

Myth and the Impossible

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for the upcoming discussion of myth
February 22, 2013

Reading “The Morphology and Function of Myths” chapter of Mircea Eliade’s 1958 classic *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, took me back to the several years I spent researching the Arrernte of Central Australia. My research wound up including an examination of the way Eliade constructed his classic example “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole.” This Aboriginal example was used frequently by Eliade as his principal and often only example for illustrating and establishing his understanding of religion, a theory of religion that prevailed through the initial decades of the development of the academic study of religion beginning in the 1960s. Indeed, my study of the Arrernte was in part a family affair, a son eagerly attempting to avoid the murder of his beloved but warring fathers.¹

My first impressions during this most recent reading were largely critical and oddly disappointing. As I read Eliade’s many references to religious cultures around the globe, I found myself deeply distrusting his use of these materials because they echoed the Australian example I know so well. In excruciating detail I documented how Eliade drew selectively and creatively on Australian source materials to almost totally concoct a “primary” example from a “primal people” to support the view of religion he wished to establish. I documented that his presentation of the Aboriginals was in almost total opposition to what his sources would support and to what can otherwise be independently documented as more closely and reliably ethnographically accurate; that is, if such a thing is even possible.² I suspect that his

¹ Both Eliade and Jonathan Smith were my teachers.

² Of course, there is much to be said for this impossibility and a looping back here from the conclusions of this paper would suggest, as I have considered elsewhere, that the creative and constructive role of scholars is perhaps greater than we have either admitted or have been willing to or had the courage to embrace. In important senses we create and discover our ethnographic others as we create and discover our academic selves; I rather like this looping interdependence. Yet, we absolutely must bear responsibility for accuracy, as difficult as it is, in our study of actual others; not the least of reasons is that, no matter how insignificant our poor scholarship often is, it nonetheless impacts these actual peoples, present past future. In *Storytracking* I wound up presenting the Arrernte as a hyphen conjoined reality to each of the major ethnographers who had studied them because I found that the perspectives of each ethnographer were so entwined with the ethnography as to make it impossible to distill the people from each ethnographer’s distinctive interests and perspectives. Notably, Geza Roheim, the neo-Freudian scholar who was most sensitive to these concerns and attempted to establish a field of psychoanalytic anthropology, was ironically the only scholar whose writings have been almost

extensive use of examples in this essay on myth is of the same moth-eaten holy cloth.

My next general impressions while reading swirled around Eliade's understanding of myth. Having gone long without thinking about his views, once seemingly so natural to so many, I found them upsettingly disappointing and wondered at my own straying from the master. I think Eliade's view of myth is, at this point a half century later, an easy target for prompt dismissal. The language of his discussion of myth seems dated and, indeed, I'm not so sure that many these days think much about myth in anything like the ways Eliade did. Still, eager to respect my elder, as I reflected further on his view of myth, on the presumptions behind his discussion of myth, and on the issues and data that are considered relevant to his study of myth, I am not so sure that things have actually evolved much in some crucial ways these last fifty years.

I want to comment a bit on the continuity of contemporary understandings of religion and the academic study of religion with Eliade's mid-twentieth century model; perhaps there remains too great a similarity. Then I want to sketch, a prolegomenon really, an alternative.

Let me use the term "efferent" to identify key characteristics of Eliade's understanding of myth (and by implication also religion). Myth, for Eliade, is archetypal, a "record" of the actions of the gods *in illo tempore*, not of this time or space, a justification for the way things are (and thus the truth). Eliade seems uninterested in the origin of myths, though he sees myth as always cosmogonic, as of the origin. Myth, as narrative, seemingly comes along as a god's handbook or a news report of the originating events. Eliade, as has often been pointed out, has a decided disdain for history understanding myth as functioning to expunge the impacts of history though the eternal return to mythic times through the repetition of rituals that reconstitute the world of mythic origination, the pure or religious time and place. Thus, it is not particularly surprising that he has no interest in the historical origination of myth or in the history of the development of myth or in how the application of myth feeds back into the evolution of traditions of mythology. It is no surprise that he found Australian Aboriginals so important to his persuasive presentation of religion.³ He can speak of the degradation of myth, but he cannot

totally ignored because of a supposed inappropriate skewing (because he was a neo-Freudian), yet my readings of his work have found them among the most important in many respects including that Roheim was very clear about what he was adding to his ethnographic records.

³ Remarkably Eliade's *Australian Religions* (1973, originally published as a series in *History of Religions*) is among the singular books on aboriginal religions, yet Eliade never went to Australia.

speak of the evolution and creative emergence of myth over time. Myth simply is; something always already there.⁴

In one key passage, seems almost like a slip really, Eliade offers a view of myth surprisingly contemporary to us; one that even Francis Crick would have likely endorsed. Eliade writes, “myth is an autonomous act of creation by the mind. It is through that act of creation that revelation is brought about—not through the things or events it makes use of.” (p. 426) Eliade aligns himself here with those today that consider the brain and central nervous system, alternately the mind, as the sole originator. In this leaked hint of Eliade’s understanding of the origination of myth, he clearly holds that perception, experience, the senses, and the environment play but a secondary role to myth. These comments come in the context of his discussion of vegetation mythology and his following sentence, assures us that this efferent pattern is indeed intended. He writes, “The drama of the death and resurrection of vegetation is revealed by the myth of Tammuz, rather than the other way about.” (p. 426) Were Eliade around today (he died in 1986) he’d land in the midst of some rather fascinating debates at the core of cognitive science, neuroscience, and phenomenology; well, of course, he himself wouldn’t because such contemporary discourse is Mars-alien to his style.

Given Eliade’s sense of the primacy of myth, then the functions of myth follow. Myth is the model for human action. Myth is the means that guides perception and makes meaningful what is perceived, what is experienced with the senses. Without myth, sensory experience, indeed the environment, would simply be without significance. I believe Eliade meant this profoundly. Myth is the paradigm for perfection. Myth is the explanation and grounding for what is truth (often by the odd logic of tautology). Myth is the explanation and instructions for ritual. Ritual functions under the direction of myth. One needn’t even study rituals directly since they are simply bringing about the meanings and forces of myth. Even in the peculiar paradoxes that Eliade acknowledges are fundamental to myth, myth functions largely to establish unity and perfection (the center and the origin are coincident with unity and perfection), resolving the oddities that come with creation such as separation and diversity. Myth seems to heal and to resolve what it appears Eliade finds rather embarrassing about the very acts of creation: division, separation, time, history, sex, knowledge, will, ... hmm kind of familiar.

⁴ I rather like this phrase “always already there.” Think I got it from Erin Manning or Brian Massumi. Yet, it is most valuable when referring to a naturalist base for our studies, which I think is promising and I am pursuing related to my study of perception, and the phrase suggests an appropriate procession of our considerations from an understanding of the neurobiology that has come to us, and that is thus “always already there,” through the process of evolution. Dewey is surely a forerunner in this perspective.

Without developing Eliade's understanding of myth further, at surely a cost to adequacy and responsibility, I hasten on to my point that his understanding of myth is through and through efferent by which I mean that the master plan of myth, which he equates with the mind and with the gods, has primacy and overwhelmingly so over perception, experience, history, environment, human plasticity and creativity.⁵ Even when Eliade refers to "experience," which he does now and then, he invariably refers to something like discovering meaning in an intellectual or mental sense of the term under the influence of myth. For example, when Eliade says that one experiences perfection in the paradoxical character of deities, he means that by exemplifying the unity and singularity of a single being with opposing traits such as male/female, creator/destroyer, benevolent/vengeful, the deity demonstrates the perfection that is beyond division or opposition. The assumption is that any sensory human experience related to paradox would simply be a meaningless experience outside of the higher order, a mental order, a divine order, given it by myth.

Certainly while much has changed in the half century since Eliade's publication of *Patterns*, I'm not so sure we have made much progress either in the academy or in the academic study of religion beyond this strongly efferent oriented approach to the study of religion that echoes the fundamental ways we understand such religious phenomena as myth and ritual; well even our general understanding of religion; even our understanding of the academic. Although I am not going to consider Roland Barthes notion of myth (as assigned for this discussion) and although it was contemporary with Eliade's, it too is an understanding of myth firmly set in semiology, in the deciphering of meaning, in signification. I do not equate this efferent oriented approach with "textual" approaches or to the prevalent methods of translation and interpretation. I think it a blunder to contrast text-based and body-based studies;⁶ it simply doesn't divide up that way and to do so is to fail before we even start.

A more promising possibility for revamping the way we understand religion is by comprehending that our methods, like neurobiological processes and certain forms of self-adjusting networks, exist as dynamic efferent-afferent looping structuralities. Such an approach—one that is focused on process, perception, experience, plasticity, dynamics, self-movement, proprioception—can be taken whatever one's basic sources or objects of study. Perception and experience must be recognized as

⁵ That Eliade allows myth to be a creation of mind reveals a difficult, and to his view I think damning, issue if one understands "mind" to refer to human creativity. I would rather guess that Eliade likely intended something more like spirit or universal mind. To me, this mind origination of myth is the most fascinating issue raised by this current reading of his discussion of myth.

⁶ This opposition of text and body is common these days as evident by Manuel Vasquez in both his book and his recent CU visit.

essential even to language acts and intellectual/mental constructs; they are essentially interdependent.

To exemplify an aspect of what I am suggesting I look to one of the simple givens of myth, its impossibles, and the various forms that such impossibles take in myths that Eliade considers extensively. What I refer to here, which Eliade does not, is the emotional reaction that accompanies this defining sensory marker of myth; impossibles; or I suppose I might better use a longer conjunctive term “impossibles-possibles.” Myths are about gods and spirits and monsters and dragons that we don’t see, that we don’t live among. Myths are set at times and in places that aren’t of our experience and that we can’t simply journey to under the direction of our local travel agent. The distinctive powers and behaviors of the characters in myth are outrageous and impossible for us, yet there they are. These impossibles are, I suggest, the main attraction of myth and one of its principal markers.⁷

I can’t see any alternative to understanding myth, a language-based form, other than as a human creation, a genre of oral and sometimes literary⁸ tradition with its own history and with given examples, that is specific myths, having their own histories, their own traditions. Therefore, these “impossibles” must occur so commonly as characteristic of this genre only because the human myth-makers and myth-modifying-tellers constructed them that way; I can’t imagine an alternative. Frankly, I think for most who have told and heard myths these “impossibles” are fundamental to their “fun” and abiding “interest.” The unexpected and the unexplainable are what delight. What I think academics, and I think they inherit this from an oddly Christian-beholden heritage, have sorrowfully misunderstood is that the myth-makers, myth-tellers, delight in creating and embracing precisely the construction and elaboration of impossibles that defy resolution. Academic students of religion, devoted to the same efferent intellectual sedentary male ecclesiastical power based model so central to Christian intellectual/church history,⁹ have devoted their total attention to making sense of, giving reasoned meaning to in an attempt to resolve those attributes of myth that their human

⁷ While I am not dealing here with Barthes’ piece, I do note that he doesn’t even recognize the “impossibles” character of the phrase he so often repeats, “my name is lion.” A great many cultures use as a marker of myth “the time when the animals talked” and they also often acknowledge as of special religious status those humans that can “speak to the animals.” To have an animal speak, “my name is lion,” is to invoke an irresolvable impossible: animals don’t speak, this animal speaks. Barthes doesn’t even notice and frankly this relates to why I don’t find his work of sufficient interest to spend much time on.

⁸ Walter Ong has the greatest insight on this matter in his *Orality and Literacy*.

⁹ Doubtless many of you better informed about Christian history than I am, which I suppose is all of you, will surely want to kick my ass for this broad generalization; have at it. Should I include all the polite and appropriate academic qualifications, I’d lose the emotional point of it.

creators so delightedly interwove into them.¹⁰ No wonder that Christianity has had such a difficult time trying to even determine if it has myth and what to do with it if it does. Myth, in the Christian context tends to be an embarrassing and shockingly primitive (irrational), phenomenon.

To return to the “impossibles”—what Eliade considers in such terms as “paradox,” “*coincidence oppositorum*,” and “one and the many”—I want to explore the implications of embracing them without seeking resolution or explanation or even signification or even meaning in the big M form of the term,¹¹ and appreciating how impossibles are experienced; experienced more in the sense of perception rather than in the sense of intellectual explanation. An impossible is basically to proclaim identity of what is clearly known not to be identical; a conjunction of “is” and “is not,” a categorical anomaly taken for granted. To identify a figure as both male and female, as benevolent and malicious, as god and human, to say that death is life, to say that rich is poor, to say bread is body, and so on, these are all impossibles. Linguistics has long held that we understand words as much in terms of what they are not, what they exclude, as what they are, what they include or reference. I like to refer to this structurality of impossibles as the interplay of a twoness and a oneness. I suggest again, as I did above, that this conjunction constituting impossibles is one of the principal markers of myth, yet I think it ubiquitous actually to human perception and to human distinctiveness.¹² Myth presents impossibles in a narrative

¹⁰ This comment is placed in a footnote only because I don’t have the time to work it into the above narrative in anything like a graceful way, but what students of religion seem to fail at miserably (my view of course) is that religious folk simply love to recite and listen to these stories; they can’t hear them often enough and it ain’t, as Barthes seems to imply if I understand him at all, that the overplus of myth, its repetition and endless redundancy, is to make it finally possible for the auditors to “get” the message (suggesting inherent stupidity perhaps), but because it is fun and entertaining and delightful and poetic and also because for myth-tellers and myth-listeners it is “our story;” this story is “our story!” Maybe I should invert this narrative device and make this footnote the main text of this essay with all the rest a footnote to it; that could be fun too.

¹¹ There is, I believe, a major difference between something that is meaningful, that is full and overflowing with meanings, and meaning in this big M sense of “the meaning” which is always reductive and, to me, dismissive and disappointing.

¹² Applying the efferent/afferent looping structurality at every concern, I find myself increasingly interested in both the sameness of humans among all animate organisms (because we are all movers and proprioceptors) as well as in what distinguishes us humans among our brother and sister animate organisms. The first arc of the loop places us in the fellowship of enormous diversity while the second arc moves in the direction of establishing a “naturalist philosophical” basis for cultural/religious comparative studies that must be grounded on some common neurobiology. Importantly, as a looping structurality, this approach to study is not

style with particular and distinctive traditions of conventions. Yet, impossibles also are the core structurality of play, of metaphor, of dancing, of seduction, of art, of language, and so forth with so many things human. Metaphor, for example, which many argue¹³ is the underlying experiential basis for all conception, is commonly described as “understanding one thing in terms of another thing which it is not.” Metaphor then, more common than common, is the equation of two things that we know full well are distinctly not the same. Myth uses the same strategy. In all of these forms, we declare in all seriousness that something is what, in the simplest and most elemental terms, we know it is not.

I recall that in my Chicago days there was the constant embarrassment when talking of myth, which we did constantly and pronouncing it in that special aspirating way Charles Long was able to do, to be sure to distinguish it when talking among non-academic friends from that annoying quotidian usage they persisted in holding that myth is something that we all think is one way (we often say true) but is actually not (we often say false). Now, some decades later, I think that this quotidian understanding of the term myth is likely an outgrowth of the way academics and Christians have tended to approach “impossibles” and that is to resolve them or to “bust” them or to expose them as myths. Even the quotidian understanding of myth juxtaposes and thereby embraces the true and the false. Surely we must see that, far more fun than being set straight by having a myth busted, is to continue to hold the “impossibles” simply because we get something out of doing so; the delight, the joy, of holding two opposing things together as identities knowing they are not. Hooah!

Now, let me do a bit more of a description of what constitutes an impossible, particularly understood as a twoness that is also always a oneness. Any twoness requires distinction and difference. There is the one of the two and there is the other of the two. Even if they are identical in some way, they cannot be co-present. Twoness necessitates a separateness, a distance, a gap, a synaptic gap in some sense while this distance doesn't at all have to be physical or temporal or even have dimension. Oneness cannot tolerate any gap, any distinction, any non-coincidence, any differentiation. The conjunction of twoness with oneness holding both forever present engenders a need, an urge, an incipience, a desire toward action, a longing for resolution, a reaching toward connection. This desire is a virtual in that it is an incipient quality or tendency; it precedes and anticipates agency, yet cannot fully manifest (to do so would collapse the structurality). It can be described as a reaching or a touching or a groping or, in Erin Manning's term, a “preacceleration;” a desire to cross a virtual distance (what Merleau-Ponty would likely have called “pure depth” or “flesh” or “chiasm”). And pure depth is, he effectively demonstrated,

directed to some end, but rather to the constantly creative oscillating movement that is satisfying.

¹³ See in particular George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's many works on metaphor, but also Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling* (2003).

the grounding of perception, one based in movement, and surprisingly boldly he understood this structurality ontologically as “the ultimate reality.” Developing on Merleau-Ponty, Renaud Barbaras described living movement in the very terms of desire and distance (see Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*, 2005). Living movement is not only primary to perception, but perception simply doesn’t occur without movement; dramatically it is shown in lab experiments that vision in kittens does not develop without their experience of proprioceptive self-movement.

So, looping quickly back lest we lose track of where I am coming from, the impossibles constitute the structurality that underlies the basis of perception itself. Merleau-Ponty understood perception in quite similar terms to the impossibles, invoking such images as chiasm, both a crossing place and a gap where identity and distinction are mutually assured. He also discussed perception in such useful terms as flesh, reversibility (especially “incomplete reversibility”), dehiscence. For Merleau-Ponty percipient and perceptible are both the same (one) and also distinct (two), self and other. For him perception arises, as do animate beings, in the chiasm of a twoness that is always also a oneness. Barbaras developed this in terms of living movement. In my studies of perception I have come to understand living or self-movement and touching (understood in the complexity of both exteroception and proprioceptive inner touch or coenaesthesia; another twoness that is one, a reversibility) to be so related and intertwined as to be two ways of describing the same dynamic.

So back to myth and the impossibles. What I suggest is that the power of myth is in the movement/touching engendered in the embracing of the dynamic of the twoness that is always also a oneness, rather than in some resolution of the impossibles into some possible or likely which is invariably accomplished by overpowering the efferent/afferent loop with an efferent proclamation that posits some turkey-bacon¹⁴ style explanation for something being what we all know full well it isn’t. If you survived that sentence, then congratulations.

It is my sense that the myth-makers and the myth-players delighted in the impossibles, not to resolve them, but rather to be “moved” and “touched” by them. Ah, and this shades us into another aspect of these impossibles, the emotional/feeling aspect of them. From the chiasm of the impossibles, from the yawning yet ever so tantalizing gap, arises emotion and feeling; poignancy and pain, longing and love; yes, lust too. Just think about that quintessentially Christian term “love” for a moment. In whatever of its forms, love can mean little outside the poignancy of the conjunction of the two—implying separation and distance and

¹⁴ This term is inspired by the Christian theological efforts to explain the presence of the body of Christ in the host of the Eucharist in the terms that hold that while it may look and taste and smell and feel like bread, it is really really the true body of Christ; turkey bacon.

longing and loneliness and lust—and the one, the desire, the urge, the need to be one rather than two. The immenseness of the feeling associated with love is that the connection, the unity, is always in some sense unfulfilled; the twoness always persists. Love is simply lost in total singularity or identity or unity. Love then is an emotion of a twoness that is always also a oneness.¹⁵

What is so remarkable about inner touch, proprioception, living movement, self-movement, that is the very quality of the experience of “impossibles,” is that these are experienced as a feeling kind of knowing. We know things based on moving because of the accompanying feeling of moving. We actually feel the self-moving rather than the backfilled task accomplished by an act of movement. Myths move us at our core; myths evoke our vitality, our self-moving feeling kind of knowing. Our stories, our own stories (especially those stories so richly laden with impossibles that we call them myths), move us, affect us so profoundly, unlike the stories of others that we might occasionally encounter, because in the familiar tellings and hearings, in the retellings and rehearings, in the repetitions and recitations where telling and hearing become inseparable, in the enactments of these story tellings/hearings that are also actings and gesturings and dancings and ritualings and socializings and mournings and celebratings and commemoratings, in the richly synesthetic experiences drenched with smells and tastes and sounds and sensations that fill our lives, in all these ways and so many more our stories become implanted deeply in muscle and ligament and nerve as the rhythms and flows and movements of our gestures and postures and feelings that make us who we are.

¹⁵ Another quick and obvious example of the most quotidian variety is the attraction we have to riddles. We delight in riddles not to resolve them like problems so that we might move on, but because of the duplicity and misdirection that always forces us to find ourselves delightfully imposing impossible frames on one another. Jokes work in a similar way. And on and on and on