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Toward a theory of myth

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Abstract

Why do we need a theory of myth? Because no systematic theory exists, let alone a consensus. What I am particularly interested in addressing are not specific theories of myth, or specific myths themselves, but rather what constitutes a good theory. In particular, throughout our investigation I hope to illuminate what a proper theory of myth would be expected to offer in terms of its descriptive and explanatory power, coherency, generality, meaningfulness, and functional utility. Here I offer a theoretic typology of myth by exploring the origin, signification, symbolic structure, and essence of myth in terms of its source, force, form, object, and teleology derived from archaic ontology. Through my analysis of an *explanandum* and an *explanans*, I argue that both interpretation and explanation are acts of explication that signify the ontological significance, truth, and psychic reality of myth in both individuals and social collectives.

KEYWORDS
discourse, essence, explanation, interpretation, myth, theory of myth, theory of theory

The term "myth" is derived from the Greek *muthos* (μῦθος), meaning *word*, *speech*.[1] The term was used frequently by Homer (800 B.C.E., 800 B.C.E.) (see *Odyssey* II.561; *Iliad* 9.443; 19.242) and other ancient poets, especially referring to the *mere word*. It is also referred to as *public speech* (*Odyssey*, I.358) as well as *conversation*. When combined with the word *logos* (λόγος), such as in the compound *muthologia* (μυθολογία), myth becomes a discourse on narrative. Myth as word, speech, discourse generically refers to the *thing said*, as *fact*, or *matter* at hand, as well as the *thing thought*, the *unspoken word*, revealing its *purpose* or *design*. This may be why the

migration of the term was closely associated with the process of thinking itself: i.e., in Old Slavic, *mysle* is equated with thought, as is *smūainim* in Old Irish, hence *I think*, perhaps derived from the Indo-European *mudh-*, to think, to *imagine*.

When Heidegger (1927) discusses the concept of logos and truth (ἀλήθεια), he tells us that "discourse" as logos "lets something be seen" by making it manifest and accessible to another party (§ 7, B). Like muthos, logos is a convoluted concept that has acquired many different meanings throughout the history of philosophy. Λόγος is customarily translated as "reason," "meaning," "judgment," "intelligence," "concept," "word," "definition," "assertion," "ground," and "relationship," which means it always succumbs to interpretation. Heidegger argues that its original, basic signification is "discourse." In fact, Heidegger specifically refers to the logos that transpires in the speech act between interlocutors as the space where signification is acquired "in its relation to something in its 'relatedness'" (p. 58). Here "interpretation" unfolds within a "relationship" where potential multiple meanings surface from a clearing based on a certain setting forth, exhibiting, laying out, recounting, and so forth, which transparently applies to any discourse on myth.

1 | ON THE SIGNIFICATION OF MYTH

The transliteration of muthos as myth has acquired various significations, many of which have centered around a story, tale (see *Odyssey* 3.94; 4.324), saying, legend, or proverb. But unlike in Homer (800 B.C.E.), where there is no distinction of true or false narratives (*Odyssey* II.492), modern and contemporary references to myth have acquired a pejorative meaning that stand in relation to derived etymologies from antiquity where discourse on myth began to be viewed as fiction and fable (Aristotle, 1984, *Meteorology*, 356b1; Plato, 1961, *Phaedo*, 61b; Plato, 1961, *Republic*, 377a). Like logos, muthos implies no reference to the truth or falsity of a narrative,[2] it is merely the reason, the ground of discourse, as matter of fact. Perhaps this is why when Robert Segal (2004) defines myth as "a story" (p. 4), he refrains from passing judgment on the truth or falsity of its claims (p. 6).

Given that words, hence myths, stand in relation to a string of signifiers where meaning is always descended from and connected to other signifiers in an ontic chain of relations to various experiential things that are signified in thought, myth will always retain a mercurial sense of undecidability. It is only when we assign a circumscribed determinate meaning that is conventionally adopted as a linguistic signifier or semiotic operative within a particular discourse, culture, or socio-symbolic structure that such undecidability is occluded. But this is merely a formal imposition of grammar that does not erase the aporia or uncertainty of the term itself and its chthonic ambiguity of meanings left open to interpretation, impasse, and deferral to a web of unconscious relations where semiotic properties are virtually infinite and indeterminate. It is for this reason that we prescribe social conventions of meaning and construct operational definitions in order to provide a structural template of fixed determinations of the signification of certain words, while all along ignoring the relativity and fluidity of discourse. Here mythos is just as much an affront on truth as is any other mode of discourse, including science, with the exception that some discourses are more persuasive than others.

If we accept the premise that any discourse by definition imports an overdetermination of meaning, where undecidability, relativity, and an infinite chain of semiotic deferrals leave an etymological uncertainty, or have undergone historical transmogrifications and variations when applied to other languages and cultures that efface the true question of origins, then the most

we can hope for in detecting any original meaning is the derivative, the trace. This leads us to ask, What is the essence of myth? Can it be deconstructed, so to speak, or analyzed in a manner that can advance our ways in which we theorize about the theory of myth?

2 | TOWARD A THEORETIC TYPOLOGY OF MYTH

If we adopt the principle of sufficient reason, namely, that every mental object must stand in relation to an archaic event derived from an original ground *in illo tempore*, then myth, like all psychic experience, must stand in relation to its origins. In other words, how is myth derived from archaic ground *ab origine*? It may appear strange to ask about original meaning, but if you change original meaning then a theory of myth becomes *presumed*, hence given, when this conclusion is a displacement of origins that is *subsumed* in any contemporary discourse on myth.

Why do we need a theory of myth? Because no systematic theory exists, let alone a consensus. If no agreement exists on what myth is or signifies, then expressive and representational approaches to language and ontology are merely relative or devolve into circularity, tautology, or are simply begging the question. What I am particularly interested in addressing are not specific theories of myth, or specific myths themselves, but rather what constitutes a good theory. In particular, throughout our investigation I hope to illuminate what a proper theory of myth would be expected to offer. But before we get there, we need to prepare the groundwork in anticipation of our conclusions.

As Segal (1999, p. 1) points out, myth is an applied subject that always appeals to broader categories that are then in turn applied to the case of myth. As a result, comparative and discipline-specific analyses of myth tend to be dubious due to the arbitrary and turbid nature of the way in which they vary in their approach to investigating myth. Furthermore, a particular approach to theorizing already imports certain epistemological assumptions about the very nature of the subject matter, such as what the theory is supposed to do or be used for, or what it is about, or accounts for, or signifies, what it is supposed to describe, and so on. For this reason, many of the leading modern theorists of myth introduce explicit presuppositions about the way things are in their very approach to myth, such as myth is a subset of religion, accompanies ritual, serves a practical function, is an ethic or conviction, is the primitive counterpart to science, or is a proto-logical view of describing and explaining the physical world, the cosmos, gods, society, the mind and human relations, the process of civilization, cultural artifacts and values, and so forth (for an overview see Chase, 1949; Feldman & Richardson, 1972). Here Segal (1999, p. 2) argues that comparative theories of myth often engage answers to fundamental questions such as, What is the (a) origin, (b) function, (c) subject matter or referent, and (d) meaning of myth?

Let us attempt to expound upon this typology or principle of categorization. First, *What is myth about?* Any reference to subject matter already presupposes various ontological assertions, so let us begin with *origin*. Origin is about foundations, archaic ground, hence history and genesis. So whatever myth refers to, it must engage a point of origination, which signifies both meaning and function, and is therefore overdetermined in surplus and value on any discourse we adopt on myth. If we begin with history and archaic ontology, where myth emerged, then we are by definition adopting a discourse about *being human* even if we are attempting to define a particular feature, function, and/or reason for positing myth. If myth is always *about* something, then it imports ontology, namely, the material world, culture, anthropology, cosmogony, the

supernatural, and so on despite the sociological and psychological functions they serve. So first of all, myth is about ontology—what is purportedly real—even if only symbolic or bears out to be a false claim.

The *function* of myth is varied, sociologically diverse, and ultimately idiosyncratic to individual persons despite participating in common collective beliefs and practices. Functions of myth may be designed to bind social collectives, such as in religion, facilitate roles and rituals, or have applied personal purposes and delineations, but they often serve a job or pragmatic task, such as a utilitarian description, interpretation, observation, deliberation, way of being, explanation, and/or expression of human phenomena, even when the subject matter is not about the human being. In this way, myth is about utility, service, helpfulness, and efficacy.

The *meaning* of myth can be (a) literal, (b) figurative, (c) metaphorical, (d) symbolic, (e) semiotically circumscribed, such as in a creed, doctrine, or ideology, and (f) imaginative, as suggested by its etymology, which is always open to hermeneutics and fantasy. In this way, myth can be personal and collective, hence universal regardless of its form and content, and open to an infinite chain of significations, meaning relations, and referents without being predetermined or confined in its ostensive definition or purpose. In this way, both function and meaning may be interdependent within a rubric of irreducibility. Although function and meaning may operate outside of the ontic conditions of archaic ground, they are not ontologically independent from origin. As previously stated, every event or appearance must stand in relation to its archaic derivations, in this case, the phenomena of myth.

Although the nature of theory has been subjected to critique in the sciences, the social sciences, and conceptual research (Corley, 2011; Estrada & Schultz, 2017; Gibbs, 1990; Shalley, 2012; Van Lange, 2013), where the characteristics of accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness (Kuhn, 1974) have enjoyed dominant attention, which often involve a limited adoption of logical empiricism (Ye & Stam, 2013), the role of imagination objectively grounded in data and practicality (Calder & Tybout, 2016) that focus on reliability, precision, parsimony, generality, falsifiability, and progress (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2015; Gieseler, Loschelder, & Friese, 2019; Popper, 1965) informs our current discourse. Critique of theory is often not discussed in the humanities: theory is merely presumed according to discipline-specific norms. The same applies to studies of myth, and theories about theoretics that are taken at face value rather than critiqued for their disposition, structure, methodology, epistemological verity, and viability as an explanatory model of knowledge. This becomes even more nebulous if we concede that theory itself is a limited medium to access the meaning of myth. Rather than critique the value and limits of studies in mythology, we may see how sound theory is a necessary requirement that guides research methodology. In general, theory of myth should be:

1. Descriptive/precise
2. Coherent/consistent
3. Expository/explanatory
4. Generalizable/broad
5. Meaningful/expressive
6. Pragmatic; namely, useful or progressive

The more clearly defined concepts and operational definitions are that allow for descriptive precision, coherency of presentation and argument, logical structure, form, and consistency, explanatory scope and depth that are generalizable or widely applicable in meaning and breadth, and that have utility, hence inspire or promote new research or theoretical progress,

the more sophisticated a theory becomes. While the criteria of parsimony, falsifiability, and prediction often apply to the sciences, they do not necessarily apply to the humanities, let alone studies of myth for the plain reason that theory can be quite complex or profound, hence far from simple, not to mention they do not necessarily conform to empirical or real-world events; therefore the criteria of replication, falsification, or refutation of conjectures through testing and experimentation do not readily apply to theories of myth, which do not require empirical reality to lend them meaning or credibility when the subject matter, referent, and function lay outside of natural observation. This does not mean to suggest that research methodology is lacking in refinement and validity just because it does not conform to the parameters of empirical science. On the contrary, the theoretical humanities may often be far more intricate and erudite, which the principle of parsimony occludes or dislocates from its scope of investigation.

To what degree is theory and method arbitrary, contextual, contingent, relative, personalized, exploratory—hence experimental, and non-conclusive? Does theory only provide parameters for explanation and meaning, or does it guide method? If so, are theory and method virtually the same thing, or merely closely related even though they are subject to categorical distinctions? If one is the framework in which meaning is created and the other its application, then identity and similarity must be differentiated by their modes of instantiation. When a method or application is followed and posited to derive from and/or engender theory, then the dialectical ontic nature of theory and method become more difficult to differentiate as they are mutually implicative, and hence interrelated. And if this is the case, how do they stand in relation to individual and cultural differences, social and anthropological discrepancies, historical and gender variances? And can a methodological approach to myth, in theory, transpire without relying on theory? In other words, can a methodology actually be executed devoid of any theoretic directing the method or procedural actions themselves?

Every discipline has a set of theoretical orienting principles guiding inquiry, research, and methodological process, whether presumptive or not. Is this notion of criteria any different for the humanities versus the empirical researcher? Perhaps this binary is unnecessary to evoke, for we may make empirical observations on the social objectivity of the existence of myth, but not necessarily on its cultural meanings, although we can generally agree that the study of myth reflects the human, semiotic, and hermeneutical sciences without devolving into the discourse of natural science.

It was Dilthey (1883) who proposed the distinction between the human sciences based upon investigating and understanding the motivations and meanings inherent to the experiential subject or human being versus that of the natural sciences, which is concerned with the impersonal forces and organizations of nature. Whereas the *Geisteswissenschaften* focus on the science of mental processes and social systems within a class of human events, the *Naturwissenschafhten* focus on the domain of the natural world. Therefore, the bifurcation that is often forged between the human and natural sciences takes as its premise that nature and human experience are mutually exclusive categories. However, the distinction lies in the methodology and discourse each discipline employs. What was crucial for Dilthey in positing distinctions between the natural and human sciences is the pivotal concept of "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*), the irreducibility of subjectivity that prereflectively (unconsciously) encounters the immediate presence of reality, that which is present "to me" as an internal sense, not as a given external object or datum of consciousness, but as an immediate internal mediacy. Here the subject-object distinction is obscured, if not sutured: Psyche is the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*).

Although this nature *vs.* human science differentiation was met with criticism due to the fact that human subjectivity and sociality are part of the natural world, and that critics (from

neo-Kantians such as Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, as well as Freud) would claim are equally open to scientific scrutiny and can, in principle, find simpatico, this categorical distinction has nevertheless often been employed to distinguish the humanities from the physical sciences. But regardless of which approach we adopt, we cannot evade making ontological assertions. To say that a linguistic, semiotic, or scientific paradigm describes or explains a phenomenon, even if mired in uncertainty and impasse, is to evoke a referent that it is still *about* something, whether a corporeal object, a mental concept, or imaginative (immaterial) state of affairs (as fantasy) derived from re-presentational (experiential) consciousness. The mode of discourse does not displace the signified object(s) in question, which always engages the question of ontology. In other words, we cannot elude the question of truth and realism no matter what discourse we adopt. Metaphysics always has a way of coming back to bite us in the backside.

The subject matter within a human science model is that of the experiential person and collective social life contextualized within a genus of human events; and impersonal aspects of the natural world are not typically part of its scope or locus. But myth has very often been historically offered as statements of explanation about the natural world. Yet, because human sciences are interpretive and target the meaning of experience, by definition they become hermeneutic. Because myth is necessarily predicated on human speech and language, as is noted by the ancients, and involves the pursuit of understanding human motivation and constructing meaning through interpretive intersubjective exchange, it may be considered a hermeneutic science.

For Dilthey and others, interpretation, understanding (*Verstehen*), or comprehension becomes a method for investigating the human sciences in relation to life-contexts, while the natural sciences are confined to sensory observation, description, testing, and explanation of causality and their effects. However, this distinction is not devoid of certain problems especially when rules or criteria for understanding may become opaque or overlap, as they do in the social sciences where methods of comprehensibility straddle the two methodological domains. Here it can be argued that hermeneutics never fully escapes the charge of slipping into relativism or recalcitrant subjectivism, given that, following certain rules of discourse versus what someone "really meant," can easily be two different things. The same applies to the scientific method where testability, verification, and falsifiability are subject to epistemic interpretation rather than pristine explanatory objectivity. Likewise, exegetical interpretation of a text or deconstructive praxis, and the application of that interpretation, may readily transform or alter it from its original meaning or purpose, even if we presuppose a hermeneutic circle. In other words, the very act of translation itself institutes reinterpretations of interpretations that can potentially spin on in circularity or regress to a point that meaning is foreclosed from its original signification.

3 | SEGAL ON MYTH

Robert A. Segal is arguably one of the most accomplished contemporary scholars of myth. Throughout his vast writings on the topic, Segal's stylistic approach to theorizing about myth is to assume and exegetically articulate the positions of various theorists on myth, particularly those after the rise of modernity, only to add his own critique. He generally shies away from taking a stance on the truth or falsity of myth, instead focusing on its origin and function, but there is a tension in his thinking influenced by his affinity for exactitude and science. Segal has

largely adopted methodologies derived from Anglo-American analytic philosophy, logical positivism, and the philosophy of science with particular historical resonances to Russell, A.J. Ayer, Quine, Kuhn, Popper, and Grünbaum, which he has applied to his studies on myth, anthropology, and religion. He particularly focuses on distinctions between explanation and interpretation championed by R.G. Collingwood (1946), William Dray, Peter Winch, and Gilbert Ryle (1971) as they are related to natural, social, and human science categories.

Although Segal generally analyzes why myths arise and examines the purpose they serve, he also becomes preoccupied with how theorists offer either interpretations or explanations about the structure and verity of myth. For example, the views of E.B. Tylor (1832–1917) and James G. Frazer (1854–1941) who claim that myth is the primitive counterpart to modern science make myth incompatible with science, which is assumed to be true, and so hence makes myth false, despite the fact that they both serve different functions. Myth here is taken literally. By contrast, the view of myth as anything but archaic or prescientific either sidesteps the question or else makes myth true, but only true symbolically or psychologically. In other words, this form of truth only applies to human nature or society, but not the physical world. Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976), Hans Jonas (1903–1993), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) would mainly fall into this camp. So here myths are not about material reality, only psychic reality; whether individual or collective is a matter of emotional identification with the subject matter mediated through imagination.

Regardless of the historical origins and functions of myth, much of Segal's analyses revolve around myth as an explanation of the world, whether antiquated, incorrect, or simply a false claim in relation to science is moot. But why does myth have to meet the challenge of science? Science merely explains while myth may serve many functions science cannot. But this all depends upon what we mean by science, hence to *know* (< Lat. *scientia*, from *scire*, to understand). In psychoanalysis for instance, to see an example from the social sciences, to offer a theory that explains psychological conditions and states of mind within social collectives, myth attempts to present the complexity of intrapsychic, intersubjective, and communal arrangements within a given culture, an unconscious manifestation of the need to make the unconscious conscious. For psychoanalysis, myth reveals in disguised forms all of humanity's desires, conflicts, defences, emotions, traits, dispositions, longings, and complexes that expose the personal and collective plight of humankind. Here myth has psychological significance for masses and functions in psychic economy unconsciously. Myth serves to symbolize culture and the symbolic value inherent in culture. In this way, myth as functionalism serves the overdetermined systems of society, and provides regulation to constant change, such that there is order, purpose, and structure to sociocultural networks via the narrative. A narrative in turn provides meaning, which is at once open to interpretation, even when attempts at explanation fail. Yet the notion of explanation is itself controversial.

For Segal (2014), "Explanation provides causes. Interpretation provides meanings" (p. 25). In comparing Max Weber, Clifford Geertz, and Paul Ricoeur, he notes an "ontological" difference between explanation and interpretation: causality is physical, while meaning is mental or psychical. Although Weber (1968, v1, pp. 4–5; 21–21) collapses the distinction and makes mentation a causal process in its own right, akin to psychoanalysis, whereas psychic meaning is determinative, Geertz maintains a division on their incompatible ways in which they account for intentional behavior and their consequential effects. For Geertz (1973, p. 43), interpretation applies to a particular, while explanation applies to a universal or generality. Ricoeur (1981, pp. 155, 158, 161), on the other hand, wants to maintain the reconcilable compatibility or

consilience between explanatory and interpretive methodologies because they harmonize one another and provide answers to different questions, at once explanatory as well as interpretive (Segal, 2014, p. 29). In the end Segal believes that Ricoeur's conciliatory attempt fails because he fails to keep the distinctions apart: reconciling meanings with causes becomes our task at hand, and Segal (2014, p. 33) seems to be more comfortable with reducing meaning to cause.

According to Segal (2014), "Any explanation starts with the effect and works backwards to the cause" (p. 93). But why should explanation predicate causality? For Segal (2009, pp. 69–72), if I read him correctly, an explanation is a reference to "proof" and "causality," which requires "testing," hence a privileging of empiricism, objectivity, and the scientific method, while other theories of explanation may rest on metaphysical foundational principles wedded to logic, non-contradiction, and internally coherent argumentation. Sometimes theories of explanation clash with one another, especially when they do not conform to the tenets of scientific experimentation, testability, verification, falsifiability, validity, replication, and reliability of measures. But this privileging of one method over another may simply be begging the question of a master discourse on method, especially when science reiterates its own ideologies when it fails to explain phenomena outside of its narrow scope of empirical observation, description, and experimentation that cannot control for variables, environments, and measurements that fall outside of the laboratory (Mills, 2015). That is why myth is part of the humanities and not the natural sciences.

As the gadfly of the Jungian world, Segal has offered a sustained critique of Jung. Recently he has applied his scheme of scientific critique using the categories of explanation versus interpretation to interrogate Jung's theory of myth, but it is the scheme that I wish to examine here rather than Jungian theory, as I find it applicable to any critique of myth. Segal (2014, pp. 82–84) believes that any good theory that is scientific must be testable, and that we simply cannot assume tenets or propositions without arguing for them. Nothing serious or worthy of merit is to be presupposed. Nor are they applicable (hence generalizable) without solid grounds for accepting them. And they must be predictive, not post hoc or ex post facto constructions. At the very least, an *internal criteria* must be met that satisfies the framework of a good theory, and this is what I would impart to internal consistency that is coherent and non-contradictory, which conforms to the parameters of what I would consider to be a sound theory of myth. But a certain degree of *external criteria* must also be met, according to Segal, to make it generalizable, hence valid. Not only is a good theory applicable and subject to the probabilistic laws of predictability, any test would have to address the viability of the theory: here testability automatically assumes the theory will be subject to scrutiny. Will it pass muster? Segal is also demanding evidence. No proposition is proof of itself. Nothing can be predicated into existence, let alone assume others will buy its applicability, meaningfulness, or pragmatic value. Evidence is inexorable. It is an essential requirement, a necessary condition for any theory to be true. But is it a sufficient condition? And what about predictability? Should this be a defining theory of myth like it is of science? Is this not a category mistake?

Segal (2014) makes an important claim: "an interpretation must be supported by an explanation" (p. 83). But we may ask, Why? And if so, is there any real difference between the two? Segal singles out the criterion of "persuasiveness" as a central feature in how a theory is applied. It seems to me that both an interpretation and an explanation must satisfy the criterion of persuasiveness if a theory is to have any merit. For Segal (1992), as for the hermeneuticists, an interpretation applies to meaning, while an explanation applies to the question of origin—why a myth was created and lasts. But a meaningful interpretation may also apply to an explication of the accounts of origin. They need not be binary categories or antinomies. They may be mutually

implicative and ontically interdependent, what Segal calls "interlocking." There is no need to cleave them off from each other as they are both operative within any meta-representational framework that addresses the meaning, origin, and function of theory.

When Segal (2014) defines the meaning of "explanation," he is referring to "the account—of mind, the world, culture, or society—that is presupposed by the interpretation" (p. 83). So here explanation and interpretation are not bifurcated even though we could argue that an interpretation is an attempt to provide a meaningful explication of events or a state of affairs, while an explanation is a cryptic form of interpretation disguised as certitude. In the end, Segal insists that a good theory of myth be justified, is generalizable, and predictive, not simply the ability to interpret a story.

4 | FROM EXPLANANDUM TO EXPLANANS

Despite the long tradition in the natural, social, and human sciences that have historically attempted to separate the notion of explanation from interpretation (Bergström, 1990; Faye, 2011; Lipton, 2004; Ricoeur, 1971; Roubekas & Ryba, 2020), we have good reason to believe this bifurcation is a false dichotomy. An *explanandum* describes a phenomenon to be explained, not the phenomenon itself, while an *explanans* seeks to adduce an answer or explanation to account for the phenomenon—its reason(s), purpose, origins, and so forth. While the *explicandum* is that which gets explicated, the *explicans* is that which gives the explication. Although an explanation attempts to account for the coming into being of a phenomenon, it is more than that. It always implies, if not literally evokes, the question of causality by attempting to explain the ground or preconditions that bring something about, such as certain antecedent events or the necessary conditions (not sufficient ones) that are temporally and materially a priori. So contrary to predicate or propositional logic, which is merely concerned with the meaning of words or expressions and their formal systemic relations and operations, or statements that make something comprehensible, an *explanans* is much more far-reaching—it is about ontology.

On the one hand, an interpretation is an attempt to describe a phenomenon, on the other, an explanation attempts to offer more, that is, how and why a phenomenon occurs. But so does an interpretation—each are about explication. So how does an interpretation differ from an explanation? When applied to the question of myth, I argue that both interpretive and explanatory models are equally making ontological claims, even if they are tarrying in epistemic uncertainty when it comes to the question of causality. Recall that for the ancients, a cause (αιτία) was the reason or explanation for something happening, which is always overdetermined.

If myth is a declarative attempt to make phenomena comprehensible, then we must contend that it is offering an explanation of phenomena, even if contestable, or it would not have any currency to grant meaning to the human mind. Whether it is true or false is another issue, one we should adjourn for now. The prowess of myth over the eons seems to coalesce into many different meaning structures that wed interpretation, explanation, emotion, feeling, aesthetics, parable, morality, spirituality, and higher rational insights into a psychic medium that is historically and culturally enshrined within the development of human civilization. To say that myth is merely about one thing, or serves merely functions—psychological, sociological, anthropological, and so on—is to miss the point that myth is ultimately about ontology, about what it signifies, that which is ultimately real, even if presented as fiction or fantasy. In other words, the imaginary is real. And anytime we evoke the notion of what is really real, we cannot

bracket or suspend the question of determinism. But why should we grant the narrative—the "story"—the status of offering a theory of causality? Why should we assume an *explanans* has anymore epistemological weight or verity to phenomenal description—to the *explanandum*? Does not an explanation have multiple threads, multiple significations, hence an over-determination and surplus of meaning and value, not to mention causal-semiotic strands of deferral to an infinite chain of associations and signifiers? This logically implies that no single explanation is ever complete or unequivocally valid, rather only a partial attempt at conceptualizing and describing phenomena.

5 | THE TRUTH OF MYTH AND THE MYTH OF TRUTH

Eliade (1963) adopts a particular view held by archaic societies that myth means a "true" story, whether literally or a narrative believed to be true by relevant social collectives, which holds sacred socioreligious significance of transcendental spiritual value explicating "beginnings" or the coming into existence of reality itself by supernatural provenance. Since the Western epistemological turn in modernity, and the hermeneutical narrative turn in more contemporary postmodern times, we may concede that our understanding and consensus of the meaning of "truth" remains hotly contested. Whether we adopt Eliade's affinities for supernaturalism or not, his position that myth narrates sacred history is itself an explanation, for it attempts to delineate a causal factor in positing an account of "creation"—the ground of archaic ontology from which myth arises. Here Eliade may be accused of obfuscating truth with reality.[3] One person's truth may be their psychic reality subject to relativism, illusion, projection, and fantasy, if not delusion, hence their phenomenal experience of the world, while another demands that reality must conform to the stronghold of objective (demonstrated and proven) empirical and material facts in order to be flown under the banner of truth, a debate we do not have to continue at length here.

If interpretive and explanatory models are used to describe and lend understanding to phenomena, which always evoke the question of ontology, as I argue, then they inevitably engage the questions of truth and epistemology, even if unintended or silent on the matter. What does this imply? This would suggest that any discourse on myth simultaneously speaks about epistemic verity and/or the truth or falsity of its predications or claims. But what do we mean by truth? If mythos and logos cannot elude the question of truth, then would not any discourse on truth equally imply that a certain mythology is at play? The myth that there is Truth, as if it were a single, unified condition, entity, or unquestionable empirical state of affairs that transcends all phenomenal realities and fulfills every epistemic criterion imaginable is simply a fantasy. If this were otherwise, then no one would be debating the question, scope, and meaning of truth. It would simply be accepted as *given*, as part of our natural thrownness. As I have critiqued elsewhere (Mills, 2014), discourse on truth is not about "correctness" or so-called empirical facts, rather it is about what phenomenally *appears* in the real world of ontic relations. Both the methods of interpretation and explanation are making propositional assertions about truth-claims, and truth-claims stand in relation to what they ultimately signify or represent, namely, onto-phenomenal conditions.

Truth may be better understood by revisiting the ancient notion of *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια), where truth is defined as a process of disclosedness or unconcealedness. Truth appears as the manifestation of particularlized expressions of the psyche-in-society that have their source in an unconscious ontology teleologically motivated to disclose itself. This applies to myth, or humanity would never have invented such discourse to begin with, for it *speaks* to a collective need to understand

and recapitulate archetypal experience of-and-in the world. Here the very conditions for truth to be disclosed must be conditioned on unconscious experience. Myth as disclosure through discourse reveals the unconcealed longings of the human race to describe, interpret, and explain human experience that could not be articulated otherwise before the age of reason and science. But even today, such mythic language can never be replaced by the antiseptic discourse of science, for staid or stolid approaches to explicating lived experience never live up to the psychological needs for satisfaction, emotionality, and enjoyment. It is a primal phenomenon arising from the pulsional desire to interpret, expatiate, and know the world.

The truth of myth is both a universal and particularized form of disclosedness—an appearance of a much more complex process that may only reveal itself a bit at a time as partial unconcealment—as event, a moment, an instance. We must graft more meaning structures onto our interpretations to expand and complicate them, where there are richer and more robust and variegated theories that fall under the categorical rubric of what we call explanation. For example, the theory of evolution is an interpretation of human origin, but is it not an unqualified explanation, albeit plausible and scientifically probable. It is very much a scheme or set of hypotheses that have explanatory power. Evolutionary biology may very well be a necessary condition but not a sufficient one to explain human origins. The same equally applies to myth. Myth, like religion, attempts to answer to origins—to ontology—as does physics and evolution, only on the condition that it is a narrative *about* origins, hence an interpretation of human experience and valuation—itself a phenomenon or appearance of our psychic expressions signifying something that is purportedly attempting to transcend human subjectivity, namely, archaic ontology. But given that myth is universal to humanity, only the particularities vary, any theory of myth must concede that it is merely a partial *explanans* of the *explanandum*.

Can a myth be true, or is it by definition false? Notice the binary logic involved in the question, presuming that the predicate "true" is valued over that which is "false." This question always stands in relation to epistemology and the discursive or procedural methods we adopt, as well as the definitions we attribute to the signifier "truth." Is truth merely about correctness, internal consistency, logical form? If so, this conforms to a theory of discourse we as collectives or cultures define through semantic or linguistic convention. Or is it about fact? But how do we determine fact and evidence independent of human consensus? Even scientific models of metaphysical realism that profess to "discover" truth and "natural laws" cannot escape from our human subjectivity in offering interpretations of those laws, even when submitted to rigorous testing exposing the problems of verification, falsification, replication, reliability, validity, observation selection effects, anthropic bias, and refutation of conjectures. All constants evolve, change, mutate, and rematerialize in other forms—the transmogrification of reality. From physics to myth, humanity cannot help but invent and reinvent its own so-called truths. Explanation is as much a myth at explicating causality as is science; yet the matter becomes not truth, but rather plausibility based on statistical probabilities and predictive validity, the gambling intellect that places value in attempting to predict possible future conditions and events. Science predicts as it explains, while myth is an explanation of interpretation, itself predictable.

6 | THE ESSENCE OF MYTH

A proper theory of myth must have several components. We have identified four thus far: (1) referent, (2) origin, (3) meaning, and (4) function. Setting aside the subject matter, let us start with origin, and I will compare this to archaic ontology appropriating Aristotle's categorization of

causality as our guide. I wish to avoid the, at times, simplistic (parsimonious) models of science, but they are subsumed in a more comprehensive explication of determinism, or more appropriately, overdetermination (Mills, 2013), so I will include them here without succumbing to reductionism.

A myth must have a (1) source, (2) force, (3) form, (4) object, and (5) goal. Because mythology is archetypal, that is, it is rooted in the archaic development of civilization and language, it is by definition a human invention, hence a cultural phenomenon that makes attempts to explain via consciousness (interpretation) origins, that is, the cosmos, gods, Being, and so forth. Although the *source* is, strictly speaking, mediated through human cognition, it attempts to answer to the question of fundamental ontology. The *force* or essence of myth is process, or the revealed organizing principles behind the narrative. The *form* is the organizational style, typology, categorization, formula, patterning, and/or genre of the story, often poetical, metaphorical, aesthetic, moralistic, and brimming with latent meanings, usually revolving around the development of characters and plot within metanarratives and meta-representations. As human linguistic inventions, they are psychologically mediated through imagination, so imaginal properties suffuse mythic structure. The *object* of myth refers to contents, properties, place, context, contingencies, and fantasies, as by contemporary definition myth is a fictional or illusory product of the imagination, although it can be taken as real, literate, material, significatory, and/ or suggestive of a greater transcendental object or reality. But to a minor degree, the object of myth (the overarching narrative or meta-structure) is intimately linked with its *goal*, namely, its purpose. The purpose or aim is both to interpret and explain—hence to assign meaning and value to—the narrative.

Myth furthermore discloses an intent or *telos*, even if supple, hence revealing the agency behind the story. Here the meaning of myth reveals the emotional mind, and often has aesthetic and ethical dimensions and utilities in conveying a message(s) that reverberates in the psyche and in social collectives through identificatory unconscious resonances. Hence a myth conveys or expresses the human soul. It is only the human being who can generate and understand myth, even if professed to be about genesis or come from an original cause outside the human mind.

As human creation, myth may be said to be socially constructed as the ethos and expression of culture, or it can be solely individualistic, subjective, and private. Although it is unconsciously motivated, and displaces the vast array of human affects, conflicts, desires, defenses, fantasies, and their compromises, it ultimately has a telos, purpose, or objective, the goal of which is to communicate internal experience, discharge pulsions, contain anxiety, and engender meaning that usually transcends mere conscious intent. Here myth is overdetermined, that is, it provides meta-meaning and has multiple functions that resonate on many parallel processes of mentation.

With stipulations, it may also be argued that meaning and function are equiprimordial, but without equating the two or collapsing them into the same category: while all functions convey meaning they may not be meaningful. They may be understood, have a practical structure, reason, and so forth, but they may offer little or no psychological solace. Functions may serve a purpose or have practicalities but may be devoid of value to the psyche. Myths logically must transcend mere function, or they would cease to lose all value, unless we were to concede that masses remain largely unconscious of their need for myths and simply are conditioned sheep in the meadow. But even if we were to yield this hypothesis, the sociological organizations that promulgate and keep mythic discourse alive speak to greater communal narratives of how myth serves both utility and meaning in collectives, or it would have disappeared from socialization

practices altogether. The prime example is religion. Religion will never disappear because it serves equiprimordial needs and meaning for humanity.

Myth is an inherent and indispensable aspect of human civilization that disperses its particularities into the social fabric of every culture, which has its own regional contents, contexts, and intent, yet it cannot stand outside of its own origins, namely, human consciousness, even when its subject matter is about cosmos, theos, and prebeginnings. Yet given that consciousness is conditioned by unconscious process, following Freud and Jung, we may conclude that myth is a collective unconscious projection of its own mythical character. Because myth is the exteriorization of interiority, myth becomes the realization of archaic unconscious ontology. As the self-externalization of its own internal lived-value, conscious identification with myth both validates and fulfills the felt-qualia of one's living interior or feeling soul.

Hence *qua* myth annuls any claim to pure epistemology and objectivity, even in science, because models of human knowledge by necessity contain their own mythic structure. Here the meaning-making powers of myth find their way into every conceivable venue in which we construct, explain, and experience the world. Because myth is always the expression of human imagination, and specifically unconscious fantasy, we may conceive of myth, like the dream, as a symptom of humanity. Myth communicates something to us and for us, hence it has a sense. Not only does it have a function, meaning, and purpose, it makes sense. In its essence, myth is a form of inner sense.[4]

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ENDNOTES

[1] Initiated in the 19th Century, and now in its 9th revised edition, Liddell and Scott's (1843) *Greek-English Lexicon* is generally considered among classicists to be the finest compilation to date of the classical works of antiquity where the etymological sources of ancient words derive and correspond to contemporary linguistics and modes of discourse. All references to μῦθος begin on p. 1151, Vol. 2.

[2] See Anderson (2004, p. 61) for a discussion.

[3] Eliade (1963) asserts that "the myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a 'true history,' because it always deals with *realities*. The cosmogonic myth is 'true' because the existence of the World is there to prove it; the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man's mortality proves it" (p. 6). Here we may say that Eliade is conflating myth with an actual portrayal of history and that such a portrayal conveys actual realities, which needs defined and demonstrated, hence proved. A myth may be true insofar as it is an artifact of culture, but it does not mean that it signifies a true reality apart from the experience of the subject or social collective. And just because the world exists does not make the myth real or true apart from the believer. The existence of the world does not remotely prove the reality of the myth other than it is an anthropological occasion or psychological projection. Projections do not necessarily correspond to objective reality. And just because we are mortal and die, does not mean that a myth of the origins of death proves it any more than the biological fact that we cease to be, as any anatomist or mortician will tell you.

[4] Earlier versions of this paper were given as a conference presentation under the title "Listening to the Other: On the Theory Versus Research Debate in Psychoanalysis" (Mills, 2019) and appeared later as "The Essence of Myth" (Mills, 2020).

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