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Myth and Reflection: Some Comments on Ricoeur's Phenomenological Analysis

The category of myth presents an embarrassment to contemporary man for he is aware that he has reached that point in his own history, and in the secularization of his culture, where myth and history have been decisively separated. Mythical time is seen to be other than historical time; and mythical space other than geographical space. The persistence of the mythical dimension beyond this point of separation presents an affront to rationality and encourages a solution in a radical demythologization involving both the conquest and the loss of the mythical. The positivism of Comte heralded such a solution, and positivism in recent history, which is not the same as that of the last century, would nevertheless appear to concur. Allegorical interpretation of myth seems to have emerged as a viable means of overcoming the confrontation of myth and thought, not by demythologization, but by imposing on the myth an explanation from without which would bestow on it some semblance of rationality. The allegory is construed outside the text, read into the text in an act of translation, and then dispensed with as the allegory is replaced by the translated text. What the allegory attempted to say could have been said in direct discourse. The solution provided by the allegorical translation proves to be no solution as the mythical remains distinct from the allegory. Myth persists in attempting to present that which cannot be reduced to literal and clear language, and appears to possess a certain immunity to translation. Interpretation, however, cannot be dispensed with although it runs the severe risk of quasi-rational or gnostic distortion. This shift from myth to gnosis is hastened by the persistence of the problem of evil and its inclusion in the mythical dimension, for the problem of evil presents an occasion for profound thought and a ready opportunity for nonsense and quasi-rational explanation of its source and presence.[1]

Myth remains autonomous and immediate, irreducible by allegorical interpretation, and opaque to literal or quasi-rational explanation.[2] It is neither

1. Gregor Sebba illustrates the phenomenon of grass roots mythopoeia with a myth story told by an old lady of the southern United States to explain the differences between black and white peoples. God created all black, and the better ones wanted to become white like God, so God in his mercy created a small pond in which they could bathe and become white. The industrious got there first and became white; the stupid and lazy got there only when the water was gone and mud remained. By walking in it, rubbing their hands and touching their lips with it, these parts became white. Altizer, Beardslee and Young, eds., *Truth, Myth and Symbol* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 151.

2. Compare Tillich's insistence that myth and cult cannot be explained in terms of psychology and sociology. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, p. 80.

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history nor explanation and demands to be understood and interpreted as myth in a process of demythologization. Hans Jonas has remarked that myth taken literally is the crudest objectification, myth taken allegorically is sophisticated objectification, and myth taken symbolically is the glass through which we see darkly.[3]

Demythologization is a process of thought, an effort of interpretation and an act of reflection. It seeks to answer a series of very difficult questions. Can myth be taken up into thought without falling into literal or quasi-rational explanation? Does myth contribute to thought? Is it in any way a *peripeteia* to knowledge? Does this knowledge presented in symbol concern the being of man in the world? Bultmann would contend that it does in insisting that the Christian understanding of man can be better explicated by means of Heidegger's existential analysis than by the mythological concepts of the New Testament writers. The myth is translatable into philosophical anthropology. Hans Jonas agrees up to a point but insists that here limits must be set, for a phenomenology using existential analysis is restricted to the self-understanding of man. The understanding of God is not some function of this human self-understanding and remains irreducible to concepts of thought. Only myth with its opaqueness protects the paradoxical quality of the understanding of the divine. Ricoeur is unwilling to restrict the symbol to the role of a 'simple revealer of self-awareness,' for every symbol is a 'hierophany, a manifestation of the bond between man and the sacred' and thus has an ontological function.[4] Myth as a narrative form of symbol has ontological implications so that the process of demythologization cannot be restricted to anthropological concerns. In a similar way Tillich maintained that myth and cult give access to the ground of being which ontological reason, under the conditions of existence, aspires to but cannot grant.[5] The object of knowledge and the object of devotion are one and the same object. Language about being and language about God remain symbolic for Tillich with the singular exception of the phrase that God is the ground of being.

An instructive distinction is thus drawn between the interpretation of myth and symbol which restricts itself to the categories of a philosophical anthropology and an interpretation which extends the significance of symbol to the field of ontology. The distinction resides in the interpretation of the legitimate uses of the phenomenological method. Hans Jonas, as noted above, limits it to the self-understanding of man. Bultmann, while recognizing that the theologian as interpreter is influenced by his philosophical approach, restricts phenomenology to existentialism, that is, to the elucidation of those concepts of the self-understanding of man that are given in existence, and, more precisely to that elucidation provided by Heidegger. But Heidegger transposes the

3. Remarks made in an address by Hans Jonas, 'Heidegger and Theology,' *The Review of Metaphysics*, 18, 2 (1964), 207–34.

4. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Emerson Buchanan, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 356.

5. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, pp. 71ff.

existentiel structures of anguish, possibility, repetition, etc., into the *existential* structures of the Dasein, which is an ontological structure. The neologism, existentiel-existential, marks this shift of level from anthropology to ontology. Tillich, as well, maintains this ontological concern as distinct from Bultmann, and even recommends phenomenology as the only method suitable for theology. Nevertheless, he cannot be considered a thorough phenomenologist.[6] Ricoeur is wholly committed to the phenomenological method for the elucidation, not simply of the structures of existence but of the situation of man in being. The symbol is an index of this situation, and the proposed 'transcendental deduction of symbols' is not to judge a symbol by the degree in which it enhances self-awareness but in its transformation of the reflective consciousness. To know oneself is more than a reflective act; it involves a situation of man at the heart of being in which he moves, exists, and wills.

We have now shifted our ground from the preliminary consideration of myth to the act of reflection, to the process of thought, and to the question of the methodology most suitable to the consideration of the full import of myth. Admittedly, the analysis of the notion of reflection prior to the analysis of myth tends to reverse the movement of phenomenological analysis which seeks to grasp the original and even prereflective experience in its fulness, and runs the hazard of placing more importance on the act of reflection than on the concrete presentation of the symbol or the experience that gave it birth. Nevertheless, it is necessary to situate 'reflection' in the context of phenomenology and in doing so attempt to clarify some essentials of the method before returning to the elucidation of myth as symbol and its relevance for philosophy.

Pierre Thevenaz has insisted that 'reflection [reflexion] is the very method of Philosophy' in that 'philosophy is to be distinguished from science by a certain mode of knowledge of self, a type of knowledge that cannot be dissociated from any knowledge that wishes to throw light on its own foundations.'[7] Reflection is the act of the subject turning back on itself to a clarification of the radical foundations of subjectivity. This view is rooted not only in Husserl who claimed that the 'phenomenological method stays fully within the acts of reflection'[8] but also in Kant, who stated 'Reflection [reflexio] does not concern itself with objects themselves with a view to deriving concepts from them directly, but is that state of mind in which we first set ourselves to discover the subjective conditions under which (alone) we are able to arrive at concepts.'[9] Further, Kant states 'Logical reflection is a mere act of comparison' and is thus quite different from 'transcendental reflection' which 'bears on the objects themselves' and 'contains the ground of the possibility of the objective comparison of representations with each other.'[10] This Kantian

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7, 211. Tillich understands phenomenology mainly in its descriptive sense and equates 'pure' phenomenology with a neutral position in such description.

7. Pierre Thevenaz, *What is Phenomenology?*, James Edie, trans. (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1962), p. 113.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

9. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, N. K. Smith, trans. (London: Macmillan), p. 276.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

'transcendental reflection,' Descartes' meditative reflection, and Husserl's phenomenological reflection on the immanent elements of consciousness constitute the sources for the emphasis on reflection in a philosophy that seeks an elucidation of the *Lebenswelt*. Kierkegaard's 'repetition,' Bergson's 'intuition-reflection,' Lavell's 'reflective act,' and Gabriel Marcel's distinction between the 'first' reflection of scientific analysis and the 'second' reflection that seeks to overcome the rigid distinction between subject and object, Sartre's distinction between the 'pure' reflection which cleanses the consciousness of the desire to become God, and the 'impure' which sustains the desire, and Merleau-Ponty's 'first' reflection on the phenomenal field followed by a 'second' reflection as a consideration of the conditions for the appearance of the first, have all contributed to the shaping of the philosophical *milieu* in which Ricoeur attempts a phenomenological analysis of myth as symbol. Husserl's insistence on returning to 'the things themselves' has meant a return to the phenomenal world of human experience, a description of the reflective and prereflective consciousness and an attempt to disclose the structures of such consciousness. Philosophical reflection, according to Ricoeur, must, in an examination of the myths of the evil, re-enact the confession of guilt. It cannot arrive at the original consciousness of 'fault' directly, but by reflection on 'confession' which has already expressed the experience in language, a phenomenology of confession can elucidate the structures of the experience. The symbol not only has a cosmic function as described by phenomenology of religion, but has an ontological function expressive of man's being in the world and man's becoming himself. Reflection is a recovery and an elucidation. Philosophy is not without presuppositions for it begins with experience and with the language of experience. Reflection, uncovers by a process of reduction, that which is given and seeks to clarify it in thought.[11]

These comments on reflection tend to raise the broader and more difficult question 'What is Phenomenology?' In religious studies, ethics, and the social sciences there is a tendency to use the term to cover a wide variety of approaches which seem to have nothing in common but a kind of neutral attitude to the subject matter. The question emerges here as a matter of methodology in philosophy as well as in exploration of the religious category of myth. Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis of myth cannot be separated from his phenomenological philosophy. To raise questions about the philosophical significance of phenomenology in a milieu shaped by another revolution in philosophy (which also had its origins in Vienna) is not without its hazards. The initial contacts were unsuccessful in establishing any rapport. Husserl lectured in London on the 'Phenomenological Method and Phenomenological Philosophy' in 1922 (6, 7, 9, and 12 June) with G. E. Moore chairing the fourth lecture. In England he failed to relate to contemporary concerns of British philosophy, while in France his neo-cartesian emphasis was seen to have immediate implications. But this is now history. Possibly the two traditions are

11. Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, chap. 1. See also his Preface to Jean Nabert, *Eléments pour une éthique* (Paris: Aubier, 1943).

not so far apart as frequently supposed. The common interest in experience, the emphasis on empiricism, and concern with philosophy of language would seem to indicate some common ground.[12] Even within the phenomenological movement no clear and distinct definition of phenomenology is available. There is no school; the practitioners seem to be much too individualistic for that although they maintain more or less an allegiance to the method. Most of the misconceptions about phenomenology and the distaste for it expressed in some circles derive from the confusion of phenomenology with existentialism.[13] If existentialism is interpreted as an individualistic, subjectivistic, and irrational philosophy and dismissed on these grounds, phenomenology becomes suspect.[14] But the distinction is quite clear; phenomenology is a methodology and existentialism is a philosophical anthropology which emerges from the application of the method.

Just as existential categories have been used to elucidate the characteristics of religious experience, particularly in the field of religious anthropology, so the phenomenological method has been adapted to the study of the manifestations of religious phenomena. The earlier application of the method was unrelated to its philosophical usage and was in effect an ordering of groups of religious phenomena in an effort to avoid a doctrinaire reduction. This placed the study in between a history of religion and a philosophy of religion. It was Van der Leeuw, in a postscript to his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, who attempted to link this approach with philosophical phenomenology, making Heidegger rather than Husserl the representative type. But a typology of religious phenomena is not a phenomenology of religion in the strictest sense of the term. Only the application of the phenomenological method to explore the content of religious experience, its essential structures and expressions can be correctly termed a phenomenology of religion.

Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis belongs to this category and, although he borrows from a phenomenology of religion which remains descriptive, he goes beyond it. His phenomenology derives from three major sources. Kant's study of the possibility of knowledge and the transcendental deduction is impressive but lacks the concern for ontology; Hegel's phenomenology of appearances as a logical order of the manifestation of being includes this ontological concern; it is Husserl's phenomenological reduction that provides the clue to the method, even if Husserl like Kant does not extend it to the foundation of an ontology.[15] Ricoeur's practice of the phenomenological

12. Gaston Berger, 'Husserl et Hume' in *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 1 (1939), 342–53.

13. Spiegelberg is no doubt correct when he insists that an understanding of the full import of phenomenology must be grasped by a study of its history. See H. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: I, II* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965).

14. Mascall, 'Some Reflections on Contemporary Existentialism,' *Religious Studies*, 2, 1 (1966), 1–11.

15. Paul Ricoeur, 'Phenomenologie existentielle,' *Encyclopedie Française: XIX* (1957); 'Le Symbole donne a penser,' *Esprit*, 27 (1959); Husserl, *Idées directrices pour une phenomenologie* (1950).

method in his phenomenology of the will indicates three levels of investigation. On the first level phenomenology is a description of the phenomena seeking an elucidation of intentional meanings. Such descriptive phenomenology is restricted to lucid consciousness and remains inadequate for the elucidation of man's participation in being. In a sense this descriptive phenomenology is also eidetic phenomenology for, despite its limits, its purpose is to concentrate on essences. On the second level he moves to an examination of the 'transcendental constitution' of the phenomena in consiousness, avoiding any implications of a transcendental idealism. On the third level he is concerned with an ontology of consciousness, that is, the status of consciousness in the framework of being.

This reference to Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis of the will indicates his appropriation of the phenomenological method and his persistent concern with ontology. We can now turn back to the consideration of myth, and in particular, those myths concerning 'origins' and 'the end' to which Ricoeur limits himself. These myths have emerged in the human consciousness of fault, and it is this consciousness which has expressed itself in a language full of contradictions but nevertheless revealing. The confrontation with philosophy is apparent and it is tempting to begin the discourse, not on the level of the expression of myth, but on the level of the rationalization of this experience, as presented in ideas and doctrines of original sin. But such rationalizations, though connected with the experience, are speculative expressions far removed from the spontaneous ones which a phenomenological analysis would seek to recover. Beneath this layer of rational or quasi-rational explanations of the experience lie myths, which are nearer to the experience, and which constitute a language or utterance of the confession of evil in the religious consciousness. It is not the confession of evil itself, for again beneath the myths there lies not only the confession of sin which appears in the cult but the language of this confession. It is through this language that the consciousness of fault expresses itself. This most primitive and least mythical language is already a symbolic language.

A philosophy that wishes to take into full account this act of confession of sin which is expressed in symbol, and its relationship to self-consciousness must elaborate a criteriology of symbols. Reflection on symbols demands that we go back to the naïve forms: that is, in the case of a phenomenology of 'confession' to the very experience of the penitent. Here, Ricoeur insists, in the naïve form 'the prerogatives of reflective consciousness are subordinated to the cosmic aspect of hierophanies, to the nocturnal aspect of dream productions, and finally to the creativity of the poetic world.'[16] The critical experience of fault is shaped by a cosmic orientation, the dream world, and by poetic expression. These present the three fundamental dimensions of symbolism – cosmic, oneiric, and poetic – and all three are to be found in every authentic symbol.

The cosmic dimension derives from man's effort to read the sacred on the world or on some aspect of the world. It centres in a manifestation of the

16. Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, p. 10.

sacred in a particular fragment of the cosmos, where the particular loses its qualities of being such a particular in favour of becoming a matrix of symbolic meanings. This constitutes a hierophany. The particular becomes a focal point for a mass of significations and innumerable spoken symbols. The experience gives rise to speech before it gives rise to thought. This symbolic speech moves further and further away from this focal point towards the more historical and less cosmic, but also continuously returns to enrich its abstractions in the fertile ground of the archaic structures.

Ricoeur refuses to permit an opposition between this dimension of symbolism which is presented by the phenomenology of religion and that of dream production elucidated by depth psychology. Of particular importance are those dimensions which go beyond 'private archaeology' to some elaboration of the common representations of a culture. He insists 'To manifest the "sacred" on the "cosmos" and to manifest it in the "psyche" are the same thing.'[17]

'Cosmos and Psyche are the two poles of the same "expressivity"; I express myself in expressing the world; I explore my own sacrality in deciphering that of the world.'[18] These two modes of expression are complemented and brought together by a third modality, that of poetic imagination. Such poetic imagination must not be confused with simple imagery. To represent the real as in a portrait is an act of making present, but the representation remains dependent on that which it represents. The poetic symbol possesses a spontaneity and a presentness; it appears at the very moment of the emergence of language and retains its closeness to the original experience.

This remarkable convergence of religious symbolism, oneiric symbolism, and poetic symbolism appears to the phenomenologist to be open to eiditic analysis, the purpose of which is to arrive at the 'essence' of the symbol. Here we must follow Ricoeur in some detail.

A Symbols are signs in that they are expressions of speech which communicate some meaning. They include an intention of signifying.

B Signs are limited to a first or literal intentionality. Meaning is given in an intention that raises the sign above its natural context. Symbolic signs are given a second intentionality, and thus a second meaning.

C The literal meaning of the first intentionality is linked to the symbolic meaning of the second intentionality by an analogical bond. Analogy is in itself inconclusive reasoning. The analogical bond becomes possible only by living in the context of the first meaning in terms of which we project to the second level.

D The distinction between symbols and allegories can be grasped if it is seen that allegorical interpretation is in effect a hermeneutic enterprise that is seeking a translation. Symbols always precede hermeneutics.

E Symbols must be understood in the primitive sense of analogical meanings which have emerged spontaneously and possess immediate significance. Myths are a species of symbols developed in the form of narratives.

The phenomenological analysis of myth must elucidate the functions of myth

17. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

as well as the structures. Myths attempt to embrace mankind in an ideal history which provides an arena of meaning for existence. The universality of man projected by myth is enhanced by the movement of narration in the myth itself and this projects some orientation on the experience. Myth concerns the enigma of human experience. It has then an ontological bearing or function because it attempts a leap or a relation between the essential being of man and his historical existence.

It is this function of myth that seems to raise questions for philosophy, particularly a philosophy that retains as a central issue the being of man in the world. Under the aphorism 'The symbol gives rise to thought' Ricoeur indicates the direction in which he wishes to proceed in linking mythical or symbolic thought with philosophy. This is critical, as we said at the beginning, for modern man has arrived at this point in his history where myths must be understood as myths. There can be no return to the archaic and primitive use; and demythologization or allegorization provide no way out.

Symbols are not by their nature alien to philosophical discourse. They belong in the element of speech – speech about man in existence and his participation in being. This symbolic language always demands hermeneutics. The first original and primitive presentations of the symbols have been lost to modern man. We aim rather at a second level of recovery through criticism, that is, by interpretation. This takes us into the hermeneutic circle. We must believe in order to understand, and understand in order to believe. This hermeneutic circle is circumscribed by the prior understanding that is required in order to interpret but, nevertheless, by making explicit this prior understanding communication with the sacred is possible. For Ricoeur, being can still speak to modern man, not in the forms of precritical belief, but only on the level of a second immediacy of hermeneutics.

But what has this to do with philosophy? How can we get beyond the circle of hermeneutics? Ricoeur suggests that it be achieved by means of a 'wager.' That is, we are to follow the indications of symbolic thought. These symbols are in effect detectors of reality. Every symbol is in essence a hierophany – a manifestation of the bond between man and sacred. Philosophical reflection on the symbols should seek to clarify this 'situation of man' at the heart of being, to break down the enclosure of man in his consciousness of himself, and to situate the *cogito* in being and not vice versa. Such a philosophy proceeds from the fulness of language available about man in existence and in relationship to being. Myths fundamentally belong to this fulness of language.