Chapter 16. Myth – a challenge to philosophy

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Abstract. Whether myths and mythologies are essential to our humanity, or whether they are features which account for the persistence of 'self-inflicted immaturity', are questions which cannot be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no'. But since these questions and their assumptions affect all aspects of being human and cultural, they require an understanding of myth which comprises the positive as well as the negative features of mythological expressions and processes. Even if the study of myths and mythologies should be no more than an investigation of irrationalities, it will be necessary to come to a – by intention – complete understanding of myth and to approach relevant phenomena in the light of theories which are as adequate as possible. But since we cannot exclude the possibility that myths and mythologies are indispensable conditions of practice and theory, it will be necessary to consider this possibility and to develop our theories accordingly.

Since I assume that the distinction between myth and reason is a precondition for the emergence of philosophy and scholarship, I would like to argue that philosophy as well as scholarship have to be careful about their relationship with myth, especially if we agree with Aristotle that knowledge and understanding are, indeed, the subject matter of philosophy (Aristotle, Metaphics Bk XII, 9, 1075a).

In order to comply with the demands of an open – and in principle comprehensive – understanding of myths and mythologies, I begin with some reflections on what it means, or could mean, to be rational about myth. Next, I would like to focus on several observations in connection with myths and mythologies. Since these observations provide a strong motive to take up the question about an adequate concept of myth, I shall discuss this point in a following step. And, because the effort to come to grips with myth on a conceptual level cannot be separated from interests in studying myth, I intend to round off these explorations with a few words about this aspect of mythological studies.

Though I am convinced that the understanding of myth is a necessary requirement for the development of theoretical reasoning, I do not intend to elaborate this point. But I do hope that the thoughts I present are sufficient to arouse interest in the correlation between myth and thinking, and strong enough to initiate further reflections on the mythic conditions of philosophy and the formation of theories.

1. Introduction

Myth is a word we associate with many different things: stories about divine beings,

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religious attitudes, ritual practices, the order of social, political, economic and other relations, basic convictions and notions of the ultimate. Moreover, we are used to correlating myths with particular frames and states of mind which, on personal or communal grounds, account for the acceptance or, by contrast, the rejection of myths and mythologies. Like the messages they convey, these associations and correlations may be highly problematic. But because they refer to issues which concern the fundamentals of being human and culture, they suggest that we face problems of pivotal importance. To consider possible extremes, we can think of myths and mythologies as necessary modes and foremost manifestations of human potential; while it is also conceivable that they confront us with the effects and pervasion of delusion, self-deception, and irrationality, or with past stages of human development.

Whether these myths and mythologies are essential to our humanity, or are features which account for the persistence of 'self-inflicted immaturity' (Kant 1784: 481), are questions which cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. But since these questions and their assumptions affect all aspects of human life, they require an understanding of myth which comprises the positive as well as the negative features of mythological expressions and processes.

What matters is not merely the interpretation of particular myths and the messages they convey, but the intent to bring into focus whatever relates to myth, and thus, to consider the ways in which we might, and ought to, deal with this problem. While myths may have their own 'about', as occurrences in cultural history and as expressions of human beings they also include another 'about' and a deeper level of meaning that invites us to investigate this particular subject and the ways we relate when we speak of myth and consider some of the further ramifications of this discourse. Even if the study of myths and mythologies were no more than an investigation of irrationalities, it would still be necessary to come to a – as far as possible - complete understanding of myth, and to approach the relevant phenomena in light of theories which agree with this intended aim. But since we cannot exclude the possibility that myths and mythologies are indispensable conditions of practice and theory, it will be necessary to consider this point as well, and to develop our theories accordingly.

Since I assume that the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, or, as the two Greek terms suggest, between the word of tradition and the word of reflective reasoning, is a precondition for the emergence of philosophy and scholarship, I would like to argue that philosophy and scholarship have to look closely at their relationship with myth, especially when we agree with Aristotle that knowledge and understanding are, indeed, the subject matter of theoretical reasoning (*Metaphysics* XII. 9, 1075a). While knowledge and understanding have their own problems, they may nevertheless depend on myths and mythologies in ways which concern the conditions of their possibility.

In order to comply with the demands of an open and, in principle, comprehensive understanding of myths and mythologies, I begin with some reflections on what it means, or could mean, to be rational about myth, and to study myths and my-

thologies, as the subject matter requires when we let it be whatever it is, and as the conditions permit under which we are able to develop our studies. Next, I would like to focus on several observations in connection with myths and mythologies. Since these observations furnish a strong motive for initially taking up the question concerning an adequate conception of myth, I shall discuss this point in a following step. And, since the effort to come to grips with myth on a conceptual level cannot be separated from actual interests in studying myth, I intend to conclude these explorations with a few final words about this aspect of mythological studies.

Although I am convinced that the understanding of myth is a necessary requirement for the development of theoretical reasoning, I do not intend to elaborate on this point here. But I do hope that the thoughts I present are sufficient to arouse interest in the correlation between myth and thinking, and strong enough to initiate further reflections on the mythic conditions of philosophy and the formation of theories. I begin with the first point under the heading of 'ways to study myth'.

2. Ways to study myth

Since we associate so many different phenomena with the meaning of myth, numerous questions and perspectives must be dealt with in the study of this particular subject matter. To exemplify this point we can think of the history of culture as it offers variable sets of stories and notions about divine agents, about decisive events in the beginning of time, about the fundamental conditions of being human and developing culture; that is, as it offers particular stories and notions which are believed to be true and sufficiently important to shape and structure the life of individuals and communities as well as of entire cultures and traditions. If and to the extent that we recognize the presence of myth in these stories and notions, it makes sense to look at them closely and to launch (what we could call) the scholarly study of myths and mythologies. Along with collecting relevant data and working on the problem of adequate theoretical definitions, we can try to map this data, to compare them with each other, and to establish relations between them. Moreover, while we intend to better understand what we are studying, a host of disciplines appears which suggest that we focus on the study of myth from many perspectives including biological, psychological, social, political, cultural and anthropological, or with questions about religion, literature, art history and other issues in the field of cultural and symbolic studies.

In contrast to the scholarly study of myth, the history of philosophy offers perspectives which derive from the reactions to the challenges and apparent seductions of myths and mythologies. They are perspectives which correlate with philosophical efforts to clarify the meaning of myth, but which reflect also the impact of myth on philosophy, as well as the influence of philosophical theories and positions on the scholarly study of myths and mythologies. When these three factors are combined, the scholarly study of myths and mythologies is not necessarily absent or irrelevant. Nor does the configuration of these factors imply that the search for adequate definitions

has ceased to be of pivotal importance. But important as these ramifications may be as far as the history of philosophy is concerned, they do not change the fact that the reactions themselves have been more important inasmuch as they define the meaning of myth in modes and forms of specific responses.[2]

Since the philosophical assessment of the meaning of myth is already an issue whenever we engage in mythological studies, either directly or indirectly, it is both justified and necessary to specifically look at questions about myth and philosophy. Because of their entanglement with the history of philosophy, these questions may lack the clarity of unequivocal definitions and well-structured arguments. They may be the result of unquestioned presuppositions and apparently self-evident assumptions. But whatever the status of the questions and the answers may be, these can still be approached rationally. Since we cannot disregard them without adopting at least some of them in our inquiries, it is a hermeneutical requirement and a demand of objectivity to become aware of this problem and to consider its possible impact on the course of scholarly studies. After all, to the extent that we are able to 'expect the unexpected' (Heraclitus, frag. 18; Kirk 1962: 195), we are not only capable of working with tentative notions of myth and philosophy, but it is also possible to let them clarify each other by means of the contrasts they evoke in the process of variable confrontations. What, then, does it mean to be rational about myth, if we refer to myth as a problem of, and in, philosophy?

When we think of myth and whatever is associated with this term as a possible subject in philosophical inquiries, we can speak of basically six options (or types of reaction) that should be considered in the confrontation of philosophy with myths and mythologies:

1)   we can reject myth as a relevant topic of philosophical investigations, and use the study of myths and mythologies as reason for, and justification of, this rejection;

2)   we can think of a mythologization of reason in which reason becomes another, and in essence, the only myth which matches the needs and the potential of intelligent beings, and use the study of myths and mythologies to accomplish this goal;

3)   we can think of a rationalization (or conceptual revaluation) of myth and use the study of myths and mythologies accordingly;

4)   we can combine the previous approaches and use this combination as the way to deal with the meanings of myths and mythologies;

5)   we can try to understand the meaning of myth and study the occurrence of

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[2] When Wim van Binsbergen (2009: 9) notices that Eliade (1963: 15) instead of 'aiming merely at identifying elements of empirical reality open to further analytical scrutiny', provides a definition which 'amounts to a theory in a nutshell', he is right in annotating this observation. But it is also possible that definitions of myth are bound to become theoretical because the subject matter requires a theoretical stance in order to be discernable in one way or another. See also Robert A. Segal (2004: 10) where he states that 'theorizing is inescapable'.

myths and mythologies in their concrete reality as well as with regard to the ramifications of this reality;

6)   we can of course also dismiss the issue and 'turn to more important matters'.

In each of the first three cases we can think of particular reasons which ask for specific approaches. If we consider the first option where we assume that myth is an insult to truth and the dignity of reasonable beings, then it is for the sake of truth, dignity, and reason that myth should be abolished. And since one has to know the enemy one struggles with, the study could help to accomplish one's goals. An example of this first approach is the work of Ernst Topitsch, a neo-positivist philosopher in the tradition of the Viennese Circle (Topitsch 1979). Yet another approach to this issue, could be to point to the ways in which theology is used (see de Vries 1961).

However, if myth is, as the second option suggests, a force in human history, and as such a necessary ingredient in the realization of humanity, we could argue that reason needs to partake in myth if it is to become effective, and that the study of myth should serve this purpose. Ernst Bloch (see 1968, 1985), Hans Jonas (see 1964, 1969), and Rudolf Bultmann (see 1954) favor this approach. At the moment, Hans Blumenberg (see Blumenberg 1979) seems to move in a similar direction. Moreover, if we think of the various ways in which 'philosophy and science' have tried to establish their superiority in the organization of human affairs, we could mention this point as well.[3]

And finally, concerning the third option. If reason is all that counts, one could argue that myth has to become part of reason, that it has to be purified from all irrationalities to retain or to gain its proper meaning, and that the study of myth may show us the way in which we can reach this goal. A classical example of this kind of study is the treatment of myth in the work of Plato and, in our time, of Ernst Cassirer.[4] In contrast to the first three options, the fourth presents itself as a recollection of the previous ways of understanding. In line with Hegel's idea of dialectics, we could argue that each of the first three approaches makes sense up to a certain degree, and that it is this feature which turns them into elements of a fourth way. Since they exemplify the sequential meaning of *negari, conservari* and *elevari*, they form not only a dialec-

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[3] The 'mood' of this development can be grasped in a remark of A. Hitler on Rosenberg's *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*:

> 'In einem Tischgespräch vom 11. 4. 1942 erklärte er, ''er habe seinerzeit ausdrücklich abgelehnt, diesem Buch parteipäpstlichen Charakter zu geben, da schon der Titel schief sei. Denn man könne nicht sagen, daß man den Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts, also etwas Mystisches, gegen die Geistesauffassung des 19. Jahrhunderts stellen wolle, sondern müsse als Nationalsozialist sagen, daß man den Glauben und das Wissen des 20. Jahrhunderts gegen den Mythos des 19. Jahrhunderts stelle.'' '

The quote can be found in Frank 1988: 108. See also Heine 1966: 201 ff.

[4] As to Plato, see Theo Kobusch 1990; Cürsgen 2002; Cassirer 1955, 1944, and 1946 (in which the experiences of Nazism compelled him to acknowledge the irrational forces of contemporary political myths). See also Barber 2004.

tical structure that reveals itself in this sequence, but also offer this structure as a device to cope with the issue. What matters is the combination or synthesis of these options, and the perspectives which become possible if we remember the synthesis in each of its elements. Heinz Reinwald's *Myth and Method* can be seen as an exemplification of this approach (Reinwald 1991). Moreover, we can also think of Claude Lévi-Strauss (see 1979), Jean-Pierre Vernant (see 1965), Paul Ricoeur (see 1990), Bruno Liebrucks (see 1972), among many others.

If (and here I refer to the fifth option) we have to take things as they present themselves in terms of truth and reality, then we should be reasonable and study the elements and features of myth accordingly. This approach does not necessarily exclude the previous options, though it stresses the point that they are no options to begin with. If myth is an expression of irrationality, we have to study it as irrationality. If it is something else, we have to take it as this something else. The decisive premise is the idea of tentative beginnings, in which philosophy is not only in search of itself, but explores also the world of mythic relations in such a way that it considers their philosophical ramifications as well. In the exploration of these relations philosophy acknowledges the scholarly study of myths and mythologies in various disciplines. But at the same time it distinguishes itself from them by its questions and interests inasmuch as philosophy centers on conditions and principles, including those of its own project, as well as those of all other projects in relation to which it assumes the status of a meta-science. Examples of this approach are Schelling's studies in the philosophy of mythology and revelation, and, in more recent times, Kurt Hübner's 'The Truth of Myth.'[5]

Since it is always possible, though not necessarily feasible or wise, to skip an issue, I have mentioned this point as a sixth option. As Aristotle has stated (*Metaphysics* 1000a), philosophers have better things to do than to keep themselves busy with the subtleties of mythologists. And, there are numerous philosophers who think along similar lines. Yet, as the previous approach indicates, I do not think that this stance is philosophically defensible. Even if Aristotle is right, from a philosophical point of view it would still be necessary to know why he is right. Besides, it is also possible that myth has more than a superficial bearing on philosophy. When dealing with the relationship between myth and philosophy, we cannot disregard claims such as these; namely, 'that myth is part of philosophy, that myth *is* philosophy, that philosophy is myth, that myth grows out of philosophy, that philosophy grows out of myth, that myth and philosophy are independent of each other but serve the same function, and that myth and philosophy are independent of each other and serve different functions' (Segal 2004: 36). Since it is not fitting for philosophy to work with prejudices without examining them, we have to keep all options open with regards to the consequences of the study of myth and independent of these consequences. Though it is imperative to be as objective as possible, we can neither exclude the possibility that new insights

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[5] Hübner 1985. See also Gusdorf 1953, Brand 1978, Day 1984, Doty 1986, Hatab 1992, Bolle 1993 and (from a psychological and historical point of view) Jung and Kerényi 1963, Campbell 1970, Eliade 1975.

require a revision of previous ways of understanding, nor can we dismiss the experience that subjectivity is a necessary condition of objectivity. Since subjectivity is always also a matter of intersubjectivity and the cultural processes that shape them both, it remains an issue which is in need of continuous clarification.

In keeping all options open, I do not think that it is the task of philosophy to add new myths to old ones, or to alter them in its own fashion, but to understand the problems of myths and mythologies as thoroughly as possible in the spirit of comprehension and critical appropriation. In fact, even if one agrees that, historically, philosophy took a path away from its mythic origins and the runways provided by mythology, there can be no doubt that the proper goal of philosophy is philosophy and nothing else; but it may turn out that philosophy relates to something like its own myth, that it develops this myth (and not other ones) as the subject matter in philosophy demands.[6] But as the task speaks for itself, it clearly indicates that philosophy should give a name to the truth which – as meaning and as reality – is either present or absent in the occurrence of mythic relations as well as in the manifest and latent messages contained in myths and mythologies.[7]

3. Observations

Present-day usage connects the word *myth* with notions of delusions, unreality, and lie.[8] Myth is almost by definition derogatory and misleading. The enlightened mind has no need for myth.[9] This understanding of myth has a history of long standing. But

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[6] See Kerényi 1964: 11: 'Es sei aber einmal die Frage in aller Schärfe gestellt: Ist die *gänzliche* Ausschaltung des Mythos, nicht nur die Entmythologisierung, sondern auch die *Entmythisierung*, historisch und phänomenologisch überhaupt *möglich*? '

[7] With regard to the present study on myth see Ivan Strenski 1987; Jamme 1991; Kerényi 1996; Segal 1999; van Binsbergen 2009; Dubuisson 2006.

[8] In this and the following section I resume thoughts which I have developed in Dupré 1999, 2005.

[9] See, for instance, Niebuhr 1968: 15, where he points out in a text of 1937:

> 'In the lexicon of the average modern, particularly in America, a myth is a piece of fiction, usually inherited from the childhood of the race. The scientific outlook of our mature culture has supposedly invalidated the truth value of these primitive stories in which gods and devils, nymphs and satyrs, fairies and witches are portrayed in actions and attitudes which partly transcend and partly conform to human limitations. They are regarded as the opulent fruits of an infantile imagination which are bound to wither under the sober discipline of a developed intelligence. Science has displaced mythology …Such are the convictions which belong to the unquestioned certainties of the modern man.'

'In reality', myth appears in crisis situations: if another person behaves strangely, if she or he relates to vital ideas which are not our own, we are inclined to speak of myth. If myth is no label of outright lies, 'myth' stands for insufficient thinking, for adhering to misleading and false beliefs, for being victim to delusions. If one is convinced that a position in favor of atomic plants is based on packs of lies and delusions, one might easily speak of, for instance, '*Five Myths About Nuclear Energy*,' no matter whether the arguments are true or false (see Shrader-Frechette 2008). The opponent's adhesion to myth

does it also do justice to the meaning of myth – and to philosophy and scholarship as they relate to myth and mythology? If the term is used with these and other similar connotations, we cannot deny this usage. But usage alone does not determine the whole truth about the concept, or that we are free to disregard the reasons which require a revision. Since it is possible that present day usage is only partly correct, it is not unlikely that it confronts us with dialectical ramifications because, and when, we desist from acknowledging this partiality. Indeed, if we consider the various meanings in which we speak of myth in the context of, for instance, social and cultural studies, it becomes evident that more is at stake than present day usage suggests, and that the solution to this problem depends on the situations we address; that is to say, whether there are situations in which myths turn out to be fantasy, and others where it is more to the point to connect myth with truth.

While strictly speaking it might be true that 'true' myths are false (from a logical point of view), this very assumption could also be false for the simple reason that it is necessary to distinguish between true and false myths; that is to say, between myths which are beneficial (and in this sense true), and myths which are detrimental (and in this sense false). If we consider, for instance, the 'Myth of the 20th Century' as it has been proclaimed by national socialists, the myth of honor, blood, and destiny, I think that it is a gruesome example of a false myth, with horrible consequences, and lasting scars on the face of humanity. By contrast, we could point to the Christian Myth, the myth of forgiveness, the suffering God, and salvation history, as an example which indicates at least what a true myth can be if one shapes one's life accordingly (and does not use it to justify murder and other crimes). However, if we focus on the myth of the French Revolution we might say that in some ways it can be classified as a false myth, whereas in other ways it may be said to be a true myth.

These three examples show clearly that the question about myth is no simple matter. When we compare them with the myths we find in handbooks of mythology, we may question whether they are myths at all; or, if they are, whether they are not 'broken' rather than 'unbroken', as Paul Tillich (1987: 262) intimates. If each of the three examples is indeed a myth, then they oblige us to ask what these myths have in common; where and in what sense are they different; what does it precisely mean that myth can be judged true or false; or more generally, how these examples relate to myth if we think of it in terms of a (Weberian) ideal type. But the issue becomes even more complicated when we look at the history of the term and its many uses.

In Early Greek usage, myth (or *mythos*) was no fictional story or untruth, but a word that was spoken with the authority of a living tradition (see, for instance, Otto 1955; Kerényi 1964). Mythos is synonymous with logos, though the word for myth is given more weight. *Mytheomai*, I speak, was an expression for speaking the truth. As Xenophanes (frag. 1) tells us, we must not forget that

'prudent people praise God first, with devotional sayings, *mythoi*, and pure words, *logoi*' (Di-

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appears as a form of escapism. People cling to stages of human development that belong to a different time. Unlike our own culture which is based on common sense and realistically oriented, it is other cultures which still live by myth. After all, the obvious needs no explanation.

els 1964: 127).

If Parmenides (frag. 8) insists on the necessity to follow the right way, to think as truth and logos demand, he calls this

> 'the one myth of the way' (*mythos hodoio*) (Diels 1964: 235).

In the course of time, as the Greeks discovered philosophy and rational thinking (not only about nature but also) about the various stories of gods and goddesses, they started to developed different theories about the meaning of myths and began to oppose logos against mythos. As a result of this opposition, myths turned into fairy tales while the term 'myth' became a symbol of delusion and ignorance.[10] Although the original meaning of *mytheomai* lingered on, the meaning of mythos started to hold different connotations. As Socrates remarks in Plato's *Gorgias*: 'Hear, then, a very beautiful *logos*. A fable (*mythos*), you will think. But I call it a logos. For what I am going to tell, I tell you as pure truth.'[11]

As language and usage develop, the same words do not necessarily keep the same meaning. They can assume meanings which differ considerably from what they used to convey in previous periods. But there is more going on in Ancient Greece as far as the meaning of mythos and logos is concerned. Since their shifts in meaning concur with changes of identity and belonging, the terms themselves turn into symbols and criteria of mutual assessment. Indeed, if we consider the emergence and de-

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[10] *Cf.* Müller 1998: 281-295. As to the first attempts at demythologization see also Hübner 1985: 145:

> 'Unter den Logographen, Genealogen und Mythographen versteht man eine Gruppe, die versuchte, den Mythos auf den ''Logos'' zu bringen, also ihm eine dem aufkommenden Rationalismus entsprechende systematische Ordnung zu geben. Dazu gehörte aber nicht zuletzt, mittels möglichst lückenloser Genealogien die mythischen Geschichten in den durchgehenden Zusammenhang der profanen Zeit zu bringen. Dennoch blieb man dabei teilweise noch in der alten Anschauungsweise befangen. Besonders deutlich zeigt sich dies bei Pherekydes (6. Jahrhundert v. Chr.)…(146) So archaisch auch der Stil des Pherekydes anmutet, so wenig kann doch darüber hinweggesehen werden, daß nunmehr in Prosa geschrieben wird. Man distanziert sich von den Dichtern. ''Alles haben den Göttern Homer und Hesiod angehängt'', klagt Xenophanes, und Hekataios (6. Jahrhundert v. Chr.) betont, er erzähle den Mythos so, wie er ihm ''wahr zu sein scheint'', er erzähle einen ''logos eikós'', etwas Wahres: ''Denn die Geschichten der Griechen scheinen mir auch mannigfaltig und lächerlich zu sein''. [Hekataios, perhaps a student of Anaximander, lived in Miletus and had considerable knowledge about the countries and traditions of various peoples – WD]. ''Eikós'' war offenbar in dieser Zeit ein Schlagwort. Wir finden es auch bei dem Mythographen Hellanikos (5. Jahrhundert v. Chr.), womit er das in seinen Augen Natürliche und Vernünftige gegenüber dem Phantastischen, nur Erfundenen der Dichter hervorzuheben sucht. Nun beginnt auf breiter Front die ''Entmythologisierung''. Da wird durch Hekataios aus dem Höllenhund Kerberos eine gewöhnliche giftige Schlange. Herakles holt die Rinder des Geryones nicht von einer fernen Insel im Westen, sondern aus dem nahen Ambrakia, und selbstverständlich zieht er nicht alleine gegen den König Augeas, sondern zusammen mit den Epeern, um nur einige Beispiele zu geben'. Der Mythos wird also nicht einfach aufgegeben, er wird nur 'vernünftig' erklärt'.

See also Detienne 1986.

[11] *Gorgias* 523a. For the translation of this quote, I follow Xaveer de Win 1978, Part I: 204.

velopment of philosophy in Ancient Greece, we not only become witnesses to a new tradition in cultural history, but we also observe a far-reaching struggle between traditional truth claims and philosophical insights (see Hatab 192, Schwabl 1995). For when Plato points out (in the third book of *The Republic*) that philosophy provides a 'better' theology, it becomes clear that he sees in it an alternative tradition which serves as a replacement of the Homeric canon. Although Aristotle's 'cultivation of reason' (*Nicomachean Ethics* X. 8, 1179a) aims at knowledge for the sake of knowledge (*Metaphysics* I. 2, 982a), thought and word insist on becoming practical realities. While the *logos* stands for those who follow the ways of philosophy, *mythos* becomes the mark of those who are unable or unwilling to accept the challenges of true humanity. *Mythos* is not merely a term that has changed its meaning, but turns out to be a symbol which, as 'tacit myth' within and outside philosophy, functions as a label that initiates and confirms social and cultural otherness.

The reference to the Apostle Paul is no more than one in many instances which shows the change in the usage of the term myth, but it nevertheless reveals the dialectical ramifications of these changes. For when he tells Timothy that he should not 'waste his time with unholy, silly myths, but practice piety instead' (1 Tim. 4. 7), he may have a point as far as the cultivation of religious attitudes is concerned. However, when he remarks in 2 Tim. 4. 4: 'from truth they will abstain, and turn to myths,'[12] it becomes clear that he has more in mind when he uses this term. For whereas this usage implies the mythlessness of his own message, it functions also as a device which, by pointing to religious backwardness, puts his fellow humans in a place where the people he refers to do not want to be.

These few indications are sufficient to state the problem. If we focus on the usage of the term 'myth', the question is not whether this usage has changed (as it undoubtedly has), but whether it still refers to notions of identity and belonging; whether labelling is still taking place when we call a conviction or a way of behaving and doing things a myth. Since there are sufficient indications that this is indeed the case, we are still burdened with the history of the word and its usage. Though labelling is a common human attitude, philosophy and scholarship have to avoid it. And, if we think about it, it is quite possible that our own convictions and evidences are not so very different from those of others. Therefore, we are undoubtedly better off when we concede that there is mutuality in labelling (or since myth is the label: in 'myth-calling'[13]), and concentrate on the question of true and false myths (or beneficial and detrimental myths) instead of ignoring the issue. After all, if we insist on 'being without myth', this insistence could turn out to be the myth that persists in the denial of myth or, as Laurence Coupe puts it, in 'the myth of mythlessness.'[14]

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[12] See also 2 Petrus 1. 16: 'We did not follow sophisticated myths when we proclaimed the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but have been eye witnesses to his sublime greatness'.

[13] I use the term 'myth-calling' analogously to 'name-calling' which Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines as 'the use of disparaging or abusive names in attacking another'.

[14] Coupe 1997: 9. See, for instance, also Hübner 1985: 109:

4. Basic meanings

If it is true that present day use of the word myth relates implicitly to issues of identity in conjunction with more or less obvious forms of labelling, these connotations are sufficiently important to be acknowledged, and to revise this use accordingly. To do this, we have to consider the relationship between philosophy and tradition, and to focus especially on religious traditions and the ways they tend to disregard the truth claims of other religions. At least since David Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, philosophers have been (or could have been) aware of this tendency and the fact that something is wrong if one ignores the challenges of mutuality. Unfortunately, though philosophers of the Enlightenment noticed the problem of mutuality in religious traditions, and took the ignoring of this problem as an indication of delusory beliefs in all religions, they overlooked the fact that the history of philosophy and the belief in reason display similar patterns of mutual labelling and 'myth-calling'.

Indeed, when we observe today that what is a myth for one is a non-myth or true reality for another, or that positions and convictions assume opposite meanings as positions and perspectives change, we have every reason to pay attention to this observation. It is an issue which asks for the *deconstruction of prejudices* as well as for an assessment of the conditions under which it is possible to *recover the meanings* that have been lost in the course of biased developments. Moreover, when we focus on the relationship between *mythos* and *logos* in philosophy, we may even wonder whether this relationship is not covered by the same mythological figure which Lévi-Strauss has discovered in traditional mythologies.[15]

'Der Grieche, der im Mythos lebte und nicht, wie wir, außerhalb seiner, konnte ebenso wenig in dem hier gemeinten Sinn über ihn sprechen wie über ihn reflektieren'.

If we ask how it is possible to study myth, the problem of speaking about myth is indeed a real problem. But Hübner's approach is ambiguous. For if we are really ouside myth, as he assumes, how, then, are we able to relate to myth in the first place? – unless this 'outside of' is in itself a myth which enables us to recognize similarities in the myths of others. In this regard, I prefer to rely on the experiences of intercultural differences, both as they confront us with contrasts that make us 'see', and relate to cultural realities under conditions which reveal similarities and dissimilarities in relatively distinct ways.

[15] I refer to: $fx(a) : fy(b) \cong fx(b): fa-1(Y)$

('Here, with two terms, a and b, being given as well as two functions, x and y, of these terms, it is assumed that a relation of equivalence exists between two situations, defined respectively by an inversion of *terms* and *relations*, under two conditions: (1) that one term be replaced by its opposite (in the above formula, *a* and *a-1*); (2) that an inversion be made between the *function value* and the *term value* of two elements (above, y and a).' Lévi-Strauss 1967: 225).

If we think, for instance, of the Purusha myth (see Ṛg Veda 10. 90; and the references to Prakrti and Purusha in the Bhagavad Gita) the formula can be read as follows: Whereas (the Great Lord of all) creation (a), becomes manifest in the entanglement of Prakrti and Purusha (fx), this entanglement relates to purusha (b) freeing himself from prakrti (fy), as purusha (b), entering and getting absorbed by prakrti (fx) relates to the harmonious order of things (Y) as it emerges in and from the sacrifice of Purusha (a-1). When applied to the tension between mythos and logos, we can read the formula in two ways, depending on whether we emphasize the liberating role of logos or the guiding function of my-

The practice of religious, philosophical, and ordinary 'myth-calling' is no trivial affair. Since it subverts the purpose of humanity and intelligence, it is an issue of general concern which requires continuous attention. As to its consequences it underlines the necessity to come to an understanding of myth which covers not only the history of 'myth-calling', but recalls also the (Greek) beginnings of this history when *mythos* and *logos* were equally indebted to (what was believed to be) truth.

The question about a revised or critical use of the term 'myth' is primarily a problem of Western history and its beginnings in Greek thought and attitudes. But since it concerns in principle all cultures and traditions, it becomes a problem of philosophical anthropology within the horizon of cultural history. In fact, if we think about the method that could lead to an adequate concept of myth, I would like to argue that rather than taking our cue from Greek tradition, we should turn to the primal (or life-communal) cultures of gatherers and hunters in order to recover the meaning of myth in its anthropological and cultural significance.

With regard to the Greeks, we know already that myth referred to stories about gods and divine beings on the one hand and, more generally, to the word of tradition on the other hand; that is, to the *hieros logos* both as it could be found in these stories, and as it exceeded them in its meanings. But when we ask what we can do with these two notions, we are already in the middle of controversy. Even though our understanding of primal cultures is limited, and biased by the conditions under which we relate to them, they offer nonetheless examples of more or less homogenous traditions which can be used to represent an ideal type. These traditions deserve to be and must be studied on their own grounds. But we can also refer to them as we try to be mindful of the meaning of being human and cultural in a more general sense; that is to say, as we think about our own being within the context of cultural multiplicity and human unity as far as the basics of personal and communal existence are concerned.

Since the two notions of myth – that is, of myth as it refers to stories about divine beings, and as it coincides with the word of tradition – are such that they permit us to distinguish similar phenomena in other cultures and traditions, I think that it makes sense to focus on these primal cultures, and to develop the questions about myths and mythologies as we try to get hold of our own being in the light of these cultures.

The study of myth which I propose, is largely indebted to the authors I have mentioned in connection with the fourth and fifth option above. In particular, I would

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thos. Myth (a) which seduces (fx) relates to Logos (b) which liberates (fy) like Logos (b) which seduces (fx) relates to Liberation (Y) in the destruction of Myth (a-1). Logos (a) which decides (fx) relates to Mythos (b) which guides (fy) like Logos (b) which decides (fx) relates to Guidance and Liberation (Y) in the destruction of Logos (a-1). The alternative to the 'myth of mythlessness' or the 'myth of logoslessness' as they emerge from the destruction of Mythos or Logos (and can be found in extreme forms of scientism and fideism) consists, however, not in a renewed identification of mythos and logos, but in a distinction which implies mutual recognition. It is an invitation to consider the differences in questions, interests, ways of thinking, object relations, and so forth, as they mark the meaning of being human under changing conditions.

like to refer to Schelling's proposal of a philosophical ethnology.[16] But since I consider it necessary to emphasize the persistence of elementary conditions on cultural grounds, I see a closer connection than these authors did between the life-communal cultures of gatherers and hunters and our own as well as other people's conditions of primal existence.

To give a few indications of the proposed approach, I would like to indicate that myth, as the word of tradition and as the story of divine beings, becomes above all a key element of and in the constitution of cultural reality and personal consciousness. In its primary meaning, myth is not a story (in the sense of an incidental account), nor an elaboration of specific notions, but the pattern of evidences by which people live, in which they are aware of themselves and all reality, which they presuppose as they concentrate on the particulars of ordinary life. Myth tells the tale of being human.[17] It comes into being where the world becomes evident; where true reality begins to be an issue. Myth is primarily not a form of knowledge (as Cassirer assumed), but a dimension and form of consciousness. In the light of myth, the world reveals itself as an integral feature of the semantic space that enables human beings to communicate, and to disclose in their own way the truth in and behind appearances. If we approach myth from the experience of cultural differences, it makes itself known as the 'grammar' that guides and orders the arrangement of symbolic meanings.

Before myth extends into narratives which confirm its impact on consciousness, it consists in frameworks of relations which determine and qualify the life that evolves in them. In its basic function myth does not provide insights, but specifies the conditions under which it becomes possible to acquire them. The study of myth is, in this regard, not about truth-claims, but about the presuppositions as well as the possibility of these claims. Myth forms and opens the space that is home and world. Because of myth it is possible 'to give' – in Shakespeare's words – 'to airy nothing a local habitation and a name' (*Midsummer Night's Dream* V. 1); or, perhaps more to the point, to find myth in the realization of this very possibility. As myth attracts and harbors knowledge and experiences, it endorses and legitimizes them, while it is also shaped and changed by them.

Moreover, as myth relates to divine beings, these beings present themselves as names which speak in and with the tradition that is part of them. The central names of myths are no allegories, at least not primarily, which say something else that is encoded in them, but – as Schelling has pointed out using Coleridge's term – *tautegories* which say what they are and as they are in the saying.[18] As tautegories they emerge in an reversal of naming in which names gain meaning apart from and prior to the movements of designation. The divine beings, whether they are ancestors or heroes, totems or creator gods, do, or do not, exist in 'their' specific modes of existence and non-existence; not as things exist, but as the non-visible realities of numbers and laws,

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[16] See Schelling 1959: 130; Dupré 1975, 1996.

[17] *Cf.* Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'An entire mythology is stored in our language' (Wittgenstein 1979: 70).

[18] Schelling 1959: 197f. See also Hedley 2000: 134f, 2008: 121ff; H. Stachowiak 1985: 143-155.

of ethical codes and values, of communities and the ideals of humanity, are part of our life in accordance with their respective characters.[19]

To understand the meaning of tautegorical names, we could say that they imply, and hinge on, different ways of speaking – which in a sense is trivial, but becomes critical when we explore the extreme possibilities of speaking. If we think along these lines, it makes sense to relate not only to the individual subject that speaks, but also to language and tradition as they form their own beginnings, and join in the same processes which consist in and structure the expressions of humanity – and thus, as they account for particular ways of speaking (Rogerson 1984: 63).

The conditions under which we become aware of mythic phenomena in primal cultures make it necessary to approach myths and mythologies from a dynamic perspective. If we contrast mythic names with the stories in which they occur, and observe that these stories may be told and retold in variable combinations, we encounter myth as it unfolds in stories, and mythic names and notions as they enfold these stories as well as the traditions by which people live. But on the one hand, the result is such that we are left with a body of narratives which can be collected and fixed. On the other hand, if we consider the collections of myths and recall the manner in which they are produced (and collected), we notice that they are temporary and in the process of being made. The tension we face in these opposing movements underscores the necessity to distinguish between actual myths as they are part of specific mythologies, and the latent myths which appear in them. But because we have no right to omit the processes in which these latent myths are generated, we have to think of what we may call the mythic, both as it precedes these processes, and as it converges on the (untold or silent) myths which form the basis of specific myths and mythologies.

To come to an understanding of the relationship between myth and mythology, the available stories offer themselves as (first) indications of the latent (untold) myth from which they derive. Conversely, if we follow these indications and think of the myths that enfold them, we may return to the stories and approach them once more in the light of these preceding (and, in principle, not synchronic but enchronic) myths. But while a body of stories refers to the untold myth from which it stems, its stories do not necessarily reflect and articulate the whole myth (or complete configuration of untold myths) by which people live. Though life-communal cultures are spontaneous enough to cover large segments of culture and consciousness in mythological expressions, they do not cover all of them. In its actuality a particular mythology may be

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[19] When we speak, for instance, of science, mathematics, or of whatever discipline we have in mind, we refer to particular activities and achievements which can be distinguished by these names. However, if we substantialize these names in such a way that they include whatever has been and will be accomplished, we may share only fragments of this inclusion, but instead of referring to these fragments, we use the names as they stand for themselves and attract whatever belongs to them. The switch from an indicative to an integral and (ultimately) tautegorical use of names may be inconsequential on the level of ordinary communication. But as it confirms opposite modes of intentionality, it points to a basic tension in the perception of reality which, when we consider the prominent place of tautegoric relations, is crucial to the formation of myths and mythologies because and to the extent that it centers on one of the two poles.

more or less comprehensive. And, whereas the idea of total coverage assumes the meaning of a limit, we can think of an opposite limit where all narratives are gone because they have disappeared in words and notions that encapsulate their myths without releasing them. The assumption of this second limit is a thought experiment. But it is an experiment which makes us wonder about situations in which we know many mythologies, though we are not sure anymore whether we can, or should, embrace any one of them.

Whereas the distinction between myth and mythology aims at the recovery of the myth in mythology and the understanding of mythology in conjunction with this myth, the distinction between myth and the mythic centers on the formation of myths and mythologies in cultural history, and on the mythic as the time absorbing source and beginning of this formation. If the first distinction relates to the plurality of mythological expressions in more or less distinct units, the second distinction refers to the convergence of myths and mythologies in the unity of being human and cultural. To the extent that the basic myths of different mythologies are one inasmuch as they concur with momentary (though relatively lasting) configurations of the semantic space that defines culture and consciousness, they can be used to distinguish various cultures with their specific histories. And conversely, inasmuch as cultural differences concur with shifts in myth and mythology, they can be used in the clarification of these shifts. However, inasmuch as myths are similar and dissimilar, they let us, and compel us to, think of the mythic in being human and cultural – not as another myth, but as focus and vanishing point of mythological processes.

Since the distinction between the myth and the mythic derives from the perception of actual myths and mythologies and the necessity to account for distinct and related phenomena, it raises several questions of whether the relation with the mythic is transient, of whether it is typical for particular cultures and not for others and of whether it reflects certain stages in cultural development or does it persist in all situations. The answer to this question depends on our understanding of being human and cultural, as well as on the one hand, the meaning of language and communication, and on the other hand, the conditions of thought and tradition. If we accept the idea that human beings do not exist without a life-world in which they find their identity and personhood, and take into consideration that myths account for the cosmological character of cultural reality in life-communal cultures, we may as well say that the mythic turns out to be an unconditional requirement of human existence. We may think of the mythic in terms of a dimension of consciousness, or as a principle which becomes effective in the formation of mythic symbols (or tautegories) and the configurations that determine the myth of mythologies, but in either way we relate to and rely on it as we cope with reality in practice and in theory. As the vanishing point of all reality, it is as unseizable as reality itself. But since we think of it – not as object, but as the implicit limit of thinking and speaking – it gives us the notion of truth both as it precedes being and understanding, and as it guides and accompanies the assessment of actions and attitudes. As the source of spiritual light it enables us to see what affects us and to evaluate the effects of this experience as we see and become aware

of them. In the realization of this ability we depend on the use of reason and the measures reason provides in the pursuit of true understanding. But to be reasonable, we depend on reality as it invites us to rely on reason. While reality appears to be subject to truth and reason, this appearance is not a consequence, but a condition of being reasonable, both as this condition results from mythological processes, and as it evolves with them in the interactions of attitudes and activities.

From a historical point of view it is evident that the stories about gods and goddesses became problematic when the word of philosophy and scholarship began to compete with the word of tradition. But the fact that these myths have been abolished, does not necessarily imply that philosophy and scholarship relinquished their own myth. As I have indicated already, if we consider the relationship between myth and mythology, we can also think of myths without mythologies. We could thus argue that reason and being are terms from a different myth which, as myth without apparent mythology, became the matrix of a new tradition within traditions. The tension between the word of the one and the words of other traditions became a powerful stimulant to the dynamics of being human and cultured, as well as to the ways in which thinking relates to itself and the whole of reality. In coping with the words of surrounding traditions, the myth of philosophy and scholarship may be hidden away in the evidences of reflective thought. But the fact that it has been or is forgotten, does not mean that the myth has ceased to be a decisive factor in the formation of philosophical systems and the development of scientific paradigms.

Whatever the ways may be in which we understand, and relate to, the mythic in the distinction of myths and mythologies, I do not think that philosophy and scholarship are rational in their approach to the study of myth, if they disregard their possible dependence on mythological conditions. What matters is not whether myths and mythologies are 'primitive' forms of science (which they are not), but whether and how they form the medium in which we exist as human beings, in which we become aware of ourselves and the whole of reality, and on the basis of which we are able to act as reasonable beings.

5. Why should it be of interest to study myth?

Since the meaning of myth belongs to that of the semantic space in which we operate as thinking beings, there are numerous reasons for our being interested in the clarification of this issue. On formal grounds we could argue that the paradigms or disciplinary matrixes of our studies are especially sensitive to the delineations in which the subjects of investigation do appear. Even if myth should not be decisive for the dimensionalization of reality, we should still know why and how it interferes with the perception of things, as it apparently does. Before we know what myth truly implies, the argument confronts us with a basic ambiguity. On the one hand, we cannot discard the belief that myth may be no more than a distorting factor which needs to be checked, and in which case, as Stephen Toulmin has pointed out (Toulmin 1970), we

have to be careful that it does not creep into 'off-duty' writings. On the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility that myth is an indispensable condition of reflective thinking, as well as of scholarly inquiries, and that the primary issue is not the rejection of myth, but the recovery of those mythic elements which sustain the idea of 'pure science' and are likely to affect, change, and deepen its meaning as they become the subject of critical and self-critical considerations.[20]

Another point which could be mentioned in this context concerns the *epistemological* aspects of the problem of myth. Because myth refers to concrete features at least to the extent that cultures, traditions, and human beings do, in fact, create its meaning, we cannot dismiss the questions of how we become aware of these features, how we know what we perceive, what the experiences are that permit and compel us to distinguish relevant phenomena, and so forth. The questions are part of the problem of interpersonal relations in the form of self understanding and the understanding of others. They have their place in the study of one's own and of other cultures, of one's own and of other religions. But they refer also to the possibility of meeting myth on its own ground and in terms that agree with the demands of empirical existence. Since Theagenes of Rhegion (6th century BC) became convinced that myth needs an allegorical interpretation, Western scholars have tried to come closer to myth by connecting it with various parameters. Myth became an expression of poetry, of priestly fraud, of forgotten histories,[21] of primitive science, and so forth. Today we try to make sense of myth by connecting it with social functions, with subconscious processes, with archetypical mappings, with historical states and developments. I do not think that these connections are necessarily wrong or without insight. They do make sense in a variety of ways, and we have to explore these possibilities. But at the same time it would certainly be insufficient if we did not try to take myths literally; if we did not first take them at their face value, before we try to look for hidden meanings. Though Schelling has already made this attempt, the issue itself is still grossly neglected (Djurić 1979).

Since I have already touched on the issue of *identity formation and labelling*, I do not have to repeat this point. Within the context of philosophical anthropology it is clear that we have to focus on myth if we intend to do justice to the meaning of being human and its place in the whole of reality. But as this issue extends into various aspects of philosophy and culture, it assumes special significance in the discussion of philosophy and ideology on the one hand, and with regard to questions about epochal shifts and their impact on the understanding of philosophy on the other hand. Moreover, as Kolakowski (1974) and Hübner (1985) have pointed out, if philosophy intends to make sense of questions about chance and providence, of how we cope with

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[20] As to the discussion of this point see, for instance, Gilkey 1976; Maziarz 1971; Munson 1975; Barbour 1984; and Scarborough 1994.

[21] See, for instance, Pépin 1958 and de Vries 1961. With the 'forgotten histories' I refer to the Euhemeristic interpretation of myth in which Zeus (and other gods) are said to have been historical figures. As the historical knowledge faded away, the memory acquired features of divine action and religious worship.

'strange' experiences in our life, with illness and death, with disaster and war, with salvation and doom – then it must not disregard the ways in which myths tackle these problems. Nor can we preclude the possibility that only myth is able to provide a solution – or that these problems present themselves in mythic terms the moment we try to define them as, for instance, when we think of events like 'September 11th', 2001 and the present breakdown of the financial and economic system. And, if it should turn out that these kinds of experiences are essential ingredients of and for the notion of God, one might wonder how it will ever be possible to develop a philosophical theology, that is indeed philosophical and not another version of theological reasoning, without an adequate theory of myth.

Finally, I would like to point to the *ontological* significance of myth. As Kurt Hübner has shown, it is possible to contrast scientific ontology with mythological ontology if we assume that they both provide models to cope more or less reasonably with experiences.[22] But since the two models are specifications of cultural reality in their particular ways, I do not think that it is sufficient to juxtapose them without answering the question about their mediation as well as about the conditions of their possibility. Here I would like to refer once more to the distinction between myth and mythology (and the mythic as depth and lasting origin), but now with the additional qualification that myth itself is more comprehensive than the mythologies which reflect some of its meanings, and that it is precisely this comprehensiveness which needs to be taken seriously in its nature, its possibilities, and consequences. For if it is true that myth consists in the configuration of evidences with the implication of naturalness, and that it insists on the tautegories which attract meanings in their own way, then we cannot doubt that myth is always a whole, no matter how limited it may be in its actuality. As tautegories form their own centers of reality, the space between them becomes a field for various activities. As we can think of changing configurations, we can think of new and different possibilities. But whatever the shifts may be, whether some of the tautegories fade away while others emerge, or whether some stay the same while others change, they form a whole in tautegorical difference and it is the whole that extends or changes together with them. Within the limits of tautegorical symbols and the semantic spaces they entail, there is room for ordinary existence both as it evolves in conjunction with them, and as it modifies them in concrete relations. Because of these symbols and spaces and their dimensions we can think of religion as a particular mode of human existence, and of religions as modifications of this mode in connection with different sets of tautegories and various relations to the meaning of tautegorical difference.[23] In the same way, we can also think of philosophy and sci-

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[22] See Hübner 1985: 239 ff , part three, on 'the rationality of the mythic'.

[23] With the notion of tautegorical difference I refer to the idea that the cultural universe which is constituted in the constellation of tautegorical names is closed: in one sense, we always have to say, that is it! But as there is tension and movement in the constellation of tautegories, their last word is always also a first one. If we begin to understand, it is fine. But there is more to it, in depth and beyond all extensions. There remains the question: what is it all about? Both moments are of vital importance for religious existence. If one of them is neglected the result is either fundamentalism or nihilism. Although I

ence as they evolve from ordinary existence in conjunction with their specific tautegories – not as *mythologies* we know from prephilosophical and prescientific cultures, but as *logomythologies* (German: *'Logomythie'*, Dupré 1973: 954) whose purpose it is to understand the world as well as the various mythologies in terms of theoretical reasoning. If the universe – not the universe that we imagine to exist 'out there', but the one that is formed by the tautegories of myth which is supposed to comprise the 'out there' as well – is large enough to contain God and Nirvana (as tautegories of tautegories), we should not in advance exclude the possibility that the tautegoric whole is capable of including philosophy as well as science and scholarship. It is at least a point which deserves to be considered. Since we hardly scratch the surface of reality, we should not believe that we have reached its essence, even if we assume that it has no essence at all.

The distinction between *mythos* and *logos* is a necessary distinction as far as the possibility of philosophy and science is concerned. It is a necessity which concurs with the emergence of philosophy and science inasmuch as they relate to the *logos* in forms of self-relation: as Parmenides has taught his fellow philosophers, with the *logos* we have to decide and come to a conclusion.[24] But the distinction does not necessarily mean that myth is a delusion, that only *logos* is true, that *mythos* and *logos* could not both be true and false, or that the distinction between them is not, in fact, an *indistinction* when seen from the viewpoint of myth. When Parmenides called his way a myth, he probably meant what he said. But when philosophers developed their myths of the way, and started to refer to the 'myths' of others in order to proclaim their cultural superiority, it is not surprising that this has been the beginning of 'off-duty' mythologies.

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do not agree with Blumenberg's simplistic opposition between myth and dogma (see Blumenberg 1990: 239ff), I think that he has a point here. For as myth tells dogma that dogma derives from myth and mythology, it becomes a thorn in the flesh of dogmatic thought, which reminds one to look out, to avoid dogmatism, to accept myth as a jester in the court of dogmatic reasoning.

[24] See frag. 7: '...do thou judge by reason the strife-encompassed proof that I have spoken'. Kirk & Raven 1962: 271.

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