus neutralized. By employing the same system of rules as those which apply to ourselves and our close environment and declaring them to be valid for the whole universe, we reduce the cosmos into a human-sized space and diminish

some of the awe which it inspires. In mythical cosmology the powers governing the universe are represented as humans or anthropoid divine entities. Even when they are seen as animals they are described as having human feelings, deliberations and discourses. Science assumes that the same materials and laws exist in places where direct observation is not possible as in our globe. The parallel between man and the world, whose most conspicuous expression is the microcosm-macrocosm mythology and philosophical speculation, is an example of the analogical explanation which is typical, in a way, of both science and mythology.

The vague similarity which exists between some scientific theories of cosmic beginnings, making use as they do of cataclysmic events and liquid matter, and certain mythical motifs, is perhaps more trivial.

Such comparisons of mythology and science can be made only in very general terms. Even when they are legitimate they should not overshadow the obvious but profound difference between the two modes of activity. Scientists may indeed receive some of the initial impetus for their theories from an imaginative leap which may be akin to that of myth making, but these are subject to verification, questioning and modification in accordance with observation and in conformity with other theories. It is significant that in the history of science the first theories about

areas that do not lend themselves to direct observation were close to mythical and religious ideas. After a series of modifications the theory may look again quite similar to a mythological idea, but it is difficult to talk in this case of mythology being vindicated.

There are however two important remarks that should be made about mythology, for the benefit especially of those who have not dealt with this subject professionally. It would be wrong to regard mythology ^{merely} as a series of intellectual statements about the universe and its origins; and even when a myth does seem to be making such a statement it is as much a statement about other things -- the individual and his fears and anxieties and hopes, society and its institutions -- as it is about the universe. It was a typical fallacy of the earlier days of the study of mythology to regard it basically as a pre-scientific mode of reflecting about the world. Professor Patai has provided us, at the beginning of his paper, with a useful and quite comprehensive definition of myth, one that takes into account practically all its divergent functions and contents. If I wished to improve on it, I would think of doing so only by suggesting some changes in the order and relative importance of its elements.

Myth, it may be recalled, was defined by Professor Patai as "a traditional religious charter" that operates

validating and explaining certain things, and takes the form of stories. By defining myth as a charter we assume it primarily to have a quasi-legal function. I believe that this conception would not hold water even with some myths of origin, and it would be much harder to justify in myths of a different character. Much of Greek mythology does not seem to have any charter character at all; it would be difficult, for example, to attribute a charter significance to the myths of the birth of Zeus, or those of Agamemnon, of Odysseus and so on. Even when they do appear to explain and justify institutions and phenomena, it is characteristic of myths not to do so deliberately or explicitly, the aetiology being left in many cases to be guessed at. I would therefore prefer to place as the primary element in the definition of myth not its function as charter, which is not always prominently present, but its form, that of a story. Myths are basically stories told, among the main effects of which is the explanation and justification of existing social institutions and natural phenomena as well as the cohesion of the social group.

Myth is an expression of a social group, a fact which helps to explain how it *is able to* validate the central elements in the life of the society without necessarily alluding to them ~~exp~~licitly. ideally, therefore, myths should be studied as one element within their

~~their~~ social context alongside with the ritual activity, the body of faith, the social structure and the economic system, although they can also of course be studied on their own from a specific point of view, as done here.

By analyzing, comparing and classifying the intellectual responses given or implied by myths of different cultures to the problems of origins we may indeed gain a better insight as to the type of questions myths of origins tend to cope with and characteristic forms which their solutions take. We may also detect, as Professor Patai did in his paper, certain themes recurring in many cultures. It is worthwhile mentioning in this context the problem which has been debated at length in scholarly literature ^{the occurrence of} whether/such common themes is the effect of diffusion from one **area** of origin or whether it is indicative of a similar working of the human mind (or, in some cases, whether there is a genuine recollection of cataclysmic events preserved over a wide range of cultures). Under the first hypothesis the variety of myths dealing with a single theme are no more than so many variations of a single myth. If the second hypothesis is correct, the more instances we find of a given theme the more we can be sure that it is typical of the mythological imagination. The question, it may be remarked, is still open, although in principle one should examine

each theme separately to determine whether the theory of diffusion does not explain its frequent occurrence.

We should bear in mind that there is more to a myth than its purely intellectual contents. An important aspect of myths is that they constitute an imaginative and emotive mode of expression, and that in this sense they belong not to the field of science or philosophy but to that of art and religion. This observation also highlights certain difficulties in the interpretation of myths. The language of myths is that of story telling, not of intellectual discourse, and as a result we often find ourselves on slippery grounds when we try to translate their contents into clear and direct statements. Almost any story is capable of more than one interpretation, and frequently it lends itself to several conflicting modes of rendering. Professor Patai observes that "polytheistic myths of cosmogony (...) are suffused in most cases with streaks of sensuality, callousness and even cruelty which no effort at symbolic interpretation can mitigate". I would argue that there is no need to soften or mitigate such cruelty where it exists. One should try to understand it, although here too we come up against the ambiguities of the mythical material. Does the occurrence of such traits imply approval of these acts as applied to human members of the society?

I believe that almost invariably such violence or immoderate sensuality is specifically the hallmark of the mythical heroes, one of the features which sets them apart from ordinary humanity. The implication is that violence or licentiousness, tolerated in the mythical context, are strictly forbidden outside it. Does the reference to extraordinary feats of atrocity serve as an oblique expression of a hidden desire to indulge in such acts? This may be so, but then such myths surely serve as valves to release pressures and social tensions. It is also possible to regard them as a way of overcoming terror, a means by which human beings try to get rid of the fear of suffering assaults from powers beyond their control; they do so by identifying themselves symbolically with those very powers. Viewed from this perspective one wonders whether a relatively "clean" mythology, such as that of the Bible, can be said to be in any real sense superior to mythologies whose heroes are endowed with excessive doses of sexual and murderous drives. One may indeed enquire whether what we have called "clean" mythologies have not lost something essential to the human experience, and whether they are not in some way the poorer for this loss. Putting the question in these terms we may be blamed to be passing judgement on the object of our enquiry; but this is precisely the criticism which may be levelled at Professor Patai's remark.

The motif of the cosmic egg, so beautifully described by Professor Patai, may be taken as a further example to illustrate the multiplicity of meanings that are capable of being attached to mythical contents. The egg signifies wholeness and integrity, but it may signify also lack of distinction, the absence of the definite and essential contrasts that make up the world and civilization as we know it. It may indicate a self-contained entity which needs to have recourse to nothing outside it, but sometimes (as in the Iranian myths of creation) it represents a prison-like trap for ensnaring and enclosing a divine antagonist, the power of evil. A similar variety of meanings exists in such mythical themes as the primordial chaos, the water, the flood, Paradise, and so on. In mythology such a plurality of divergent senses can be taken to coexist on different levels of interpretation. A mythical statement is by its nature ambiguous. It is a story designed to delight and enthrall an audience, and yet it carries a heavy weight of implied meanings which, within the range allowed for by the culture to which it belongs, are all legitimate.

The thematic approach used by Professor Patai has as its inevitable effect a certain blurring of the sense and structure of individual myths in their own context. One could think of other possible classifications which

may retain a general view of the themes discussed while allowing us to distinguish between types of cultures and their mythologies. There is good reason to separate the discussion of myths emanating from complex and literate societies from those collected by ethnologists outside the centers of civilization. Despite certain common traits, the structure and contents of these two sets are quite distinct from each other. Within the first group it seems to make good sense to treat the mythologies of the great polytheistic systems, those of the Ancient Near East, Greece, Rome and India apart from the mythologies of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (or what remains of them), Zoroastrianism and (to some extent) Buddhism, as representing a contrast between a conception based on divergence and diffusion of divine power and a system with a strictly defined cosmic and divine hierarchy and a strong concentration of power. This contrast has its repercussions in ^{the} structure and use of myths.

The above remarks are not meant as criticism, but as notes towards some further areas of investigation, of which the author of the paper under discussion is surely as well aware as the author of the present notes.