

The Mythical Mind and its World – Husserl and Cassirer on Mythical Consciousness

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Introduction

Mythical consciousness could be treated as the childhood of human mind. At least Edmund Husserl definitely understood myth in this way. His contemporary, the leading figure of the Neo-Kantians of the age, Ernst Cassirer was more cautious about it: he was rather sceptical about hierarchical and stratificational approach of cultural formations and achievements; he tended to treat every cultural complex and system on the same level, in a quite egalitarian way. Despite the different accents and motifs of their interpretation of myth and mythical mind, there was an essential point, which they both shared: that the understanding and adequate explanation of mythical (archaic) mind in a way could shed light on all other forms of culture and human consciousness, and myth discloses (under the proper scientific investigation) something fundamental concerning the essence of human existence as such.

There are strong parallelisms, but also remarkable differences between the two authors. Husserl’s phenomenological stance implied the first person perspective as the ultimate point of orientation, and his method was essentially descriptive; the description of the phenomena which appear to consciousness (or to the ego). He approached the mythical consciousness finally through a dismantling-reconstructive process; in an archaeological manner he tried to dig down to such archaic layers of historical consciousness. In Cassirer we cannot speak about the dominance of the first person perspective. “Phenomenology” was also something essential to him; the last book of his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* had the title: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*. But he used this term fundamentally in the Hegelian sense; he meant the manner in which Hegel applied this conception in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹ For Cassirer phenomenology was the theory of cultural, spiritual and historical formations and productions. His point of view was rather that of the general stance of an intersubjective community.

¹ Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Three: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957: xiv. “In speaking of a phenomenology of knowledge I am using the word “phenomenology” not in its modern sense but with its fundamental signification as established and systematically grounded by Hegel. For Hegel, phenomenology became the basis of all philosophical knowledge, since he insisted that philosophical knowledge must encompass the totality of cultural forms and since in his view this totality can be made visible only in the transitions from one form to another”.

Both Husserl and Cassirer interpreted the mythical mind as a state of mind, which grasped the entire world (and man in it) as a coherent totality; to which belongs *a myth of origins*, which informs us concerning the emergence of this totality and its structure. But in Cassirer the role of *symbols* had a crucial, utmost importance in the explanation of human existence in general, and the mythical mind in particular. Man's essential, characteristic capacity, according to Cassirer, is to create symbols and articulate everything in symbolic forms. Man is – in his opinion – “animal symbolicum”, “symbol-making animal”.² In Cassirer these symbolic forms shaped and formed also experience itself; (just as in Hegel). For Husserl, symbols were also important – throughout his entire career³ – but symbols, in the end, were rather external means of communication, of documentation of thoughts and expressing them.

In Cassirer the *language* was the first and most fundamental symbolic layer. It is not by accident that the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is about language.⁴ It is the *conditio sine qua non* of every other – so to say: “higher order” – symbolic form; and – in a certain way – of specifically human existence as such. He uses the term “symbol” in another – exactly this “higher order” – meaning also; symbols, which are founded by linguistic signs (symbols); symbols which represent and expresses complex ideas and state of affairs (such as e.g. the dove is the symbol of peace, and the heart is the symbol of love, etc.). The motif of symbols and language is so strong in Cassirer, that we could even find a form of *linguistic relativism* in him (in a moderate form). It (the language in particular, and symbol in general) is the universal medium of every human being, activity and achievement.

In this presentation what is especially interesting for us is Husserl's and Cassirer's account of mythical existence, on the basis of such methodological foundations, that we have just referred to. Yet we shall make not only a comparative analysis of them (which would be first and foremost of philological, historical interest – that is also something very important), but we would like to contribute to the actual, contemporary scientific researches concerning mythical thought and experiences, on the basis of such investigations (on Husserl and Cassirer).

² Cassirer: *Was ist der Mensch*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960: 40.

³ Cf. Husserl: „Zur Logik der Zeichen (Semiotik)” (1890). In *Hua* [= Husserliana] 12: 340-373. Uö.: „Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem”. In *Hua* 6: 365-386. (1936).

⁴ See: Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume First: Language*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

I. Husserl: The Myth as source of identity and explanation of the world

In Husserl's interpretation, myth is basically the childhood condition of human mind and history, (cf. Hua 29: 38-46). It has essentially two functions: first, it offers a narrative which creates the collective, culturally shaped identity of a community, second: this narrative on the other hand explains the origins of the order of the world, for the particular community in question. Though the identity-forming power of mythical narratives is also present on the horizon of Husserl, what is especially important for him is the cognitive function of myth. Myth is a totalizing activity of human mind, through which it grasps the world as a coherent totality, as cosmos; with himself (or herself), having a fix place in it. But it is also something which – regarding its particular form – strongly bound to the life-world and to its concrete praxis. Myth, which serves as the preliminary foundation and form of scientific attitude, has the historical development of its own. According to Husserl, it also gets more and more universal, abstract and – in its own way – also rational.

For Husserl, what is first of all important, is the reconstruction of the process from local myth to rational and universal science. As a point of departure, he shares the opinion of Cassirer, that myth is a way of thought without any rationality, but has the logic of its own. Its logic is bound to the terrain, in which the proper people or tribe is living. It is a "territorial myth", (Hua 29: 43). Because myth also defines and fundamentally determines the cultural identity of a group or community, the myth of another, "alien" group, the "foreign myth" ("der fremde Mythos") could appear as a threat to the cultural identity of the first; and this opposition, this tension could generate conflicts between cultural, historical communities, (op. cit. 42).⁵ But the relationship between two culturally different groups need not be necessarily hostile; it could also take the form of a relatively peaceful *communication*. Through communication between separate groups, or through peculiar reflections within the very same group, the limits of a myth could be widened, the local, tribal myth could be made more rational, more universal. According to Husserl, every community, every nation has a myth of world (Weltmythos), which refers back to the specific myth, territorial myth of this people, (op. cit. 43). This myth of world, with the cultural progress of the history, gets more and more rational, in certain elements and in its general connections and patterns. The myth slowly takes the form of a *religion*, with several rational motifs in it; which lays the foundation of theology, as a scientific discipline,

⁵ See also: Hua 39: 167-170.

and which is – though bound to the fundamental narrative of certain sacred texts – rational within its specific limits.⁶

Myth and religion claims a total description and explanation of the present order of the world. Science emerges as a special form of *epokhe*: namely it brackets the contents and formations of traditional myths and religious praxis (and theory); and it tries to explain the world (and man's place in it) solely from itself. But the historical foundation (at least in the sense of “intentional history”) of such a scientific attitude is a more rational form of religious attitude.

II. Cassirer: mythical language and consciousness

Husserl's considerations on myth and mythology are in most cases all too general; based on his overall philosophical stance. He knew quite a lot about the mythology and religion of peoples around the world, but he rarely went into details in his analyses concerning this topic.⁷ Cassirer, on the other hand, had a wide-range, astonishingly profound knowledge of the theme; and he performed very detailed, nuanced investigations about this question. In the centre of his trains of thought – as mentioned above – was the motif of symbol; and particularly the linguistic determination of thought and world-view was of utmost importance for him. But he tried to show how does it (this symbolic and specially, linguistic determination) work in praxis, concretely, in the case of different cultural communities and mythologies.

Cassirer's account on mythical mind was much more “egalitarian”, than Husserl's. He did not emphasize the superiority of rational, scientific cognition and knowledge in contrast to myth, as Husserl did, but tended to analyse myth and mythical consciousness, which has its own peculiar characteristic, special importance and logic. What is central to mythic world-view and attitude according to Cassirer, its *affective and emotional character*.⁸ The universal coherence and totality of mythical world-view is created – in Cassirer's interpretation – through certain emotions. A further decisive feature of mythical stance is that there are no strict and

⁶ To this see: Anthony Steinbock: *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*. Evanston: Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995: (especially): 213, 243-244.

⁷ He even wrote a letter on this topic to the French sociologist, cultural anthropologist, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. “Husserl speaks of the notion of an ‘over-nationality’ or ‘supranationality’ also in his March 1935 letter to Levy-Bruhl, written shortly before the ‘Vienna Lecture’, where he speaks of each national and supranational grouping having its own representation of the world”. Dermot Moran: *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 47, (footnote: 9).

⁸ Cassirer: *Was ist der Mensch*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960: 98-99, 105.

rigid borders between external and internal, really existing and purely imaginative. Subject and object exist in an intimate, barely differentiated *fusion*, in a strong intertwining.⁹

The mythical world-view, in Cassirer's opinion, does not know such abstract unities as the *ideal meanings*, which we can find on more formal, more abstract levels of human thought, such as the theoretical, scientific thinking. The myth is always very concrete, and it explains the world in the network, nexus of concrete relationships, between worldly things. Everything is fundamentally different than what we meet in modern world and thought. It – the myth – applies an essentially different notion of *causality*.¹⁰ Causal connections are governed by symbolic laws and by divine will. There is nothing without a cause. Mythical thought seeks a cause everywhere; a thing or an event without a cause is nonsense to it.

The concrete character of myth could be observed on *typical mythical topographies*, on the division of space by mythical thinking. Every direction and region of space possesses a very concrete meaning, it is a very concrete location with its own inhabitants and laws. "Up" and "down": "heaven" is the realm of superior, divine beings, "hell" is something inferior, infernal, chaotic, demon-like creatures. "Left" and "right": "right" is a "cosmic" direction, something which refers to "cosmic", "creative" tendencies, structures and qualities; while "left" is the source of "destructive", "dark", chaotic forces. "East" is the origin of light, life and joy, it is the dwell-place of positive, heavenly creatures and peoples. "West" is the realm of darkness and underworld; with creatures who are characteristic to such a realm.¹¹

According to Cassirer, the fundamental difference between myth and religion, is that the latter is much more abstract and rational than the former. In religion – Cassirer says – external and internal gets separated. Divine forces become more abstract than e.g. in mythical animism and totemism. Furthermore, which is unknown to mythical thought: *abstract ideals* appear in (and for) religious attitude. What will be extremely important in religious attitude is *the ethical or moral function*. In Cassirer's view, with the differentiation of symbolic forms, and with the rapid development of sciences, *religion will be reduced to its ethical function*.¹²

Conclusion

In this presentation we gave an overview of Husserl's and Cassirer's account of mythical thought. My opinion is, that it could be a really fruitful approach even in contemporary research

⁹ Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Three: The Mythic Thought*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955: 48, 51.

¹⁰ See: op.cit. pp. 53-63.

¹¹ Op. cit. pp. 26, 121f.

¹² Cassirer: *Was ist der Mensch*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960: 121.

and analysis of mythical thought and world-view, if we combine these two approaches, that we have sketched above. For Husserl, what is first and foremost important, from the methodological point of view: the first person perspective description; and in regard of the content of mythical attitude: its inherent tendency to grasp the world as a meaningful (yet concretely meaningful) totality and to create cultural identity of a certain community. Myth performs both of these functions in a narrative way, in the form of stories or a storyline.

For Cassirer, what is essential, the role of symbols in mythical world-view and the linguistic determined character of thought in general, and mythical thought in particular. He highlighted the concrete connections and meanings in the mythical stance, and analysed in long details how do they look like in the case of different myths. Cassirer – in contrast to Husserl – had a rather external approach of myth; and a very rich comparative analysis of different mythical formations.

In my opinion we could base Cassirer's nuanced symbolic, linguistic and psychologic descriptions of myth on Husserl's apriori, intentional, first person view approach; and this combined method could be very useful even today in understanding the structure and concrete functioning of mythical mind. We can see, reading the investigations of these two authors concerning myth and mythology, how essential it is to man, to give meaning to the things in the world, and to his or her own existence.