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LANGUAGE AND MYTH

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Translated by
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LANGUAGE *and* MYTH



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Being, they are not mere products of fantasy which vapor off from fixed, empirical, realistic existence, to float above the actual world like a bright mist; to primitive consciousness they present the *totality* of Being. The mythical form of conception is not something super-added to certain definite *elements* of empirical existence; instead, the primary "experience" itself is steeped in the imagery of myth and saturated with its atmosphere. Man lives with *objects* only in so far as he lives with these *forms*; he reveals reality to himself, and himself to reality, in that he lets himself and the environment enter into this plastic medium, in which the two do not merely make contact, but fuse with each other.

Consequently all those theories which propose to find the roots of myth by exploring the realm of experience, of *objects*, which are supposed to have given rise to it, and from which it then allegedly grew and spread, must always remain one-sided and inadequate. There are, as is well known, a multitude of such explanations—a great variety of doctrines about the ultimate origin and real kernel of mythmaking, hardly less motley than the world of objects itself. Now it is found in certain psychical conditions and experiences, especially the phenomenon of dreaming, now in the contemplation of natural events, and among the latter it is further limited to the observation of natural objects such as the sun, the moon, the stars, or else to that of great occurrences such as storms, lightning and thunder, etc. Thus the attempt is made again and again to make soul mythology or nature mythology, sun or moon or thunder mythology the basis of mythology as such.

But even if one of these attempts should prove successful, this would not solve the real problem which mythology presents to philosophy, but at best would

push it back one step. For mythical formulation as such cannot be understood and appreciated simply by determining the object on which it is immediately and originally centered. It is, and remains, the same miracle of the spirit and the same mystery, no matter whether it covers this or that realistic matter, whether it deals with the interpretation and articulation of psychical processes or physical things, and in the latter case, just what particular things these may be. Even though it were possible to resolve all mythology to a basic astral mythology—what the mythical consciousness derives from contemplation of the stars, what it sees in them directly, would still be something radically different from the view they present to empirical observation or the way they figure in theoretical speculation and scientific “explanations” of natural phenomena. Descartes said that theoretical science remains the same in its essence no matter what object it deals with—just as the sun’s light is the same no matter what wealth and variety of things it may illuminate. The same may be said of any symbolic form, of language, art, or myth, in that each of these is a particular way of seeing, and carries within itself its particular and proper source of light. The function of envisagement, the dawn of a conceptual enlightenment can never be realistically derived from things themselves or understood through the nature of its objective contents. For it is not a question of what we see in a certain perspective, but of the perspective itself. If we conceive the problem in this way, it is certainly clear that a reduction of all myth to one subject matter brings us no nearer to the solution, in fact it removes us further than ever from any hope of a real answer. For now we see in language, art and mythology so many archetypal phenomena of human mentality which can be indicated as such, but

LANGUAGE AND MYTH

by Ernst Cassirer

In this important study Ernst Cassirer analyzes the non-rational thought processes that go to make up culture. He demonstrates that beneath both language and myth there lies an unconscious "grammar" of experience, whose categories and canons are not those of logical thought. It shows that this prelogical "logic" is not merely an undeveloped state of rationality, but something basically different, and that this archaic mode of thought still has enormous power over even our most rigorous thought, in language, poetry and myth.

The author analyzes brilliantly such seemingly diverse (yet related) phenomena as the metaphysics of the Bhagavat Gita, the Melanesian concept of Mana, the Naturphilosophie of Schelling, modern poetry, Ancient Egyptian religion, and symbolic logic. He covers a vast range of material that is all too often neglected in studies of human thought.

These six essays are of great interest to the student of philosophy, of philosophy of science, the historian, or anthropologist. They are also remarkably timely for students of literature, what with the enormous emphasis placed upon "myth" in modern literary speculation. This book is not superficial speculation by a dabbler, but a penetrating study by one of the most profound and sensitive philosophic minds of our time.

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