

Why theory is not myth

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Abstract

James Cresswell provides a thoughtful critique of my essay on a theory of myth (Mills) with a specific focus on the nature of theorizing that challenges the dogma of empirical frames of reference, concluding that scientific theories themselves are contemporary myths. Insofar as myth is an attempt to provide a narrative or discourse about phenomena, Cresswell's argument could apply to any theory. But he takes this point further: theory is synonymous with myth. In order to unpack this evocative claim, it may prove useful to revisit how theory and myth relate to the concepts of logos, truth, ontology and identity. In the end, I suggest theory is not myth because theory sets out to describe, interpret and explain phenomena and is scrutinized for its validity, generalizability and applied consequences, while the premises of myth are often historically and culturally presupposed or simply devolve into belief that may or may not be defensible.

KEYWORDS

critique of theory, discourse, identity, myth, theory, truth

In his critique of my theory of myth (Mills, 2020), James Cresswell (2020) argues that a good theory cannot rely on coherence as a criterion. At first glance this may appear rather odd. If a theory is not coherent, how could it be very good, let alone valid? Does he mean to imply that incoherence—unintelligibility, inarticulateness, disjointedness, illogicality—would be an acceptable defining feature of good theory? Cresswell begins with the proposition that “myth and theory are synonymous” (p. 1) without arguing for why this is so, hence eluding a coherent explanation, and then goes on to differentiate theory from theorizing. Why would we accept at face value the assertion that myth and theory are the same without providing a proper

argument? As it stands, this proposition is merely begging the question: here Cresswell is committing a *petitio principii*. But can his thesis be rehabilitated? This would depend upon mutually agreed definitions and logical propositions that are defensible. Cresswell hones in on, and dismisses, the notion of “coherence” as a criterion for what constitutes a good theory, while I address six categories (p. 4), one of which is coherence/consistency, four components (p. 11), and five subcomponents (p. 12). He curiously believes the criterion of coherence is not relevant to substantiate a good theory, instead advocating for what constitutes good quality theorizing, much of which is compatible with my views, including the notion that good theorizing generates innovation. But why dismiss coherence? Granted that theory can be contradictory, as much of human psychology is based on mediating inner contradiction (Mills, 2019), as is Hegel’s (1812/1831) *Logic*, for instance, which relies on an ever ending crescendo toward sublation (*Aufhebung*) in its attempt to resolve contradiction through the coming into being of self-consciousness as thought thinking about itself and its operations (Mills, 2002).

In his reduction of theory and myth into homogenous categories, Cresswell wants to further extend this application to theorizing in general. Although I am sympathetic with his pursuit of good theorizing, I do not see how he can separate out theory from theorizing given that theorizing by definition refers to and is the instantiation of theory. In other words, theorizing is a method of applied theory: they are mutually implicative because they form a dialectical relation. Theorizing itself refers, or is a referent, to a signified object, whether in thought or reality, which entails the act of signification itself. Furthermore, in applying theory as theorizing, the object of signification involves an ontological principle. This is why logos as discourse reveals itself in acts of relation *qua* relatedness and is intimately tied to the notions of truth as dis-closure or unconcealment, and ontology as being or presence.

Cresswell claims that theorizing is “what we *do with*” theory. Fair enough. So how does this make theory and myth the same? If theorizing is the application of theory, then why does he think we can dispense with the pursuit of good theory, what he calls “a nearly impossible task” (p. 1), when theorizing is dependent upon theory? And if theorizing is the application and utility of myth, does this not further beg the question of a proper discourse on myth? Why not critique the quality of what constitutes a good theory alongside its application? Cresswell argues that this is impossible because theorists who purport a coherent worldview of human life believe their approach to be the “most coherent,” when coherence is merely one factor of many that could account for good theory and applied method. Like Robert Segal (2020) who emphasizes the point that what counts is not the truth of myth, but what others *believe* to be true and why, we may argue that what is sincere, first-person warranted belief based on the confirmation of the believer’s internal experience is not the same as truth. Here belief becomes a rather fluid epistemological category not contingent upon the empirical parameters of proof and evidence, but rather a subjective *sensus divinitatis* that is all that is needed to merit its justification. The same can be applied to myth but not good theory, for “knowledge of one’s inner experience is different than the independent truth or verity of a proposition” (Mills, 2017, p. 84). The most we can say is that belief is a posited (psychological) object that corresponds to an *idea* of its truth, even if it’s false, distorted, or delusional despite being authentic lived experience informing the reason for holding it.

Given that Cresswell makes the argument that theory and myth are identical, hence collapsing identity into a non-differentiated category, this would make any theory a myth irrespective of their truth claims and subject matter. Are we justified in making this conceptual move? Is the theory of evolution a myth? How about God? Is the theory of relativity a myth? How about gravity? Insofar as myth is an attempt to provide a narrative or discourse about

phenomena, Cresswell's argument could apply to any theory. Here he is to be commended on what theories do and what they accomplish through theorizing. But are we justified in suspending the logical and semiotic distinctions between theory and myth? Granted that theory and fact are categorically distinct and subject to different qualitative and quantitative factors involving description (observation), interpretation (meaning), and explanation (causality), theory informs method and vice versa through reciprocal exchange or engagement. Myth does not. Here an explanation cannot be devoid of meaning and meaning would necessarily require an explication. It is in the surplus of meaning and the qualia of lived experience that Cresswell argues theory or myth trumps empirical work alone in its (false/fictional/mythic) attempt to enter the realm of pure objectivity through scientific naturalism devoid of human subjectivity lending meaning structures to theory and method.

Setting aside the turf wars between the epistemology of science and hermeneutics, Cresswell (2020) believes that the "notion of description is more sophisticated than the notion of theory as a model representing the real world" (p. 2), when in my discussion of good theory, description and precision fall within one of six categories encompassing a comprehensive composite (Mills, 2020, p. 4). Here he favors description after already jettisoning coherence, further subordinating theory to an *explanandum* at the expense of an *explanans*. But if I read him correctly, his point is that theory, and by extension theorizing, is a philosophical enterprise involving many systemic conditions and variables that ground observation, data description, qualia of the observer, and hermeneutic frames of meaning into an ontic-epistemic-phenomenologic-semiotic relationship, for which we are in agreement.

Another important point is Cresswell's claim that when positing theory, particularly under the hegemon of science, we are in fact repeating an entrenched and repetitive convention of cultural discourse that is conditioned on unconscious interpellation of what we mean by truth and facticity already *given* within our social milieu. Although he is advocating for a categorization of myth and theory that in principle transcends the empirical delimitations of the scientific method, where their verification, falsifiability, and veracity do not apply, it becomes difficult to sustain any discourse without slipping back into ontology—the *aboutness* or *isness* of something, which demands a justification of truth claims nonetheless. With his insistence that an internal critique of theory is not possible due to the problem of coherence, Cresswell further believes critique cannot be conducted outside theory itself because it does not apply to those living their own theory/myth. But I see no reason why critique cannot be executed from within the given parameters of a theory (or field) subject to all the criteria I address, nor would critique be off-limits from other disciplines and modes of discourse just because they don't adopt such theories or live another's myth. After all, *theōria* (θεωρία) is to contemplate, consider, look at, examine, the methods of which applied are variable and diverse depending upon one's field of study. How can the act of theorizing stand above theory itself? And how can theorizing be reduced to mythic constructions when theory is subject to critical analysis of propositions supported by evidence while myth does not? Theory is far more scrutinized for its validity, generalizability, and applied consequences, while the premises of myth are often historically and culturally presupposed. Theorizing by definition employs and spreads theory, so any attempt to askew their relationship, not to mention what constitutes a definition of "good," becomes moot.

Although I concede that Cresswell and I have tackled the question, meaning, and scope of theory from the throne of abstraction, his main conclusion, if I understand him correctly, is to consider multiple perspectives simultaneously from both insider and outsider points of view involving metatheoretical representations or images of knowledge that can entertain difference and initiate dialogue. If successful, theorizing will generate innovation in novel approaches to

theory and understanding through comparative-integrative praxis. Fair enough, but does this displace—let alone erase—the concepts of truth, facticity, or disclosedness? If good theorizing is about articulating a meaningful ontology through lived experience, to what degree is it imaginative or colored by fantasy or relativism? But if good theorizing is about entertaining multiple perspectives about appearance, truth, and reality, then the question of worldviews enjoys its own collective objectivity *as* subjective universality despite lack of consensus or the epistemological divide between science and the humanities. These identity politics are tiresome, but persist for a reason. From my perspective, it all hinges on what we deem as *real*: science is absorbed with observing the natural world of objects and describing and manipulating so-called causal laws and processes while psychology is about understanding psychic events, human relations, and internal experience, *esse in anima*, being *in* soul. But psyche does not exist independent of its social and material ontology in which it is thrown, including the causal efficacy of language, culture, and its physical environs affecting the phenomenology of lived spacetime, the *Lebenswelt*.

So are theory and myth the same? In other words, as Cresswell maintains, are they identical? Identity involves essence, for in order to be, identity is essential to its being, for which it would not or could not exist. Applied to theory *qua* myth, there would be no essential difference, as no difference can be identified. But identity is identified only as a dialectical moment conditioned by difference, for that which is not-identical to itself is excluded from its immediate reflection. But following Hegel (1812/1831, pp. 407–416), reflective consciousness or speculative reason identifies difference as a moment in the constitution of identity, which possesses an essential feature in the meaning of its distinctiveness. Therefore, to think about identity necessarily requires reflection on what differentiates it from what it is not: in this moment or act of positing difference is at the same time to give it a paradoxical yet self-identical character. What it is not—the moment of pure difference—is also intertwined in what it is as an essential determination of its meaning and being. Therefore, for theory and myth to be the same, they must be self-identical through positing difference that differentiates identity from non-identity yet brought back together as a mediated unit. Given that Cresswell (2020) claims that “engaging such differences is what constitutes good theorizing” (p. 4), he may have a point, as according to Hegel, “it is identity as difference that is identical with itself” (p. 413). Identity by definition eludes difference while relying on difference to differentiate, hence define, its self-relation. Identity *in* difference may be a more proper characterization of theory, here its own myth.

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