

Boston University Symposium  
Read at 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday, March 29, 1978

Reality, Myth, Symbol

I believe that each of the three terms--reality, myth, symbol--gives rise to questions. I have no doubt that the questions that are raised are quite different. But I venture to treat all three because in my opinion the style or method of reaching solutions is, in each case, fundamentally the same.

Now let me state this a bit more fully. There arise problems about reality not merely because people make mistakes and even live their lives in error but more radically because they have lived in two worlds without adverting to the fact and grasping its implications. There is the world of immediacy of the infant. There also is the world of the adult, mediated by meaning and motivated by values. The transition from one to the other is a long process involving a succession of stages. We are familiar with the stages, say learning to talk, learning to read, learning to write, learning to be good, and so on. But that very familiarity is apt to dissemble the fact that the criteria employed in coming to know the world mediated by meaning and in coming to behave in the world motivated by values are quite novel when contrasted with the more spontaneous criteria that suffice for one's orienting oneself in the world of immediacy. Samuel Johnson's refutation of Berkeley's acosmic idealism by kicking a stone appealed to a criterion of the world of immediacy but has been thought inefficacious against an elaborate world mediated by meaning. At the same time Berkeley's principle, esse est percipi, being is being perceived, was an attempt to make the world of immediacy a world mediated by meaning. Hume's radical empiricism was

a radical use of the criteria of the world of immediacy to empty out the world mediated by meaning and motivated by values and so revert to the simpler world of immediacy. Kant and the absolute idealists rightly saw that the criteria of the world of immediacy were insufficient to ground a world mediated by meaning and motivated by values. Again, they were right in seeking the further criteria in the spontaneity of the subject. But the worlds they mediated by meaning are not the worlds of common sense, of science, or of history. So it is that I wish to suggest to your consideration that it is in the immanent criteria of the knowing subject that we may perhaps manage to discover why there are many opinions about reality and even which is probably the correct opinion.

Indeed, since I am not writing a detective story, let me say briefly what I fancy these immanent criteria to be. A principle may be defined as a first in an ordered set. So there are logical principles, that is, propositions that are first in a deductive process. Again, there are principles that are realities, for example, Aristotle defined a nature as an immanent principle of movement and rest. Now our ability to raise questions is an immanent principle of movement and rest: it is principle of movement as long as the inquiry continues; and it becomes a principle of rest when a satisfactory answer has been reached. Further, there are three distinct types of question. There are questions for intelligence asking what, why, how, what for. There are questions for reflection asking whether our answers to the previous type of question are true or false, certain or only probably. Finally, there are questions for deliberation, and deliberations are of two kinds: there are the deliberations of the egoist asking what's in it for me or for us; there are also the deliberations or moral people who inquire whether the proposed end is a value, whether

it is really and truly worth while.

Let us now turn to myth. For the rationalist it was simply the product of ignorance if not of waywardness. But a more benign view has been gaining ground in this century. Indeed Plato composed myths, insisting that they were not the truth but gave an inkling into the truth. Aristotle in a later letter confessed that as he grew older he became less a philosopher, a friend of wisdom, and more a friend of myths.

What is the justification of such views? I would suggest that since man's being is being-in-the-world, he cannot rise to his full stature until he knows the world. But there is much that is obscure about the world. Man easily enough raises his questions for intelligence, for reflection, for deliberation. But he can have hunches that he cannot formulate clearly and exactly, so he tells a story. Stories, as is being currently affirmed, are existential: they are true stories that reveal the life that really we are leading; and they are cover stories, they make out our lives to be somewhat better than in reality they are. So stories today, as earlier were myths, suffer from a basic ambiguity. They can bring to light what truly is human. But also they can propagate an apparently more pleasant view of human aspiration and human destiny.

So we are led from myth to symbols, for there, it would seem, lie the roots of the hunches that myths delineate. But I am not a professional depth psychologist, and so I can do no more than direct your attention to the writings of Ira Progoff, specifically to his Death and Rebirth of Modern Psychology, which reviews the positions of Freud, Adler, Jung, and Otto Rank, and assigns the laurels to Otto Rank who for long years h, posthum. was a disciple and collaborator of Freud's but ended with a posthumous work, Beyond Psychology, which contended that human destiny is much more

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than is dreamt of in the worlds of the depth psychologists. There followed Proff's Depth Psychology and Modern Man which stressed what Bergson would have named the elan vital, the formative power that underpins the evolution of atomic elements and compounds, of the genera and species of plant and animal life, of the spontaneous attractions and repulsions of human consciousness that, when followed, produce the charismatic leaders of social groups, the artists that catch and form the spirit of a progressive age, the scientists that chance upon the key paradigms that open new vistas upon the world process, the scholars that recapture past human achievement and reconstitute for our contemplation the ongoing march of human history, the saints and mystics that, like the statue of Buddha, place before our eyes the spirit of prayer and adoration, and, I would add, the Christ, the Son of God, whose story is to be read in the gospels and the significance of that story in the OT and the NT.

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To conclude this first section let me recapitulate. There arise questions about reality, about myth, about symbol. In each case the questions differ. None the less, I would suggest that in each case the style or method of solution is fundamentally the same. It appeals to what has come to be called intentionality analysis. It reduces conflicting views of reality to the very different types of intentionality employed by the infant, in in-fans that does not talk, and the adult that lives in a world mediated by meaning and motivated by values. It accounts for the oddity of the myth by arguing that being a man is a being-in-the-world, an in-der-Welt-sein, that man can rise to his full stature only through full knowledge of his world, that man does not possess that full knowledge and so makes use of the elan vital that, as it guides biological growth

and evolution, so too it takes the lead in human development and expresses its intimations through the stories it inspires. Symbols, finally, are a more elementary type of story: they are inner or outer events, or a combination of both, that intimate to us at once the kind of being that we are to be and the kind of world in which we become our true selves.

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So far I have been merely outlining my own views on reality, myth, and symbol. But an outline is not a proof, and I may be asked for proof. Unfortunately what proof there is is not deductive but inductive, and the induction is long and difficult. The best I can hope to do today is to attempt a Platonic deuteros plous, a second best, and tell something of the story by which I arrived at my views.

A first step occurred when I was a second year student of philosophy. I became convinced that universal concepts were grossly overrated, that what really counted was intelligence. At the time I thought myself a nominalist, but a few years later I got beyond that verdict on reading J. A. Stewart's Plato's Doctrine of Ideas who contended that for Plato an idea was something like the Cartesian formula for a circle. Obviously that formula,  $(x^2 + y^2) = r^2$ , is the product of an act of understanding. And I was to elaborate that point later at considerable length in my Verbum articles in Theological Studies later published by David Burrell at the University of Notre Dame Press under the title, Word and Idea in Aquinas.

A second and related source was Peter Hoenen, a Dutch professor of philosophy in Rome, who during the thirties was writing articles and

eventually brought out a book on the nature of geometrical knowledge. Already I was familiar with the recurrent lapses from logic in Euclid's Elements. But Hoenen was a former pupil of Lorentz of the Lorentz-Einstein transformation, and had a far wider range. The example that sticks with me is the Moebius strip. He explained how the strip was constructed, how it was to be cut, how unexpected was the result of the cutting, only to ask whether the result would always be the same when the same procedure was repeated. His answer was a development of the theory of abstraction: just as intellect abstracts universal terms from images, so too it abstracts the universal connection between the universal terms. It was an answer that fitted into the context of Aristotelian logic. But I had shifted somewhat from that context. I believed, not in the abstraction of universals, but in the understanding of particulars and, provided the particulars did not differ significantly, in the generalized formulation of that understanding.

I followed this up in the forties with two historical studies, the first concerned with Aquinas' views on willing, the second with his views on knowing. These labors put my thought in a medieval context. The further labor of transposing it to a contemporary context began when I was invited to give a course of Thought and Reality at the Thomas More Institute for Adult Education in Montreal. The Institute was founded at the end of the second world war in 1945. I lectured one evening a week for two hours. In November, forty-five were attending the course. At Easter time forty-one were still coming. Their interest and perseverance assured me that I had a book. Eventually in 1957 it appeared under the title, Insight: A Study of Human Understanding. Reprinted many times, it recently was issued in paperback by Harper and Row.

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While the book, Insight, had something to say on evolution and historical process, it did not tackle the problem of critical history. But with this issue I was confronted in its multinational form when I was assigned to a post at the Gregorian in Rome. When I had been a student there in the thirties, the big name in Christology was de Grandmaison and on the Trinity Jules Lebreton. Unfortunately when it became my job to present these doctrines in the fifties, de Grandmaison and Lebreton were regarded as apologists rather than historians. So I found myself with a twofold problem on my hands. I had to extend my theory of knowledge to include an account of critical history and I had then to adjust my ideas on theology so that critical historians could find themselves at home in contributing to theology. Finally, I managed to publish a book on Method in Theology in 1972, and it since has been translated and published in Italian in 1975, in Polish in 1976, in French in 1978.

More significantly, the book on method has already provided a basis for a distinct advance. In writing on Insight and on Method I had to develop a doctrine of objectivity that was relevant to a world mediated by meaning and motivated by values. My position was that objectivity was the fruit of authentic subjectivity, and authentic subjectivity was the result of raising and answering all relevant questions for intelligence, for reflection, and for deliberation. Further while man is capable of authenticity, he also is capable of unauthenticity. In so far as one is unauthentic, there is needed an about-turn, a conversion and, indeed, a threefold conversion: an intellectual conversion by which without reserves one enters the world mediated by meaning; a moral conversion by which one comes to live in a world motivated by values; and a religious conversion when one accepts God's gift of his love bestowed through the Holy Spirit.

The advance to which I wish to allude comes from Robert Doran of Marquette University. He affirms a fourth conversion. It occurs when we uncover within ourselves the working of our own psyche's, the elan vital, which according to Ira Progoff has two manifestations. There are the dynatypes and the cognitypes. The cognitypes are symbols. The dynatypes are the root of the life-styles to which we are attracted, in which we excel, with which we find ourselves most easily content. By the dynatypes our vital energies are programmed; by the cognitypes they are released. The spontaneity that has been observed in the humming-bird for the first time building a nest also has its counterpart in us. But in us that counterpart is complemented, transposed, extended by the symbols and stories that mediate between our vital energies and our intelligent, reasonable, responsible lives.

Now it is in the realm of symbols and stories, of what he terms the imaginal, that Prof. Doran finds a deficiency in my work. With me he would ask why? is that so? is it worth while? But to these three he would add a fourth. It is Heidegger's Befindlichkeit taken as the existential question, How do I feel? It is not just the question but also each one's intelligent answer, reasonable judgment, responsible acceptance. And on that response I can do no better than refer the reader to Prof. Doran's current writing.\*

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Bernard Lonergan

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\* Subject and Psyche: Ricoeur, Jung, and the Search for the Foundations, Washington D.C.; University Press of America, 1977.

"Psychic Conversion," The Thomist, 41 (April 1977) 200-236.

"Aesthetics and the Opposites," Thought, 52 (1977) 117-133.



"Subject, Psyche, and Theology's Foundations," The Journal of Religion, 57 (1977) 267-287.