

MARCIN LISIECKI

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, Poland
Department of Communication, Media and Journalism
Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences
e-mail: marlis@umk.pl
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6531-616X>
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Does myth have to be old? Philosophical reflection on myth

Myšlenka o věčném návratu je tajemná
a Nietzsche jí uvedl ostatní filosofy do rozpaků:
pomyšlit, že by se jednou všechno opakovalo,
jako jsme to už zažili, a že by se i to opakování ještě
do nekonečna opakovalo! Co chce říci ten pomatený mýtus?

Milan Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one,
and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it:
to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it,
and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum!
What does this mad myth signify?

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Abstract. *The present paper is an introduction to the debate on the contemporary methodology of research on myths. I attempt herein to elucidate the essence of myth, with the attempt being carried out in two parts. In the first part, I overview a history of the philosophical debate on the subject as well as I specify the reasons why myth ought to be reunited with truth anew, as was the case with Greek philosophers. In the latter part, I deal with the analysis of myth in relation with a human being – both in the individualist sense*

and in the social one, with the latter sense performing a significant role in understanding the world as well as humanity at large. Furthermore, I suggest what the essence of myth might be and what validity it can have for the contemporary man. The reflection included in the present text is inspired by some pertinent philosophical conceptions that allow me to show that it is possible to say something new about myth and the research thereupon.

Keywords: myth, logos, truth, philosophy, thing-in-itself, ciphers of transcendence, icon, hard core v. auxiliary hypotheses

Introduction

Immanuel Kant in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science* (*Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, 1783), wrote:

There are scholars for whom the history of philosophy (ancient as well as modern) is itself their philosophy; the present prolegomena have not been written for them. They must wait until those who endeavor to draw from the wellsprings of reason itself have finished their business, and then it will be their turn to bring news of these events to the world.¹

While citing these words, I am well aware that they are an overstatement and they do not qualitatively fit the considerations below as well as that they relate to another – significantly more serious and more general, though not quite distinct – subject than the one that concerns us here, that is, myths. The purpose of the below considerations is to sketch a new way of thinking about myths and reformulating their relations to contemporary man. Just to start to appreciate the said task more seriously, let us take heed of another remark by Kant from *Prolegomena*:

Otherwise, in their opinion nothing can be said that has not already been said before; and in fact this opinion can stand for all time as an infallible prediction, for since the human understanding has wandered over countless subjects in various ways through many centuries, it can hardly fail that for anything new something old should be found that has some similarity with it.²

The task Kant set to himself, that is, the attainment of something utterly novel, proves to be not only difficult but it should also urge us to think about whether it is possible at all. Similarly, in the context of our topic, can we predicate anything novel on myths? Something novel of essential nature that is not being confined to searching or studying new motifs in hitherto unknown and unexplored texts or cultures. Let us also pay attention to the fact that thus posed problems transcend

¹ I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, transl. G. Hatfield, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 5.

² *Ibidem*.

anthropological, religious, ethnographic, or philological approaches and open us to philosophical reflection.

I shall commence with the explanation of the essence of the question posed in the very title of this paper while going slightly beyond the realm of philosophy and by citing a fragment of the conversation between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, derived from the book *Power of Myth* (1988). Namely:

Moyers: Why myths? Why should we care about myths? What do they have to do with my life?

Campbell: My first response would be, “Go on, live your life, it’s a good life – you don’t need mythology.” I don’t believe in being interested in a subject just because it’s said to be important. I believe in being caught by it somehow or other. But you may find that, with a proper introduction, mythology will catch you. And so, what can it do for you if it does catch you?³

It is important to take heed of not only the answer given by Campbell but also of the question posed by Moyers. And especially the latter, that is “Why should we care about myths”? It is telling that, while responding, Campbell does not suggest anything new, and he only says what seems – for people dealing with studying myths – fairly obvious. After all, the notion of “myth,” as understood by Campbell, belongs to the realm of fascination, and as such, it does not require any special explanation. However, fascination alone is insufficient because it fails to explain the sense of this concept. Frankly speaking, the questions posed by Moyers turn out to be much more important than the answers given by Campbell because the former originate from the need for a clearer exposition of what “myth” and its actual meaning is.

1. Why does myth need *logos*?

Philosophical introduction to the problem of truth

It would be proper to explain why it is philosophy that was distinguished in the present text. The primary reason is that it is in philosophy that we can find several important conceptions which might help us illuminate the notion of “myth” and – in particular – capture the complexity of its essence. Second, we should not forget that it was in philosophy – in the context of questions about truth – that myth first appeared as a problem. What is not without significance is also the fact that this concept was not particularly popular with philosophers, as opposed to the studies conducted by ethnographers, religion experts, or anthropologists, and it is in the latter areas that “myth” became a crucial notion to understand the manifestations of human activity over time and across cultures. The cause of this state of affairs is

³ J. Campbell, B. Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, Anchor, New York 2001, p. 1.

to be attributed to the crisis philosophy was caught in as well as to an anti-universalist tone of the said three branches of science, which avoid elaborating a uniform concept of man as such. Another cause might be the two-thousand-year-old Greek distinction between opinion (*δόξα, doxa*) and knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη, episteme*), with the latter connoting striving for reason-based certainty, which automatically rules out cultural variety and various conceptions of man.

The exceptions, although not always marked by any radical deviations, are to be encountered in contemporary philosophy, in which we can observe certain interest taken in the issue of myth and in rendering it a concept that would be useful for grasping contemporary culture and contemporary man. However, even in those few works tackling the problem of myth, what is wanting is the elaboration of any coherent concept thereof.⁴ The sense of scholarly confusion may be aggravated by the fact that despite two-thousand-year philosophical scrutiny over the concept, we have at our disposal a few dozen different views that, on the one hand, influenced the semantic extension of the concept and which, on the other hand, are confined to European cultural patterns and thus did not introduce any novel ideals operative in other parts of the world. What we should thereby mean is that what is a significant, albeit not new, step was to render “myth” an important notion in the philosophical analysis of culture, art, and religion. However, it is only rarely that we can find in philosophy such understanding of myth that would transcend Greek mythology or Christianity (or Judaism, for that matter). Even in his innovative works, that is in *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* [*Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 1960] and *Arbeit am Mythos* [*Work on Myth*, 1979], with the latter work opposing the traditional distinction between logos and myth,⁵ Hans Blumenberg restricted his attention of classical Greek myths.

It might seem that philosophy might come in handy – with philosophy being somewhat predestined to pose this sort of question – notwithstanding the fact that it is only minimally interested in the issue at stake. For even when the concept of myth is explicitly applied, philosophers considering myths – paraphrasing the thought cherished by Wolfgang Iser – cared less about myths than about philosophy itself. Rather, they turned myths into mere instrument for philosophy.⁶ This attitude involving treating myths as tools for resolving problems haunting philosophy is presented by, for example, Ernst Cassirer in his famous works: (*Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* 1–3 [*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 1–3, 1923–1929],

⁴ Cf. J. Niznik, *Mit jako kategoria metodologiczna*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 1978, no. 3; L. Honko, *The problem of defining myth*, “Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis” 1972, no. 6, pp. 10–14.

⁵ E. Kwiatkowska, *Infiltracja kultur przez mit. Szkice*, Akademia Pióra, Wrocław 2018, p. 16. Cf. H. Blumenberg, *Praca nad mitem*, transl. K. Najdek, M. Herrero, Z. Zwoliński, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2009.

⁶ W. Iser, *Philosophie und Kunst eine wechselhafte Beziehung*, in: idem, *Blickwechsel. Neue Wege der Ästhetik*, Reclam Verlag, Leipzig 2012, pp. 81 and 84.

Sprache und Mythos. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen [Language and Myth. A contribution to the problem of God names, 1925] and *The Myth of the State* [Vom Mythos des Staates, 1946]. It is perhaps in this that we should recognize the cause of the fact that the task of studying myths was taken over by ethnography and anthropology, with these two disciplines being to a larger extent interested in myths themselves, their cultural diversity, and the need to describe and explore them.

The difficulties with grasping the essence as well as the reason for methodological chaos are attributable not only to the erroneous belief that the concept of myth is obvious but also to the tendency to narrow down its meaning to the issues related to theology (mainly to different variants of the Christian doctrine or to religion as such). To a large extent, this boils down to reiterating the following pronouncement by Mircea Eliade: “Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings.’ [...] the myth is regarded as a sacred story [...]”⁷ This understanding of myth is restated by Paul Ricoeur in his book *Philosophie de la volonté. Tome II: Finitude et culpabilité* [The Symbolism of Evil, 1960].⁸ In his work *Arbeit am Mythos*, the above-mentioned Blumenberg restricted the meaning of myths to people’s dealing with primordial fear.⁹ This can also be found in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who treated myths as primordial forms and mysteries of the past.¹⁰ It is worth adding that they are assigned, based upon the determinations made by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, the status of pre-philosophical or pre-scientific reflection.¹¹ The employment of precisely this understanding of myth substantially contributed to turning it into an archaic story (or pattern) which, although it lost its meaning a long time ago, deserves – due to its elevated status established and preserved by tradition – to be disseminated, protected and delved into. In other words, referring to the question posed in the very title of the present paper, upon this understanding, myth must be old. However, let us emphasize that this is the flaw of the above reasoning and that it is a consequence of combining myth with religion (broadly understood).

It is important to note that there appears a fairly idiosyncratic contradiction among contemporary philosophers dealing with myth. Namely, on the one hand, myth is presented as a “true story”; and on the other hand, it is pointed out that it does not have anything (or not much) to do with a rational approach or science.¹² Thus, let us ask: what sort of truth is at issue here? Is myth connected with truth or

⁷ M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, transl. W.R. Trask, Harper Torchbooks, New York 1963, pp. 5–6.

⁸ Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Symbolika zła*, transl. S. Cichowicz, M. Ochab, Pax, Warszawa 1986, p. 158.

⁹ H. Blumenberg, *Praca nad mitem*, pp. 60–63.

¹⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Prometeusz i tragedia kultury*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, in: idem, *Rozum, słowo, dzieje. Szkice wybrane*, PIW, Warszawa 2000, pp. 183–184.

¹¹ M. Czeremski, *Struktura mitów. W stronę metonimii*, Nomos, Kraków 2009, p. 34.

¹² Cf. E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Mythical Thought*, vol. 2, transl. R. Manheim, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 1955, p. 1; P. Ricoeur, *Symbolika zła*,

not? Or perhaps it is the case that, as the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski in his book *The Presence of Myth* [1972] put it, myth is beyond truth or falsity?¹³ An answer to these questions should be looked for in the dispute over the difference between myth and truth, as understood by Greek philosophers, and in a substantive distinction between *mythos* (μῦθος) and *logos* (λόγος). Moreover, the thinkers of Enlightenment and Romanticism as well as contemporary ones should be consulted too. The history of that dispute may be recognized as one of the most fascinating and, at the same time, obscure since myth was endowed with different meanings over time in ancient Greece as well as across different thinkers.¹⁴ Let us also note that, as far as preserved old Greek literature goes, in Homer and Hesiod, myth did not refer to falsity but was rather related to truth (ἀλήθεια, *aletheia*).¹⁵ By contrast, in pioneering philosophers dealing with this issue such as Heraclitus of Ephesus, Parmenides of Elea, Plato, and Aristotle, these concepts were conceived of in a diametrically different way; that is, *mythos* was associated with lies, whereas *logos* was identified with truth, with this truth being – what ought to be underlined – of a rather peculiar kind. It is interesting that (although I must leave this issue unanswered), whereas we can grasp the later association of myth with the falsity of poets' verbal expressions (since these did not correspond with *episteme*), the identification of *logos* with truth is already rather enigmatic. Against this benchmark, what appears to be much less incomprehensible is the reversal of this relation during Enlightenment by Giambattista Vico in his book *La Scienza Nuova* [*The New Science*, 1725] and by Friedrich J. W von Schelling in *Philosophie der Mythologie* [*Philosophie of Mythology*, 1842]. These thinkers, in turn, influenced subsequent philosophers such as, say, Cassirer, Gadamer, and Ricoeur.

On the basis of texts containing analyses of relations (or divergences) between truth and myth, we can adopt four stages of the said relation. Let us subject them to closer scrutiny because it is in them – that is, in the tension between *mythos* and *logos* – that a significant element allowing us to approximate the essence of myth lies. Also, it enables us to reject the view that myth must be old. What is more, we can make a stronger claim that myth *cannot* be old. If Chiara Bottici is right in saying that originally *mythos* may have been used interchangeably with *logos*, with the former being plainly synonymous with the latter,¹⁶ then we may regard it as a first stage, that is, as the moment in which the relation between the two was

p. 156; L. Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, transl. A. Czerniawski. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 2001, p. 2.

¹³ L. Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Cf. Ch. Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 20–43; K. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy. From the Presocratics to Plato*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 17–19.

¹⁵ Ch. Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 21; B. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1999, p. 4.

¹⁶ Ch. Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 21.

that of identity. At the second stage, in Homer and Hesiod, the separation and hence the distinguishing of *mythos* occurred. At the third stage, commenced by the reflection of Greek philosophers, there occurred the reversal and the distinguishing of *logos*, thus making *mythos* fall into oblivion, with *mythos* having been thought of as founded on *doxa* instead of *episteme*. And finally, at the fourth stage, in contemporary philosophy, we can observe the resurgence of myth, inspired by Vico and Schelling, with myth being again viewed as an important category. It seems that these four stages exhaust possible types of relations between myth and *logos*.

Approaching this issue from a logical standpoint and trying to introduce something novel into the study over myth, it transpires that the fifth and, at the same time, the last stage should occur. And this stage involves reuniting myth with *logos*, although not unconsciously or accidentally – as was (or may have been) the case in ancient Greece – but rather consciously and necessarily. I will venture a thesis that to fully appreciate myth, we cannot focus on myth alone, but we must extend it and combine it with *logos*, that is, with peculiarly understood truth. If we do so, we will be forced to pose the question of not only what myth is but also what truth is. It turns out that what is necessary is combing myth with truth or asking questions about the relation between them anew. After all, whereas in the case of myth, we understand it as a “sacred narration,” in the case of “truth,” truth is still defined in a classical way, that is, as *Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus* [“Truth is the adequation of thing and intellect”]. Apart from that, just as in the case of myth, albeit to a lesser extent, we have at our disposal, except for the classical theory, different kinds of theories of truth, such as correspondence, coherence, constructivist, consensus, and pragmatic one as well.¹⁷ And finally, resorting to only one of the selected definitions or granting it the status of exclusive validity is quite restrictive, which leaves us blind to a wide variety of senses contained therein.

The significance of bringing *logos* back to myth stems from the fact that in the philosophical tradition, these two concepts did not stand in a relation of dialectical tension to one another. Instead, they acquired new meanings and values. This remark applies mainly to *logos* (sometimes spelled as *Logos*), which, already for Heraclitus of Ephesus, ceased to imply only the opposite of *mythos*, thus having become a universal and eternal principle upon which the order of the world was contingent.¹⁸ The Italian philosopher Giovanni Reale went as far as to claim that *logos* as a principle of truth – via laws of reasoning, cognition, and speaking – is a proper subject matter of logic; *logos* as an ontological principle of cosmos is a subject matter of physics (conceived of in its original, pre-Socratic sense, that is, as a science of *physis*); and

¹⁷ M. Przełęcki, *Prawda*, “Filozofia Nauki” 1993, no. 2–3, p. 389; S. Judycki, *O klasycznym pojęciu prawdy*, “Roczniki Filozoficzne” 2001, no. 49(1), p. 26; K. Ajdukiewicz, *Zagadnienia i kierunki filozofii. Teoria poznania. Metafizyka*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1983, pp. 29–43.

¹⁸ A. Drozek, *Greccy filozofowie jako teolodzy*, IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2011, p. 80; M. Heinze, *Die lehre vom logos in der griechischen Philosophie*, Ferdinand Schmidt, Oldenburg 1872, pp. 10–11 and 218.

finally *logos* as a principle guiding us to our goal, that is, a principle which establishes the meaning of each thing, and hence, also goals and duties of man is a subject matter of ethics.¹⁹ The meaning of thus understood *logos* is semantically closely related to *dharma* in Hinduism and Buddhism, *dao* in Taoism and Confucianism as well as *ma'at* in Ancient Egyptian beliefs.²⁰

Let us also note that this sort of truth that is represented by *logos*, that is, eternal and universal truth or the law upon which the order of the universe is supposedly contingent, may again confine myth within the limits of religious thinking. By referring to the work by the Russian philosopher Aleksei F. Losev, *Dialektika mifa* [*The Dialectics of Myth*, 1930], we realize that the above does not have to be the case since “myth” is a much broader concept transcending religious thinking. After all, as Losev boldly put it: “Myth is possible without religion. But is religion without myth possible?”²¹ It is vital to explain why it is so (and it used to be so) that myth is combined with religion, and thus the former is recognized as sort of a model originating in the past. The key to understanding this is the concept of “transcendence” and something we may label as universal questions, which originally operated within the remit of religious thinking and which – despite the fact they were subsequently developed by philosophy – are still commonly associated with religion. This misconception was pointed out not only by Losev but also by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, with the latter claiming that “transcendence” does not pertain to unearthly things but to “transcending” our “selves” and the world itself in order to, however paradoxically it may sound, reach nothing over and above “self” and “the world.” The above is the case, as Jaspers wrote in the spirit of Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy in his *Chiffren der Transzendenz* [*Ciphers of Transcendence*, 1961] that neither will the world in its entirety become an object to us nor will we become an object to the world.²²

It is interesting and, at the same time, readily explicable that myths are still associated with religious content. The said association stems from religions having accommodated the issues related not only to the elucidation of the origins, actions, and personality traits of particular deities but also to the threads pertaining to dealing with daily existential problems, including attempts to answer universal questions such as: who am I, what will happen after death, what is the meaning of life, etc. What is to blame for this state of affairs, that is, for leaving such issues at the discretion of religion, is philosophy itself, which, while competing with

¹⁹ G. Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytniej. Systemy epoki hellenistycznej*, vol. III, transl. E.I. Zieliński, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 1999, p. 333.

²⁰ Cf. G. Flood, *Hinduizm. Wprowadzenie*, transl. M. Ruchel, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2008, pp. 54–55; L. Kohn, *Taoizm. Wprowadzenie*, transl. J. Hunia, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2012, p. 28; J. Assmann, *Ma'at. Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten*, C.H. Beck, München 2006, p. 18.

²¹ A.F. Losev, *Dialektika mifa, Mysl'*, Moskwa 2001, p. 125.

²² K. Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, Piper Verlag, München 1970, p. 11.

burgeoning natural sciences, lost interest in issues – dismissing them out of hand as unscientific – which could not be answered (and necessarily will not be ever answered) by means of determinations made by physics and logic alone.²³ And after all, running counter to any positivist intellectual trends (without underestimating them by any means), it is philosophy that proves to be most pre-destined – due to its postulated anti-dogmatism – among any other intellectual reflection (whether religious or scientific ones) to raise such issues and to seek for answers thereto. What is thereby meant are universal questions, that is – let us invoke the above-mentioned set thereof yet again – the ones related to myself, the meaning of the world, life and death, etc. In order to underline the significance of these issues, it would be worthwhile to cite the pronouncement of Franz Rosenzweig, who – in his book *Der Stern der Erlösung* [*The Star of Redemption*, 1921] and while postulating the adoption of a new direction in philosophy – tellingly wrote: “From death, it is from the fear of death that all cognition of the All begins.”²⁴

2. Philosophical reflection on the essence of myth

Starting the second, and at the same time last, part of the paper, I must concede – and that is something intellectual honesty requires – that dealing with contemporary methodology is nothing novel or inventive. This can be witnessed mainly in anthropology, in which researchers analyze those aspects of popular culture that brim with myths.²⁵ However, apart from indicating contemporary mythological content, they do not contain any proposals for redefining the methodology of mythological research. Nor do they imply the delineation of qualitative changes in understanding the essence of myth. For these reasons, I took up a challenge, while grounding my considerations in selected philosophical works, of reflecting upon changing a conceptual framework designed for studying myths. While reiterating the above remarks to the effect that myth cannot be old, it is high time to take the next step and clarify three issues. First, why is it so important to recognize that myth cannot be old? Second, how is the existence of a novel myth possible, and what is it essentially? And third, do the myths operating in contemporary society have anything in common with their respective earlier versions?

²³ Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Filozofia pozytywistyczna (od Hume’a do Koła Wiedeńskiego)*, PWN, Warszawa 1966, p. 11; R. Carnap, *Oceny i normy to wypowiedzi pozbawione sensu*, in: *Metaetyka*, ed. I. Lazari-Pawłowska, PWN, Warszawa 1975, p. 81.

²⁴ F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, transl. B. E. Galli, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2005, p. 9.

²⁵ Cf. M. Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna. Relacje o poczynaniach i przygodach krajowców zamieszkałych w globalnej wiosce*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2013; R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, transl. A. Lavers, Hill and Wang, New York 2001; *Nouvelles Mythologies*, ed. J. Garcin, Seuil, Paris 2007; J. Campbell, B. Moyers, *The Power of Myth*.

By now, the inquisitive reader might get the impression that the above questions require some determination that has not been hitherto made accurately. The wanting determination is what the essence of myth consists in. Bearing in mind the remarks made in the previous part of the paper, in which we established that “myth” calls for reunification with logos, we are acutely aware of the ambiguity of the concept in question. In my view, the essence of myth reduces to being a paradigm motif centered around the attempts at getting an answer to the vital question of what we are, what is the meaning of our life (including its beginning as well as its end), and what our duties are. It is also important to note that myth is not a narration; rather, the former is expressed by the latter. In other words, myth may assume a form of narration, as, for example, an epos (or any other literary genre), film, philosophical or religious work. Furthermore, myth may also appear in social, political, or economic actions. That is why myth is not restricted to the level of particular individuals. Quite the contrary, it functions in a communication sphere of a particular group of society, constituting a sort of benchmark for trying to explain the origins of the group, its goals, and principles of conduct guiding its members. Many a time, albeit not necessarily, some myths perform the role of consolidating the identity of the group.

The ambiguity of myth is strengthened by the fact that apart from being a paradigm motif, it is also a way of capturing the said content. And it is exactly this feature that distinguishes it from other ways of approaching the discovery of senses contained in logos. Upon this understanding, and being inspired by Karl Jaspers’s conception, we may view myth as resembling a “cipher of transcendence” (*Chiffren der Transzendenz*) because, in a similar way, it enables us to refer to what we may tentatively dub as “mystery.” Somehow enigmatically, he wrote that “ciphers of transcendence” – quite like myths – are not tantamount to cognizing anything, but rather they are speech which, in this way and at this moment, *speaks* to us and tries to subordinate us to itself.²⁶ For this reason, myth allows us to approximate “mystery,” and it is due to this fact that it must be something up-to-date. Otherwise, we would not treat it seriously. It would not become a guiding principle for attitudes to be assumed in our lives. Moreover, this may explain why myth emerged in the first place. After all, paraphrasing the “ciphers of transcendence” approach, we can say that myth, as a paradigm motif, appears as a pressing need stemming from the most profound essence of human existence while remaining substantively unanswered.²⁷ According to Jaspers, it is so because, living in the world, we feel that something is hidden before us and, most of all, that that entity transcends the world as known to us and transcends ourselves. Ultimately, that entity is somehow beyond verification.²⁸ This intuition may be captured while alluding to the thought of

²⁶ K. Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, p. 29 and 36.

²⁷ M. Żelazny, *Filozofia i psychologia egzystencjalna*, Wydawnictwo UMK, Toruń 2011, p. 231.

²⁸ K. Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, p. 13; K. Jaspers, *Der philosophie Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, R. Piper&Co Verlag, München 1963, p. 153.

the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion in his book *Dieu sans l'être* [*God Without Being*, 1982], by saying that there is something that allows us to turn to “mystery.” This something is an icon (*l'icône*), which in contrast with an idol (*l'idol*), tries to render the invisible visible by referring to something beyond itself.²⁹ That is why it is so important to differentiate between myth and science, between logos and truth in use; as exemplified by, say, mathematics. In other words, myth may help us approximate “mystery” and enable us to pose a question and at least sketch an answer to it. So little and so much at the same time.

Let us linger for a moment over the topic of distinguishing myth from a scientific systematization of knowledge. And let us confront this with the pronouncement of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset to the effect that to live is to have to do with something – with the world and with oneself.³⁰ With a hint of overstatement, we can assume that what distinguishes scientific perception (reasoning) from myth is paying greater attention to external reality than ourselves. The above is the case since, in science, we normally face reality while not transcending the relations held between us and reality itself. On the other hand, as Jaspers contended, the relations we always stand in are three-fold: object-subject, subject-subject, and subject-transcendence.³¹ The first relation pertains to the relationship between me and reality, with me being always outside and being able to experience and cognize only within a particular place in which I am currently located and with reality always evading being cognized fully.³² When it comes to the second relation, I am to myself what I desire to explore. Also, it transpires that – in the vein of the Kantian *ding an sich* (thing-in-itself) – both reality and myself as related to myself are transcendence, that is, what transcends myself in a given existential and cognitive situation. I must add that, in line with Jaspers' intention, it is only us that are inclined towards “mystery,” but it is also mystery itself that leans towards us. It is possible precisely due to myths, which are a way of “mystery” coming into contact with ourselves. Appreciating this distinction is connected with the fact that our being oriented in the world is constituted not, as Ortega y Gasset maintains, by scientific ideas but rather by convictions (*creencias*). This, in turn, is due to the fact that they constitute a foundation or a scaffolding for our life and map the terrain on which it takes place.³³ And it is thanks to them that we, often unconsciously, attempt to reach the “mystery” contained in logos and in ourselves. And it is only upon them that consecutive levels in the form of knowledge are built. Let us also

²⁹ J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being. Hors-Texte*, transl. T.A. Carlson, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 2012, p. 17.

³⁰ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Ideas y creencias*, in: J. Ortega y Gasset. *Obras Completas*, vol. 5, Analiza, Madrid 1983, p. 658.

³¹ M. Żelazny, *Pojęcie znaku egzystencji i szyfru transcendencji w filozofii Jaspersa: (próba komentarza)*, “Humanistyka i Przyrodoznawstwo” 2011, no. 17, pp. 52–53.

³² K. Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, pp. 11–12.

³³ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Ideas y creencias*, p. 658.

note that what is important is not so much a result itself as – most of all – the very process of approximating “mystery” because, in the course of it, we are – if I may put it this way – given a chance to “touch upon” its elusive essence.³⁴

Answering the above-posed two questions, we should admit that treating myths in an “antiquarian” way, that is, as narrations confined to the oldest texts, is inappropriate. The same remarks apply to making an effort to establish the meaning of myth, with this attempt being based on the dispute over a scientific or pre-scientific approach to it.³⁵ This is because it may lead to a false belief of what myths essentially are and to attributing to them artificial validity for present-day people. Let us note that employing the distinction between an “old” and “new” myth distorts its sense. That is why it would be better to use the following expressions: “dead” myth and “living” myth. The distinctive feature is whether a given myth is meaningful for a particular man or (and/or) for a given social group; that is, whether it enables us to approximate “mystery,” contributes to shaping our values, the sense of meaning; and most of all, whether it is treated seriously (even if unconsciously). The opposite of that is a “dead” myth, that is, such that may interest and fascinate us, for example, from a cognitive point of view. In other words, a dead myth ceases to be an icon and becomes an idol. This sort of myth may originate from, say, a culture or society alien to us or from the distant past. However, this does not imply that it cannot become important to us or become in some part (or even in its entirety) a “living” myth.

We are left then with the third question, which, in line with the above elucidations, we can ask in a correct form now: do “living myths” have anything in common with “dead” ones? What comes in handy for providing an answer to this question is the conception cherished by the Hungarian philosopher of science Imre Lakatos, originating from his work *Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* (1970). More precisely, what is thereby meant is one of his ideas related to the fact that each theory implies a “hard core” and “auxiliary hypotheses” around it. Namely:

All scientific research programs may be characterized by their “hard core.” The negative heuristic of the program forbids us to direct the *modus tollens* at this “hard core.” Instead, we must use our ingenuity to articulate or even invent “auxiliary hypotheses,” which form a *protective belt* around this core, and we must redirect the *modus tollens* to these.³⁶

Passing over the significance of Lakatos’s conception for philosophy of science and methodology of science in general, let us confine our attention to the meaning

³⁴ M. Heidegger, *Rzecz*, transl. J. Mizera, “Principia. Pisma koncepcyjne z filozofii i socjologii teoretycznej” 1997, no. XVI–XVII, p. 8.

³⁵ Cf. L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, transl. L.A. Clare, Beacon Press, Boston 1966.

³⁶ I. Lakatos, *Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, in: I. Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, eds J. Worrall, G. Currie, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, p. 48.

of “hard core” and “auxiliary hypotheses,” which shall prove useful for appreciating the relation between a “living” and “dead” myth.

To put it in a more narrative form, we can say that “hard core” is surrounded by a “protective belt” and “auxiliary hypotheses.” Therefore, a core remains constant, whereas “auxiliary hypotheses” change depending on emerging paradigms. It is worth adding that Lakatos himself was aware of the difficulties with explaining the existence of “hard core” and its relation to its surroundings. However, since this topic is beyond the scope of the present paper, I will leave it without any further clarifications. Still, it is interesting that Lakatos, trying to disentangle the complexity hinted at above, alluded to Greek mythology while contending that “hard core” does not actually emerge fully armed like Athene from the head of Zeus.³⁷ Although we may regard this comparison as a witty add-on, its sense is crucially important. The implication is that “hard core” did not emerge all of a sudden in full bloom with all its attributes but rather that it develops slowly, through a long, preliminary process of trial and error.³⁸

Furthermore, it is difficult to unambiguously settle how myth may become “hard core” and – or perhaps most of all – whether we can ultimately reach it. What follows therefrom is that “hard core” of myth also developed slowly and encompassed (which is still taking place these days) a variety of cultures influencing one another over thousands of years directly, indirectly, or accidentally. For this reason alone, we must come to a modest conclusion that what is supposed to constitute an immutable essence of myth is to be a paradigm motif or a leitmotif of all mythological narrations which were shaped in the history of mankind. However, what is more important than “hard core” of myth itself is the relation between it and “auxiliary hypotheses.” It is because we can reach the core only via “auxiliary hypotheses,” which, in the context of our paper, are myths available to us. And it is myths that are subject to changes which in turn vary across particular cultures and depend on the times in which a given culture operates and develops. That is why some myths are “dead,” that is such that were valid in, say, ancient times or the middle ages but now lost their previous status, while others are “living” and still valid for contemporary people. It is to be underlined that “living” and “dead” myths are mutually related. This means that a successive myth, following the preceding one, does not remove it – in a qualitative sense – but supersedes it by, for example, changing the medium of its content or by changing protagonists. This explains the presence of the same motifs – yet in different “costumes” – present in, say, ancient epics and nowadays in popular literature or film. For this reason, we should treat seriously not only ancient texts, as ones containing paradigm motifs, but also contemporary works of art. What deserves our scholarly attention are not only the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Torah*, *Kōjiki*, *Upanisadas* (*Upaniṣad*) or *Rāmāyaṇa*

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Ibidem.

but also *Faust* of Johann W. von Goethe, stories of Cthulhu of Howard P. Lovecraft, adventures of young wizard Harry Potter, authored by J.K. Rowling, the Earthsea trilogy of Ursula K. Le Guin, the Polish series *Czterej pancerni i pies* [*Four Tankmen and a Dog*], or, as claimed by Joseph Campbell, the short story *Tonio Kröger* of Thomas Mann and the popular film saga *Star Wars*.³⁹ Without much difficulty, we can point to the presence of the same schemes and motifs, regardless of the culture and times in which they appeared. On the other hand, a distinctive feature – apart from “costumes,” protagonists, and contexts in which they appear – is that some myths are treated in an “antiquarian” way, while others shape our beliefs and guide us in our contact with “mystery.”

Conclusion

What shall serve as a summary of the considerations herein is an answer to the question: is philosophy useful for scrutinizing myths? Giving an exhaustive answer seems to be easy, which is only illusory because, as we could see in the first part of the paper, the problem of myth is unwillingly raised in philosophy. Certainly, there are few thinkers who set themselves a task of analyzing myths while not believing – as Karl R. Popper, for example, did – that they are synonymous with falsity.⁴⁰ However, even among those few scholars, it is difficult to find works directly related to myths and, equally importantly, would run counter to commonly accepted views that myths are age-old narrations concerning the actions of deities or the protagonists of a given social group. The above view was adhered to by Schelling, who – as we remember – brought about the resurgence of the topic of myth in modern philosophy, which was swiftly followed by successive generations of European philosophers. Similar claims are to be found without much difficulty in such prominent figures of contemporary philosophy as Karl Jaspers, Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hans Blumenberg, to name just a few.

It does not mean that in philosophy, what is missing are serious ideas that could push the research on myths forwards, as was the case in, for example, anthropology, in which the research on myths in the contemporary world was conducted. The research in question operated both at the level of the analysis of particular cases and the level of methodology, with the latter being a pre-condition for the former. The significance of the present paper is two-fold. First, what philosophy can offer to scholars studying myth involves returning to the determinations made by Greek thinkers. What is thereby meant is the reunification of myth, as *mythos*, with *logos*, which amounts to including the problem of truth in the dispute over the meaning

³⁹ J. Campbell, B. Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, pp. xiii and 2.

⁴⁰ K.R. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework*, in: idem, *Defence of Science and Rationality*, Routledge, London–New York 2006, p. 33.

of myth. However, the sort of truth at stake here is idiosyncratically understood, with this understanding going beyond classical or coherentist definitions, as they are employed in natural science. Second, the paper distinguishes between “living” and “dead” myths. Thanks to this distinction, we can transcend an “antiquarian” approach focused on searching for myth in the most ancient text as well as we can appreciate myths as meaningful for the contemporary man. This is important insofar as the proposal I put forward in the present paper refers exactly to thus explicated myth, that is, a paradigm motif enabling us to understand ourselves and the world around us. Appreciating this dimension is possible precisely due to philosophy which offers profound studies which are not ventured either in positive sciences or in other social sciences or in humanities for that matter.

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