

# Mythological Thinking and Philosophy

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**Abstract:** The article's primary purpose is to analyze the problems of the emergence of philosophy against the background of myth and the correlation of mythical and philosophical styles of thinking. The author substantiates the question of myth theories that do not consider the bearer's inner conviction of mythological thinking in the absolute reality of events and characters described in myths. The main features of the myth as the most ancient form of social consciousness are revealed: absolute subjective certainty, anonymity, which is expressed in an unconscious type of authorship, as well as a specific explanatory function, the essence of which is to implement the solution for a cognitive task before this task itself can be set and consciously formulated. Myth cannot be considered pre-scientific thinking, as an early form of folk art, or as primitive forms of religious worship. The crisis of mythology, which consists of its inability to perform its explanatory function, in turn, generates three new types of social consciousness: epic and other types of the poetry of personal authorship, religious teachings as a system of dogmas and organized cult actions, propagated by the prophets and supported by the priests, and philosophical thinking as a form of conscious intellectual creativity, the reliability of the results of which is supported by the personal wisdom of its author.

**Keywords:** Mythology, Philosophy, Genesis of Philosophy, Pre-Philosophy, Thinking.

## INTRODUCTION

In modern philosophical literature, the question of the genesis of philosophy is considered generally resolved. Since the time of Aristotle, it has been customary to begin the history of philosophical thought with Thales of Miletus<sup>1</sup>, who lived at the end of the seventh or first half of the sixth century BC. G. W. F. Hegel also begins his history of philosophy with the history of Greek thought, the first section of which is "from Thales to Anaxagoras" (Hegel 2001). However, before proceeding to the presentation of the history of philosophy, Hegel recalls mythology, which is "the result of a fantasizing mind that makes its object the essence..." However, Hegel soon discards mythology, which, although it contains some elements of philosophy in a hidden form, does not interest the historian of philosophy, because he should be interested in "thoughts that are revealed, and only in so far as they are revealed" (Hegel 2001; López-Astorga 2019).

However, such a radical contrast between philosophy and mythology may be premature. Many

modern authors have pointed out the difficulties of contrasting philosophy and mythology: Ponizovkina (2016), and Prokhorov (2016). A number of researchers have pointed to a kind of continuum that provides a transition from myth to logos (Most 1999; Cornford 2010). M. López-Astorga in his article, based on the analysis of the material of Homer's Iliad, points out that pre-philosophical texts of mythology are not separated from the actual philosophy by a rigid impassable barrier, but on the contrary, can contain full-fledged philosophical concepts (López-Astorga 2019). An interesting analysis of the relationship between myth and logos in Plato's work can be found in the article by R. Zhu (2005) Of no less importance we consider the work of G.K. Saykina, where the author describes the genetic link between the "School of beginning" that developed in early Greek philosophy and the mythological tradition that preceded it (Saykina 2014; Yuan 2020).

Although the attempts to combine myth and philosophy into a single continuum are justified, in our opinion, they lead to a certain blurring of the boundaries between these forms of thinking, which significantly complicates the understanding of their differences. This article attempts to identify the key features of the mythological form of thinking which fundamentally distinguish it from other forms that arose in the past from the crisis of mythology.

## METHODS

The article uses the method of comparative research, which allows us to identify the specifics of the

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<sup>1</sup>In the first book of Metaphysics, Aristotle gives a brief overview of all previous philosophical theories, which begins with Thales' theory of water as the originating principle: "Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says the principle is water (for which reason he declared that the earth rests on water)" (Aristotle, transl. 1933).

defined object by comparing its characteristics with other phenomena that are similar in content and form. In addition, we use a method of semantic analysis of the use of concepts, as well as a genetic method that allows us to trace the development of a certain cultural phenomenon through its origin.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mythology has attracted the interest of philosophers and scientists since ancient times. However, a special surge of interest in the study of mythological stories is noted at the turn of the XVIII-XIX centuries, in the era of romanticism, when poets and thinkers sought to find a higher truth, inaccessible to mechanistic rationalism, in ancient stories. The pinnacle of this approach was the famous "Philosophy of mythology" of the late F. W. J. Schelling's background (Schelling 2013). Since then, many researchers have turned to the subject of mythology, considering it from a variety of angles: as a symbol (Cassirer 1955), as primitive magical thinking (Lévy-Bruhl 1983), as an archetype-a manifestation of the collective unconscious (Jung 2012; Belentsov *et al.* 2019; Kaban *et al.* 2019).

Any theory of myth that explores its external form as expressing some content different from this form is doomed to a total misunderstanding of what is happening in the mind of the bearer of this mythology. We can consider the appearance of Athena from the head of Zeus in full armor and with a spear at the ready an allegory that the wisdom that Athena personified, is not formed gradually, but is given at once in its entirety. At the same time, a person who was born and raised in the space of this mythology does not perceive this statement as a symbol of something else, but as a description of reality itself. A. F. Losev states: "The myth is (for the mythic consciousness, of course) the reality that is utmost by its concrete nature, intense to the maximum and intensive in the supreme degree" (Losev 2014). For the bearer of mythical consciousness, a myth cannot be an invention or a fairy tale, it is an object of absolute faith. However, even the last statement is not quite correct since you can not even say that the myth is *believed*. After all, the requirement of faith implied in any statement of religion implies that this statement *may not* be believed, but it is the duty of the believer to resist this disbelief. Meanwhile, in the space of mythology, there is no room for doubt and criticism, as M. I. Steblin-Kamensky writes: "Only one thing is certain about the myth: a myth is a narrative that, wherever it arose and existed,

was accepted as true, however improbable it may be." (Steblin-Kaminsky 1976; Buana *et al.* 2020).

The difficulty of understanding this feature of the myth comes from the fact that the analyst of mythology is always *outside of its space* and looks from the outside. For this reason, it cannot perceive the mythical narrative as truth. None of the modern forms of spiritual culture can claim such an *absolute* epistemological status. A work of art is always perceived as *fiction*, different from reality by definition. As stated earlier, statements of religion always require faith, and therefore suggest the possibility of *disbelief*. Any scientific judgment involves *doubt and criticism* because scientific knowledge develops only because any scientific judgment is replaced by a new, more accurate judgment that refutes or clarifies our past knowledge.

Where does the myth come from? M. K. Mamardashvili points out that the myth is always *anonymous*: "We don't say who invented them: myth is a thousand-years' nameless collective tradition packed in images and metaphors, and mythical creatures" (Mamardashvili 1996; Yuan 2020). Isn't that strange? We used to think that if a thought exists, someone invented it, i.e. it had an author, even if his name was forgotten. But why are we so sure that every thought must have an author? M. I. Steblin-Kamensky notes: "In fact, only in the era of romanticism, one of the main features of which was the cult of the individual and personal, literary authorship fully developed in the modern sense of the word" (Steblin-Kaminsky 1976). The Soviet researcher offers a certain type of a scale for authorship types, which are arranged according to the degree of awareness decreasing: literary, skaldic, epic, fabulous, and mythical, where the latter kind of authorship is a kind of paradox: this is "a combination of unconsciousness of authorship with unconsciousness of fiction" (Steblin-Kaminsky 1976). Thus, the author of a mythological idea is not at all aware of himself as the author does not understand that this is *his idea*, which is the result of the activity of *his* consciousness.

Let's try to solve the mystery of this "unconscious" authorship. In our opinion, the root of authorship awareness (in the broadest sense of the word) is self-reflection, that is, the conscious perception of the problem and the process of its solution in the human mind. The essence of mythical thinking is that the problem is resolved in consciousness as if without the participation of consciousness itself; moreover, it is

resolved even before the existence of the problem itself is realized. In our opinion, mythology creates a situation in which the answers to all possible questions appear *before the questions themselves appear*. And the main function of mythology is precise to ensure that questions *do not arise*.

The last point should be emphasized in particular: for a human, mythology forms a single, understandable, fundamentally explained world. According to M. K. Mamardashvili, "A myth is a story in which a person fits any specific events; then they are understandable and do not represent a problem" (Mamardashvili 1996). However, we are deeply mistaken when we assume that this mythological explanation was invented by man in order to understand something *incomprehensible, unexplained*, preceding this understanding. It seems to us that the explanation must always follow the inexplicable, the understanding must correct the incomprehensible, the answer must clarify some question, but mythological stories are not preceded by any questions or anything incomprehensible.

Thus, the myth forms a world that can be described as fundamentally understandable and close to a person. How does this happen? How is the myth formed? The basis for the formation of the myth is *obviousness*, that is, what seems intuitively understood by everyone (due to the lack of an alternative explanation). Interestingly, not all ideas or theories that today seem to us polemically equivalent, or once were of this quality in the history of science, are actually equivalent in origin. Let us take heliocentrism as an example. In the time of Galileo, in the first half of the seventeenth century, Ptolemaic geocentrism and Copernican heliocentrism were considered as two theories about which arguments can be put forward to prove a particular point of view. Even Galileo makes arguments in favor of geocentrism in his famous "Dialogue on the two systems of the world" (although its purpose is to refute these arguments). This makes us feel that geocentrism and heliocentrism are two ideas that explain the visible movement of celestial bodies, and each of them must have been formed in someone's mind as a solution to some problem.

The absurdity of presenting geocentrism and heliocentrism as two theories that arise as two alternative solutions to the same problem is obvious: in order to raise the question of the mutual rotation of the Earth and the Sun at all, the sage of antiquity *must already know* that the Sun cannot orbit around the

Earth. He cannot come up with the right answer because he cannot ask the right question. It is not surprising that we do not know the person who invented geocentrism<sup>2</sup>. There is no need to invent it, because geocentrism is equally *obvious to everyone*, it is enough to simply look at the sky. The opposite theory is not obvious: in order to imagine that we are on the surface of a moving Earth that revolves around the Sun, we need not only a large body of astronomical observations but also a remarkable imagination.

The following remains unclear: what do geocentrism and mythology have in common? Isn't the former a pre-scientific theory? At the same time, with regard to the myth, we fully share the point of view of A.F. Losev: "It is necessary to assume that science has nothing to do with mythology even at the primitive stage of its development" (Losev 2014). Based on the previous speculation, we conclude that the idea of geocentrism is *neither a scientific nor even a pre-scientific* theory (unlike, for example, Pythagorean geocentric cosmology). It is mythological, so it is not surprising that most developed mythologies include geocentrism as an integral part. What do geocentrism and Zeus myths have in common? The same intuitive obviousness that explains the absolute epistemological status of myths. Zeus is the personification of power, strength, and might. Besides, he is the master of thunder and lightning. Ancient man did not understand the very idea of natural phenomena, that is, the events that occur not by someone's will, but due to natural causes, while the idea of a Supreme ruler with a special power, a special weapon, correlates very well with everyday experience.

Around the eighth century BC, the mythical way of thinking in Greek culture enters a period of crisis. At the same time, the crisis of mythology did not mean a complete loss of confidence in mythological stories in Greek society. (V). Myths continue to exist and develop, but there are fundamentally new forms of public consciousness that reflect a change in the perception of authorship.

1. It becomes possible to restructure or reinterpret the mythological text itself, so that it becomes more understandable and less contradictory. Homer and Hesiod try to accomplish this task,

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<sup>2</sup>Pythagoras is considered the author of one of the first full-fledged geocentric cosmologies in Greece, which included all the knowledge available at that time about celestial bodies and was much broader than the simple idea that the Sun and stars revolve around a stationary Earth.

and here we can state the origin of the *awareness of authorship* in solving the cognitive problem. In their era, a transition from the mythical to the epic type of authorship takes place. It is interesting to note that the so-called "Homer question" appears to be a vivid illustration of the transience of his era, expressed in the transience of the Homer figure itself: even if the semi-legendary blind poet-storyteller was not the author of the texts of the Iliad and Odyssey, the very need for the author's signature at the end of the work is essential. Authorship must be recorded in the name, even if this fixation occurs significantly later in time compared to the period of creation of the work itself. Thus, *the crisis of mythology generates the first forms of conscious artistic creativity*.

2. Another way out of the mythological crisis was to form a *national religion* based on mythological material. The gods cease to be part of a living reality, and the understanding of their nature becomes more symbolic. They are more associated with elements, abstract forces, than with specific individuals. Examples of this tendency can be found in the Orphic religion or in the Pythagorean doctrine, which was a fusion of philosophy and religious worship. The "distance" of the gods from the real life of people creates the need for a new attitude to them - *the demand* for faith and the threat of punishment for disbelief, while the priests are responsible for protecting the faith. As we have already mentioned, the characters of traditional mythology did not need such protectors at all, no one doubted the presence of gods, not because of fear of the power of the all-powerful priests, but because of the evidence of their existence. It is here that the figure of the *prophet*, as an author of religious dogma, begins to play a special role: examples of such prophets are Pythagoras and Empedocles in Ancient Greece, Zoroaster in Persia, and the Jewish prophets.
3. Another way out of the crisis of mythology is the emergence of philosophy. Its essence can be formulated as follows: if the traditional mythological wisdom passed down from generation to generation has ceased to perform its function, the mind comes to the fore, independently searching for answers to the most important questions. In this case, the idea can repeat the classic mythological stories, or create

new ones that take the form of a myth: for example, Plato's myths about Atlantis, about androgyne, about the soul, and, finally, the famous myth of the cave. However, if in the past the idea was justified by the authority of tradition or antiquity, the authority of general opinion, now the mind has no other points of support than itself. And so the person has no choice but to say: "this is my thought", "this is my idea". And whose is "mine"? Thales, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Plato... the name of the author becomes particularly important here. The correctness of their statements is provided not by the nameless tradition of "folk wisdom", but by the wisdom of the specific person whose name the saying is signed. In the future, there will be additional means of justifying the thought, in addition to the authority of the speaker's wisdom: rhetoric, logical proof and refutation, and finally dialectics.

Does this mean that with the emergence of more progressive forms of social consciousness, traditional mythology has been eliminated? Of course, this is not the case – traditional mythology remains relevant to most members of society, who do not even try to question it. Myth captures society as a whole by the force of its imaginary evidence, while doubt, criticism, and independent thinking are always strictly individual, personal matters. And this remains true not only for ancient societies: in modern times, the mythological form of thinking continues to exist in the form of ideas shared by many people only because "everyone knows it". Simultaneously, it is not possible to point to a specific source of such "well-known" truths, which directly indicates the "anonymity" of their origin, and the uncritical acceptance of such ideas by many people comes from their apparent obviousness. At the same time, we must always remember that the apparent evidence of an idea does not say anything about what relation it has to reality.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can mention that here we see that mythology cannot be considered neither as the first form of artistic creation nor as early religious systems and cults, nor as primitive pre-scientific (or pre-philosophical) thinking. At the same time, it is mythology that becomes the source of personal artistic creativity in the form of epic and lyrical poetry. Based on the processing of mythical material and the consolidation of the cult tradition, the first forms of

conscious religiosity and the teachings of the prophets are born, relaying religious content for their flock. And, finally, it is from mythology that philosophical thinking arises, as a conscious statement of problems and a purposeful search for their solution, even if in some cases the solution of philosophical problems again takes the form of a myth, as it was with Plato. A distinctive feature of the mythological form of thinking is its reliance on obviousness, which is the reason for the uncritical attitude to mythical contents. At the same time, the source of this obviousness is not the impossible sensory perception of the characters of myths, but rather the unconsciousness of the authorship of the mythical idea: a person cannot question an idea in his mind if he is not aware of the idea as a product of conscious thought. Instead, the idea is perceived as part of the everyday reality of a person, and the objective reality cannot be questioned in any way.

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