



Ontological and Epistemological Function of Mythical-Religious Consciousness in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer and Mircea Eliade

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the concept of mythical-religious consciousness and present its ontological and epistemological significance through the meaning-giving aspect of myth and the category of the sacred as demonstrated by Ernst Cassirer and Mircea Eliade. Regardless of the significant differences in the understanding of myth and religion of both thinkers, we shall try to present the common ground, which we believe they have shared within the bounds of their anti-reductionist and anti-Cartesian attitudes towards the subject of myth. We shall supplement this perspective with the hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (and others) to make this more coherent within the broader field of anthropology. In doing so, we hope to establish a synthetic perspective for such study, rather than relying on analysis and criticism alone. As such, this will be a trans-disciplinary study of literary sources on the intersections of ontology, epistemology, linguistics, psychology, sociology and religious studies, which exposes itself for a critique of oversimplification from all the disciplines listed. Finally, we shall also attempt to make this study more relevant by reference to the ongoing research in 4E cognition.

Keywords: ontology, epistemology, cognition, meaning-giving, myth, world-building, sacred, symbol, lived-experience.

Słowa kluczowe: ontologia, epistemologia, poznanie, nadawanie znaczeń, mit, świętość, symbol, żywe doświadczenie

The Perspective

First, let us establish the perspective from which we shall look at the subject matter of mythical-religious consciousness, by a brief presentation of the profiles of the two protagonists and their common research.

Both Ernst Cassirer and Mircea Eliade were two very different thinkers, who had no direct contact with each other's works.¹ They both were coming from different traditions, having different backgrounds and initial fields of study; thus, the choice of those two to present a shared understanding is not obvious. However, it is puzzling that many points they've claimed independently on the problem of myth and religion are held by both, especially in their relation to ontology and cognition.

Cassirer initially had a great interest in the philosophy of science, physics and Einstein's theory of relativity and was a prominent representative of the Marburg School, situating himself within the neo-Kantian tradition. His interest in the philosophy of culture (including the theory of religion and myth) could be attributed to a rather late stage of his academic career and to certain extent can be regarded as the effect of his close and rather unexpected contact with *Bibliothek Warburg*: a great and very much unique collection of classical and pre-classical works on art and ethnography which, according to its founder Aby Warburg, were dedicated to the "afterlife of antiquity" and its distant echoes in the present.

Eliade was a child prodigy, starting his scholarly path very early on, with his first interest in literature and then Indology and Sanskrit, which he went on to study in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). He had fluent command of five languages (Romanian, French, German, Italian, and English) and a reading knowledge of three others (Hebrew, Persian, and Sanskrit). Eventually, he became a world-renowned religious scholar and wrote the *Encyclopaedia of Religion* in 12 volumes in the '80s as a professor at Divinity School, University of Chicago. However, a temporary affiliation with Romanian fascist organization (*Iron Guard*) in his early years cast a shadow on his achievements.²

While Cassirer was building his anthropological theory in regard to Kantian *a priori* categories of cognition, elementary "facts of culture" (which to him was the sheer intensity of belief, that had to be simply acknowledged by philosophy and science) and developing a functional hypothesis around each symbolic form such as religion, myth or language, Eliade was investigating the *phenomenology* of religious experience of the believer, more in a sense of Rudolf Otto's understanding and not that of Edmund Husserl (although, due to its existential orientation, somehow close to the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, Husserl's disciple). While both Cassirer and Eliade were investigating the research outcomes and reports from the broad spectrum of anthropological fieldwork (mostly in the first half of the 20th century), they were

¹ Cassirer died in 1945 before the most prominent Eliade's works appeared, while Eliade, 33 years older than Cassirer, never referred – for whatever reason – to the German philosopher either.

² Eliade sympathised with the "Iron Guard" – a Romanian Nazi organization – in his early years, although his antisemitic views are debated, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mircea-eliade-and-anti-semitism-an-exchange/> [access: 11.09.2023].

focusing on different aspects of mythical-religious phenomena with regard to the theory of man, which they had constructed for the sake of their own philosophical anthropologies: Cassirer rather on their function and symbolic, mediated character for the consciousness of *animal symbolicum*, Eliade on sacral aura, profound meaning and the inner, often inherently psychological experience of *homo religiosus*.³

However, both Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic (religious and areligious) forms and Eliade's phenomenology of religion share the same non-reductionist approach to religion and meet on the common ground of the primacy of mytho-religious behaviour and its unique character (as well as an anti-Cartesian approach to cognition). For both thinkers, this original behaviour plays a leading part in the formation of man's basic psychology and his first coherent cosmological worldview, both collectively and individually, while leading to advanced ontology and cognitive progress.⁴ Similarly, they both go back far beyond the elaborated, theological concepts of major religions and their dogmas into very basic and universal acts of the believer: worship, sacrifice (also understood as asceticism) and ritual repetition, which are seen as a *religious* and factual activities that should be properly understood in their own light.

This shared non-reductionist approach to myth and religion – in which both concepts retain their own, constitutive, specific character – is the perspective we shall adopt in presenting the concept of mythological-religious consciousness and its role in primary ontology and cognition, while also trying to relate it to some of the contemporary perspectives on myth and religion in regard to ontology and cognition.

What is Mythical-Religious Consciousness?

First of all, we have to ask what is “mythical-religious consciousness” and how is it related to the concept of myth? We can find the term “mythical-religious consciousness” (thereinafter MRC) in 2nd volume of the opus magnum of Cassirer – *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* – subtitled *Mythical Thinking* and published in 1925.⁵

³ While Eliade views man as essentially *homo religiosus*, contrasting it with modern man, who can only be regarded as such insofar as he tries to refute the legacy of his ancestors, to Cassirer man is more of an *animal symbolicum* that comprises of numerous parallel aspects of which religion is only one. Even though he considers science as the highest form of a symbolic system that is most distinctive to humans (next to art and history), he nonetheless considers not only religion, but also myth as well their rightful place in human culture.

⁴ Eliade uses the strict dialectic of the archaic man–modern man, where the former is essentially *homo religiosus*, while the latter is essentially areligious. This dialectic, however, also points to the direction of historical development from theism to atheism, but where western religion, even in its shattered form, still drives the thinking of modern man unconsciously under cosmic (natural) symbols, archetypes and rituals. Cassirer also puts religion as one of the main driving forces before science, history and art, but merges it with myth and to some extent magic. For him, there is no religion without mythical upbringing, and although religion is trying to clear itself from magic, its mythical elements remain important. Here, the mythical component within religious activity has a privileged role in the creation of meaning, while religion is more conscious activity, building a holistic existential system for the reflective believer.

⁵ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms II. Mythical Thought*, trans. R. Manheim, New Haven 1955 (1925), p. 177.

The concept is built into Cassirer's theory of man and theory of culture, where both myth and religion are understood as major "products" of cultural activity. Just like language (and other cultural forms),⁶ they are both inherently symbolic and have a function of their own kind, but due to their archaic origin are deeply entangled with one another. As Cassirer mentions, we know of no religion that is entirely void of mythical stories (or did not go through a mythical phase) and such narratives are originally strictly religious as they not simply retell stories from a "distant past," but above all refer to a *sacred* reality.⁷

However, Cassirer does not give any outlined definition of MRC and builds the concept gradually as he develops his theory of myth. At first, it is assumed to be a form of "thinking,," since behind an enormous variety of mythical stories, we can recognize some kind of patterns of "reasoning,," which assumes some prior symbolic and narrative structures, often in various relations.⁸ In his first provisional elaboration, MRC is thus presented *as if* it was a "mythical thinking." This is helpful to build a *working concept* and guide us from familiar grounds of our modern thinking – which is (at least to a large degree) logical, empirical and theoretical – towards the "foreign landscape" of myths, while giving us something to stand on in the meantime. Thus, he contrasts this working concept of "mythical thinking" with theoretical thinking according to the dichotomy of irrational *versus* rational. As such "mythical thinking" appears initially as ridden with all sorts of logical fallacies⁹ and affected by what we may call "semantic agnosticism."¹⁰ However, once Cassirer develops the concept to a full articulation towards the end of the first half of the text – and explicitly frames it as MRC for the first time, he does so in analogy to Immanuel Kant's "transcendental apperception."¹¹ And within such analogy, the latter is presented as

⁶ Apart from myth and religion, Cassirer also includes language, history, art and science as symbolic forms understood as unique and distinct cultural "products". For a brief recapitulation see: E. Cassirer, *Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, New York 1944.

⁷ Malinowski's theory of myth as a sacred story delimited from fables told for entertainment and from legends told to commemorate deeds of great ancestors is shared to great extent by both Cassirer and Eliade.

⁸ See especially works of É. Durkheim and C. Levy-Strauss on Totemism and totemic representations.

⁹ Such as taking the part for the whole (*pars pro toto*) or inability to distinguish between different levels of abstraction.

¹⁰ Semantic agnosticism would be a lack of the awareness of the mediacy of the linguistic signs, especially observable within magical thinking (e.g. when the name of the person is identified with the person itself etc). Magic and particularly magical thinking however could be justifiably presented as a proto science, since it is a great "speculation," however misjudged, about cause and effect. It was very clearly investigated by James Frazer and taken up as well as such by Bronisław Malinowski, who was clearly an authority in the field of anthropological research for both Cassirer and Eliade. However, both Frazer and Malinowski had strictly delimited magical thinking and so called "mythical thinking," where one was trying to simply enforce its spiritual will on external reality ("power of thoughts over things"), while the other was – as we will see – nothing like it. However, this Cassirer's approach can be forgiven, if we take the provisional wrapping up of both magic and myth, in order to make a first clear distinction between those forms together and our theoretical thinking.

¹¹ A concept deduced by Kant as a common "link" or "thread,," between the numerous individual experiences, which is constitutive for the (transcendental) consciousness. See: E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms II...*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

the producer of “advanced conception” of the subjective “I,” in which the subject is a self-determined agent and a carrier of knowledge, while the former is capable of barely producing something like the “first primitive intuitions of the soul demon” – some form of animistic intuition of one’s own internality¹² – that is still yet to be fully transformed into the autonomous, isolated and spiritual “self.”¹³

However, from the second part of the volume – in part III titled “Myth as a Life Form” (and also in Cassirer’s later works like *Myth and Language, Essay on Man, Myth of the State*) – MRC is exemplified clearly in numerous occurrences, which gives us context rich enough to frame it properly *as a predisposition to synthesize and express raw experience of emotional character in a composite form that binds together something external and something internal*. As such, MRC serves primarily as a vehicle of acquiring self-understanding and subjectivity – where such concepts as “I,” “soul” and “God” can emerge for the first time for consciousness with their fundamental significance for its identity and self-awareness – and at the same time constitute that which is outside of the self. Thus, myth is understood here as a product of MRC and by discussing mythical work of MRC, we can discuss the original faculty of expression of self and objectification of the world. In Cassirer’s philosophy, the interest is put on MRC, while mythical work (or in short *myth*) is only relevant insofar as it stands for MRC.¹⁴

Therefore, it is important to stress that Cassirer does not reduce MRC to thinking *per se* (or specifically to logical thinking) and openly rejects Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of the “prelogical mind,”¹⁵ contrary to what some authors believe.¹⁶ As such, *myth* – understood not as a story (specifically *false* story), but as a faculty – is not “incompatible with science,” but is concerned with a whole different level and area of human activity than science. As such *myth* (= MRC) is concerned with conceptualization of that which is intuitively sensed but remains *radically* unknown or “wholly other,” according to the understanding of Eliade, but also Hans Blumenberg.¹⁷ Such conceptualization is brought about through unconscious association with some previously known images (like a mountain, the sky but also *a stain*) and linguistic forms (like lingual symbols of the “centre of the world,” “limitless” or “unclean”), while its radical synthetic approach is based on a feeling (or intuition) of unity of all living

¹² Here we see Cassirer adhering to Edward Tylor’s claim that *animism* played a major role in the creation of myths, since the “spirits” that inhabited the “natural” world of the believer were the key factors in establishing the boundary between the inner and outer world. However, he rejects Tylor view that the motivation behind the incorporation of spirits into myth was to explain the natural world since myth only works within the dynamics of creation concepts and the synthesizing of “mind and body” and not the strict delimitation of their subject matter. Furthermore, in an indirect way, Cassirer claims after Tylor that “animism” was in fact the original religion for man, which in 21st century is rather far from the scientific consensus of anthropologists and religious scholars (*ibidem*, p. 155–156).

¹³ However, we shall see later that such modern idea of the self is rather naïve, partly due to the ignorance of the role of myth and its role in the formation of consciousness.

¹⁴ In the same way, we shall have in mind MRC whenever we refer to *myth*, unless an explicitly *mythical narrative* is put forward.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 69, E. Cassirer, *Essay on Man...*, *op. cit.*, p. 106–108.

¹⁶ R. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2015, p. 32.

¹⁷ H. Blumenberg, Hans, *Work on Myth*, trans. R.M. Wallace, Massachusetts 1985, p. 34–35.

forms.¹⁸ This is why Cassirer finally introduces the MRC in a chapter called “Myth as a Life Form,” which supersedes the provisional and introductory chapters of “Myth as a Form of Thought” and “Myth as a Form of Intuition.”¹⁹ In this light, MRC acquires its own, irreducible, *sui generis* function that is strictly related to the aspect of life as such (life as a global or cosmic phenomenon with its interdependence of living forms).²⁰

Another misconception within the researchers of myth is that “myth” (= MRC) is to Cassirer “exclusively primitive” – which is to say – restricted only to historical or undeveloped (pre-theoretical), contemporary forms of social organization.²¹ In this way, “myth” is thought to be understood as a purely negative form of regression; a cultural artifact that has either long gone with past peoples or present within tiny specks of indigenous, “undeveloped” peoples today. It is true that there are situations when he does treat myth as “exclusively primitive,” but those occurrences stand out from his general theory of myth and can be justified by his early, pioneering work (almost a century ago) and perhaps his personal life as well.²² Rather what both Cassirer and Eliade try to say is that not only are mythical stories with their religious “load” widely present in a “derailed form” and believed in our modern, Western (and Westernized), predominantly secular societies, but also that MRC was as culturally vital and existentially significant part of human psyche in the past, as it is today. We shall return to this briefly in the later part of this article.

¹⁸ This unique intuition of unity between living beings could be seen in identification with dead ancestors within ancestor worship, identification with totemic animals, plants, and forces within totemism and in various sorts of ecstatic experience like that within the Dionysian cult and mystical schools of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

¹⁹ Cassirer distinguishes it clearly not only from science and especially its analytical, formal approach, but also from art (which creates a far greater resemblance to myth than science according to Cassirer), history, and language.

²⁰ See: E. Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer. The Last Philosopher of Culture*, Princeton 2008, p. 107. Skidelsky notes that even though various symbolic forms have their own logical and historical progression and that “each new form is intelligible only in light of its predecessors,” while myth is the predecessor for all other forms, it still does not mean for Cassirer that “each new form exhausts the content of predecessors [...] Each symbolic form has its own specific content, incommensurable with that of the others”.

²¹ Skidelsky also notes that Cassirer fails to develop independent ethical history, because of the presupposition or even faith that “the evolving forms of myth, science, language and religion” have their own progressive tendency in history itself. That “a civilizing process” of history is enough to guarantee moral sophistication (*ibidem*, p. 125–127).

²² At the very end of his last book *The Myth of the State*, written near the end of the WWII, where he outlines the modern mythology related to national socialism and specifically Nazism, he writes bitterly about the hope to defeat the “mythical monsters” as if myth would be a purely regressive form. But given that Cassirer – being a German Jew – was forced to leave the Germany when the NSDAP came to power (1933) and remained so until his death in April 1945 must have a significant, emotional impact on him personally, but also on the interpretation of his work and its political impact during that historical moment. However, Ivan Strenski rather suggests that *Mythical Thought* (1925) was written in “intimidating environment” of the Weimar republic, where Cassirer had to restrain himself, while *Myth of the State* (1944) was written in “relative freedom from political threats,” where he could be more critical of the “Volkish” element within myth (I. Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History. Cassirer; Eliade, Levi-Stauss and Malinowski*, Hampshire 1995, pp. 15, 41).

However, Eliade does not use the term MRC, nor “mythical thinking”. Rather, the meaning behind MRC is silently given as the context of his utterances such as “archaic man,” *homo religiosus*, or – when he refers to the “sacred beginnings” of the “mythical time” where MRC is rooted – *in illo tempore* or *ab origine*. Moreover, one of his most prominent works – *The Sacred and The Profane* – is written exactly from this perspective and presented within Cassirer’s concept of MRC.

Eliade also writes of “archaic ontology” of premodern societies outlining a *system* behind their myth-making and ritual behaviour.²³ Mythical narrative is to him – as to Cassirer – not just a story, but a *sacred* story²⁴ and a specific type of *human behaviour*, which is an element of a civilization.²⁵ Even if he puts more pressure on the *archetypical* situations of the original myth-makers and “paradigmatic gestures” of *homo religiosus*, he nonetheless expands the meaning of MRC in order to relate it with the attitude of *homo religiosus* towards history (escape from time/terror of history).²⁶

The key evidence that Eliade shares Cassirer view in the following regard is that according to the Romanian thinker *myth* – understood as MRC – brings *cosmic symbols* into play.²⁷ These very specific, *lingual signs* refer – as Paul Ricoeur will point out – to the universal experiences of man, which are transformed and expressed through them, and show some inherent similarity with that experience, regardless of countless variations and certain dynamism.²⁸ Such are the symbols present in the holy speech across various cultures and religions with such utterances as “sky,” “impure,” “centre of the world,” “communion.” Those mythically conceived, largely universal symbols are ambiguous, metaphorical and enduring relics of archaic speech that serve exactly the function of MRC: they synthesize and express that which is internal and psychological within that which is external and concrete in order to expand the consciousness of self and constitute the externality of the world as its opposite.

Finally, the religious “primordial” experience of space and time of Eliade’s “archaic man” is in accord with the epistemological aspect of MRC and – in its most general sense – with Cassirer’s transcendental application of the neo-Kantianism to the study of myth, in which all experience is structured by *a priori* forms of the mind.²⁹

²³ M. Eliade, *The Myth of The Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*, trans. W.R. Trask, New York 1991, p. 3; M. Eliade, *Myths, Dream and Mysteries. The Encounter of the Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. P. Mairet, New York 1960.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

²⁶ Archetypical situations are those which “archaic man” tries to “match” with his own life in striving for such “archaic ontology,” while this is nothing more than an effort to recreate the mythical, exemplary model that stands behind the behaviour of periodical ritual repetitions.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

²⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Le Symbole Donne a Penser, Esprit* 27/7-8, Paris 1959; P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics*, trans. D. Ihde, London 2000, p. 11–13; E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, New York 2013, p. 26–28.

²⁹ M. Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane. The Nature of Religion*, trans. W.R. Trask, New York 1987, pp. 20–21, 68–69.

Although Cassirer did try to formulate even more basic, “*originary*”³⁰ forms of perception and expression – being functions of consciousness – within his *Phenomenology of Knowledge*, but also in his unfinished works (published as volume IV of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*)³¹, it is unclear to what extent we can still talk about consciousness, before any conceptions or preconceptions of “I” and “world” (or *Ich* and *Es*) are formulated, which are understood here as the effects of mythical work. In this case, we shall focus on presenting MRC as the fundamental form of consciousness based on the unity of life with its autonomous function of world-making as it reverberated in the thought of Eliade.

Primal Dichotomy and Cognition

Let us then characterize the meaning-making work of mythical-religious consciousness (MRC) in such basic, acts as mentioned in the previous chapters. The following phenomenological description follows Cassirer’s and Eliade’s understanding from the above-mentioned works but is mostly based on *Mythical Thinking*.

Within MRC the basic cognitive categories are the *sacred* and the *profane*.³² In the initial moment of the cognitive process, consciousness delimits the sacred experience of the elevated, emotional states from the ordinary and mundane and at some point fixes it to the religious phenomena it experiences. Those newly, consciously encountered “objects” – whether a place (sacred, delimited symbolically *templum*), a time (as a delimited *holiday*), an activity (as *con-templare*) or a number – constitutes the models for the consciousnesses.

Eliade suggests that such exemplary sacred experience is initially uncovered as *hierophanies*, through a spontaneous and creative activity (that could be perhaps compared to art). Hierophany is the abrupt irruption or breakthrough of the “*holy*” – a complex, ambivalent affect as both *numinosum* and *fascinans* in the Otto’s understanding³³ – that manifested itself within the experience of the profane as something radically different from anything that was experienced before. Thus, the experience of the “*holy*” exceeds the “normal” experience to such scale that a new quality is established and a whole another dimension of “being” uncovered for the consciousness (Cassirer, Max Scheler and much of the German idealist tradition will call this dimension that of the *Geist*). Only once does hierophany reveal such a phenomenon towards which consciousness can now orient itself in a meaningful way (whether

³⁰ See further in this chapter. Original utterance by Goethe.

³¹ See next chapter “Critical Evaluation of MRC and Its Cognitive Significance.”

³² This is ultimately basic situation corresponds to physical anthropology according to which the earliest clues as to the beginning of man as *a man* we can find in our prewritten history are religious artifacts (e.g. ceremonial burials and tombs dated to hundreds of thousands of years ago). However, as Eliade notes, we cannot exclude situations where religious behaviours, some forms of sacred experience, were present even before the Palaeolithic era, in which case, evolution of religious behaviour could stretch as far as millions of years in time.

³³ R. Otto, *The Idea of The Holy. An Inquiry Into The Non-Rational Factor In The Idea Of The Divine And Its Relation The Rational*, trans. J.W. Harvey, London 1928, pp. 7, 31–32.

it would be through a fear, disgust, or passion); this phenomenon becomes truly *an object for the consciousness*. Thus the “first things” that man discovers in primordial experience are his subjective projections, once they are attributed to external phenomena. Even if in this manner both the “objective” world and the subjective “I” are constituted at the same time, “the objective” is nothing physical or material, but rather signifies something meaningful in contrast to the meaningless chaotic flux of impressions.

Since it is the elevated emotional state that gives rise to this meaning-making activity, the first “definition” of *sacred* (if we may use our modern notions with caution) is thus “strong,” “stable,” “persistent”. The sacred phenomena which *homo religiosus* establishes such an *emotional* relationship with are only on this *religious ontological basis* treated as “real,” “true” and “objective.”³⁴ At this point, it is easy to see why the classical debate between “religion versus science” on “truth” is so badly misplaced as it is unavoidable. At the level of primal dichotomy of sacred and profane within consciousness, “the stage” is simply not ready for the predicate of logical truth that can be (or not) attributed to certain “objects,” since, at this original world-making moment, there are no evolved concepts of things, no fundamental carriers of meaning. Rather, it is the initial meaning-making moment leading to the erection of the *irrational*, emotionally intense foundation (which then can give rise to a religious symbol, a metaphor, or a story) that can *much later* give support for objective thinking in a neutral, mathematical, or historical manner. However, what is often misunderstood is that the transition from *mythos* to *logos*, from irrational *life* to rational *spirit* is not that much of a dramatic jump (although belief is often understood as a “leap”) and leads through slow and gradual symbolic transformations. This gradual evolution takes place both in collective form as observed in the history of religion and language, as well as in the individual development of personality from an infant to an adult. Only at some point, the distance between the subjective and objective is large enough to begin reflection with such clarity that separation of the knowing from that which is known is possible. The same should be true as well for scientific analysis of religious phenomena – no fast track is available for evaluating religious or mythical “objects” as if they could be simply “true” or “false,” while separating them from their specific context. However, within MRC, we can see that the intermediate and central process of acquiring self and forming an ontological concept of the world (and its separated parts), happens within the delimitation of “I” from the *collective*, which is the primary reference for objectification, and not the physical world. As Cassirer notes, after Friedrich Schleiermacher, within myth we encounter the fusion of *I* and *Thou*, hence the very basic, symbolic concepts would be often called collective representations (Émile Durkheim) or even archetypes of collective unconsciousness (Carl G. Jung).

In this way, sanctification (or primeval religious activity) becomes in fact objectification – establishing stable concepts within the ephemeral and changing experiences of the *animal symbolicum*, who at this stage is overly or solely *homo religiosus*.

³⁴ Here we find a very similar understanding as to Friedrich Nietzsche’s changing meanings of our basic concepts such as “good” or “bad.” See: *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Critical Evaluation of MRC and Its Cognitive Significance

However, such reading of Cassirer, may be at odds with some of the more recent “Cassirer Studies” coming with the late publication of Cassirer’s unfinished works. Giulio Raio, researching the character of “originary phenomenon” (immediate experience)³⁵ and its relationship with expressive phenomenon (mediated experience) defines Cassirer’s myth-form as “non-objectifying,” and “‘independent’ from any forms of objectification”. “Myth has the world as its correlate – he writes – the correlate of mythical vision evolves by a continuous conversion of forms into forms, by ‘metamorphosis’. It is, in a word, ‘fluid’.”³⁶ Indeed, within myth, we can observe the creative, mythopoeic process of MRC to form the meaning, but there is also a striving to build the original, non-random associations through basic opposition and affective apprehension of *hierophanic* experience, which is only possible by such “fluid” work. Such meaning-making work eventually leads to the objectification of originary phenomena for MRC, where mythical symbols and sacred narratives are born with all their ontological, existential and historical significance. Furthermore, through the evolution of mythical symbols and within family resemblance of myths and symbols in varied cultures, we can see that even if the outward shell of the symbol or myth is changed between iterations, the existential core – the basic intention – remains intact and provides the permanence of myth in time and supports this original “ontological” aspect for the developing consciousness.

Similarly, within the same new tradition of re-reading Cassirer and uncovering his concept of *Urphänomene*, Steven Lofts outlines the importance of the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) for Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms that may seem to put the perspective in this paper at odds as well. In his view, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (especially in the fourth, unfinished part and published posthumously) is seen as a critical response – *Auseinandersetzung* – or confrontation with *Lebensphilosophie*. The latter claims that such of the neo-Kantian concepts like “reflective experience” (*Erfahrung*) is largely an “artificial and empty abstraction that had little or nothing to do with concrete lived-experience,” while it is rather philosophy of life that is providing justice to authentic reflection by seeking “to expose the irrational, or certainly non-rational or pre-theoretical, forces of life that escape rational philosophical reflection.”³⁷

How then can we understand Cassirer’s theory of myth seen as “a life form” where the leading mythical principle is the original feeling of solidarity of all life forms (that is on par with *Lebensphilosophie*), which Cassirer is allegedly trying to confront?

³⁵ A term of (much appreciated by Cassirer) Goethe used by the poet to explain such inexplicable and non-rational things as beauty (S.G. Lofts, *The Symbolic Auseinandersetzung of The Urphanomen of The Expression of Life*, [in:] *Cassirer Studies III – 2010 – The Originary Phenomena*, Napoli 2010, p. 58, <http://www.cassirerstudies.eu/?cat=43> [access: 15.08.2023]).

³⁶ G. Raio, *Transitional Phenomena. From Ausdrucksphänomen to Urphänomen*, [in:] *Cassirer Studies III – 2010 – The Originary Phenomena*, Napoli 2010, pp. 119–120, <http://www.cassirerstudies.eu/?cat=43> [access: 15.08.2023].

³⁷ S.G. Lofts, *The Symbolic...*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

We can find the answer in the same article of Lofts, where he also admits that it was *through that polemic* that Cassirer came to his conclusion with consideration of logical, theoretical, and transcendental thought, but also in regard to such concepts like that of *élan vital* of Henri Bergson. Lofts confirms that Cassirer's criticism of *Lebensphilosophie* was in fact constructive (as in the original German meaning of the term *Auseinandersetzung*, which is – roughly speaking – “lawful agreement”) and had a significant influence on his own thought: “Cassirer, thus, did not dismiss the position of *Lebensphilosophie*, but took it into account through the development of his theory of *Urphänomene*”³⁸ – or theory of “originary phenomenon” an (original quotation by Goethe), which was apparently seen by Cassirer as the immediate and original experience of consciousness that could be found in myth, (poetic) language and art.

Some thinkers such as Hans Blumenberg – perceived as Cassirer's successors³⁹ – may primarily view myth as an attempt to familiarize the unknown through naming it, in order to control and manage the fear of it, but they would still admit the enduring character of mythical *themes* across history with some amount of variation, while the naming aspect (especially in the case of giving meaningful names to the gods or demons) has its own aspect of objectification in the realm of the consciousness.⁴⁰ Cassirer also points to the act of naming, which becomes the same as “grasping” objects.⁴¹

Furthermore, within the historical progress of the Greek and Judeo-Christian religion, we can discern the “vitalistic” core of such original religious ideas – especially seen within the Dionysian cult and Orphism, but also in all mystical and ecstatic schools in Christianity – which seems to strive for direct access to the (intuitively sensed) original feeling of community and social life on a cosmic level (as exemplified within the “definition” of MRC), where the believer tries to dissolve his individual existence within the collective and even within the “living cosmos,” through orgiastic dance and symbolic “communion” (otherwise observed as a “bloody” feast). As such, “the mythical-religious consciousness does not simply follow from the empirical content of the social form but is rather one of the most important factors of the feeling of community and social life.”⁴²

In this “reversal,” otherwise “shamanic” move towards the living, archaic element of experience (which has its strong representation in Western world in all sorts of hallucinogenic and entheogenic experience), we can also discern the basic intuition that is directed towards such culturally and individually vital elements as we have exposed in Cassirer and Eliade's understanding within the concept of MRC.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

³⁹ J.A. Barash, *Myth in History, Philosophy of History as Myth: On The Ambivalence of Hans Blumenberg's Interpretation of Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Myth*, “History and Theory” 2011, vol. 50, no. 3, p. 328.

⁴⁰ H. Blumenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–35.

⁴¹ This is the first occurrence of using such names as “I,” “forces,” “world,” “human,” which to structural anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss would also be the inherent tendency towards categorization (yet not necessarily within sacred and profane) and *bricolage* within “mythical thought” that shows however the effort of conceptualization.

⁴² E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms II...*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

When it comes to the ontological and cognitive potential of MRC, then it could be validated in face of commonly observable social phenomena today and the shared *vision* of Cassirer and Eliade on the further *transformation* of the religious life (especially in the Western culture), which was expressed by them as long as a century ago, based on the gradual changes in religion they had observed; from the raw, elemental gods to sophisticated, person-like gods; from ancestor worship, through totemism, animism and polytheism, towards monotheism and the contemporary erosion of the latter in the West. Therefore, *if* religion is a unique spiritual formation that cannot be exchanged by other means, since it has its own religious function that is not exchangeable (either by science, or history, or art), then it should not wane in time within any given culture. Even if the once unified mythical world image of *homo religiosus* – an unique product of MRC – would be shattered along with the process of “the disenchantment of the world,”⁴³ the process of emancipation,⁴⁴ and the forgetfulness of collectively shared religious symbolism,⁴⁵ mythical thought, and ritual behaviours as such – they would argue – would still be reborn in smaller and more personal forms or resurface unexpectedly outside religion. This seems to be something that we observe today in in our pop-culture, entertainment, literature and politics; in the growing rise of populist narratives in mass media; in the structures of secret societies (especially in their initiation practices), phenomena of so called “occulture” and “conspirituality,” but also in all forms of leisure – novels, comics, movies, games and VR, or even tourism – if we consider the mythical concept of the *escape from time* where mythical longing to transcend time (or “return to Eden”) is clearly visible and stretches its power over us.⁴⁶ Myth is finding its own niche within the cultural life of all eras, even if the erosion of religious symbolism leads to the gradual loss of its coherence and misuse of its empowering potential as it once had in ancient Greece, or as it may still have in other *Kulturkreise* around the world today.

Therefore, there seems to be some merit in seeing MRC – through myth and religion – as an “originary force” of objectification as exemplified by Cassirer and Eliade, which is intrinsically interdependent with our existential need to live in a “real world” outside artificial *simulakra*.

This shared understanding of the primary cognitive activity and vital function of the MRC is not only shared between Cassirer and Eliade, but also in implicit form among such thinkers as Rudolf Otto, Émile Durkheim, and Martin Heidegger, while in more explicit form, by Erich Fromm, Paul Ricoeur and Joseph Campbell,

⁴³ With the incursions of the scientific discourse to the emotive contents of the belief. Concept introduced by sociologist Max Weber.

⁴⁴ Emancipation of the individual from external authorities. See chapter “II. The Emergence of The Individual And The Ambiguity Of Freedom” in: E. Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, New York 2013.

⁴⁵ P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations...*, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

⁴⁶ See: E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms II...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 243–244. The very much troubling difference is that now such repressed “mythical thinking” erupts chaotically and is becoming much more prone to subjugation by socio-political engineering like it was with the case with Nazism – an example par excellence of an allegedly areligious, rational formation, yet ridden by implicit mythical narratives, (crypto)religious cult and irrational utopia – all of which have been based on the increasingly forgotten, yet fertile grounds of mythical-religious consciousness.

especially if we consider the primacy and profound effect of collective forms of thinking (*représentations collectives*), “automated” and enacted modes of thought, and thinking in terms of narratives and lived experience, where processual factor becomes a major role player in uncovering human history with strong religious affiliations towards *genesis* and *eschaton*, *birth* and *death*. Similarly, work on the cognitive and deeply rooted function of metaphors by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who are also considered by some as the forefathers of the movement in 4E cognition, seem to echo the reinterpretation of the role of myth and its metaphorical grounding in experience.

However, in the time of secular ethics, democratic institutions, and rational, scientific discourse, we can still ask – considering, that the evaluation of MRC here is correct – why myth should be relevant, especially as a tool of objectification, while it apparently seems that the concept of the “object” as presented here is *antithetical* to the concept of object in our everyday language?

It seems that the scientific worldview and religious worldview constitute ontologies on two different levels of cognition. We could say that the empirical, theoretical mind – which is a late stage of the development of both individual and civilization – focuses on the “objective” world, which is seen as a great collection of separated “physical things” and on itself as something strictly delimited and intellectually autonomous. On the other hand, MRC focuses on the social world and its primary, religious reality, which should be more thought of as a certain feelings towards experiences based on things (instead of the “things themselves”) and then as clusters of such feelings which form complex relationships and meaningful wholes (or “experiential gestalts”), most often tightly integrated with one another in a coherent manner that provides for orientation, work and action. To some extent within MRC, we are dealing with fundamental ontology in the sense of Martin Heidegger, where the processual and action based “ontic” sphere, related to the *being* of Dasein (which is always already synthetic “gestalt” of *being-in-the-world* altogether), takes precedence and as such is not only instrumental within our cognition, especially intuitive, but is also existentially irreducible.

Thus, the approach presented in this article is a return to a reinterpreted “anthropocentric worldview,” yet informed by science and based on a claim that all knowledge is eventually structured unconsciously within a paradigm which is based on the gradual work of consciousness that is not easily dissected and naively presented in the subject-object-cognition triad.

Objectification

Our modern and in many areas still prevailing model of cognition inherited from the philosophy of Descartes, in which subject approaches object *vis-à-vis*, is increasingly problematic. Not only does the distance between subject and object need to be established first, but also the concepts of “the object” (or “world”) and “I” as well. *Cogito’s* firmness lies on an illusory foundation. Acquiring subjective self is a

process that is not given, but rather slowly worked out and established, and as such could be interfered with in numerous ways within individuation or reversed through psychological regression.

Usually, we not only ignore the active role of the observer, the cognizant “subject” that is structuring the experience, not only reduce both the “subject” and “object” to some atomic and abstract entities independent from their contexts, but also collapse cognition into an ideal, bipolar relationship between mind and object. However, not only is mind embodied and not only is embodied mind enacted, but as such, it is also extended with all sorts of technical equipment (even if we consider a human grasping hand with an opposable thumb) and equally technical vocabulary, but it is also socially constructed. In other words, cognition is heavily mediated by language (like different colour representations in different languages), society (like a totemic social structure and hierarchy projected onto cosmology), physiology (like up-down metaphors and erect posture)⁴⁷ and by the natural and even cosmic environment (e.g. the Earth’s rotation, inclination etc). At the bottom, it is mediated by myth and religion as well, which – from the point of view presented in this article – deals with a kind of immediate, fundamental experience, which is based primarily on human affects which structurally remain the same.

The theory of Cassirer and Eliade, supported with hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and George Gadamer (especially along the critique by Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Marx and Sigmund Freud), outlines the fundamental shortfalls in the Cartesian model of cognition and uncovers the significance of the pre-conceptual stage in the evolution of psyche in both the collective as well as individual dimension.⁴⁸

Mythical-religious Consciousness and 4E Cognition

A body of facts supports the potentially prominent role which the mythical-religious consciousness may hold in epistemology. One such fact is the contemporary crisis in classical cognitive science and the emergence of 4E cognition theories, where a shift within traditionally understood cognition takes place. Cognition is no longer reduced to “the involvement of algorithmic processes upon symbolic representations,”⁴⁹ but is rather understood as also taking place outside the human mind (as in embodied cognition, embedded cognition, followed by enacted and extended cognition).⁵⁰ This shift uncovers the epistemological significance of the social and natural environments, body and motor functions, which takes place in cognitive processes, most of which is unconscious to the subject. At the same time, those aspects and functions are the key factors of MRC in its mediacy in original social bonding, objectification

⁴⁷ B.P. Meier, M.D. Robinson, *Why the Sunny Side Is Up: Associations Between Affect and Vertical Position*, “Psychological Science” 2004, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 243–247.

⁴⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, Chicago–London 1994, pp. 11–25.

⁴⁹ L. Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition*, New York 2011, p. 2.

⁵⁰ J. Carney, *Thinking avant la lettre: A Review of 4E Cognition*, “Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture” 2020, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 77–90.

of nature through sanctification and finally in ritual and original toolmaking and tool-orientation.⁵¹ We have shown those in more detail in the previous chapter dedicated to the explanation of MRC.

The work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson titled *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999) is often credited as the major step in this shift, but the clear beginning of this movement could already be seen within their much earlier work of *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), where our everyday language is presented as profoundly metaphorical. Regardless of a century of the older works of Friedrich Nietzsche on the same subject (which was perhaps too radical at the time),⁵² the metaphor is now understood by the authors not as an exclusively poetic form of expression, but rather as a fundamental and everyday vehicle of understanding, which is grounded in our casual, daily experience (which could be as prosaic as standing up and lying down). Metaphors *allow us* to understand objects and processes within domains of experience that are elusive (like feelings or ideas), in terms of a domain of experience that is more easily graspable (like physical, concrete objects).

There is a significant structural similarity in the work of Lakoff and Johnson and the concept of MRC presented in this article. In the same way as metaphors mediate and structure our understanding of complex ideas on a basic level in a non-arbitrary way, so does myth facilitate our basic understanding through more approachable symbolic concepts as explained by Cassirer and Eliade, by introducing stable references, which are present in everyday experience. Religious symbolism that is at the heart of properly understood myth (speaking of which, Lakoff and Johnson also treat in a non-derogatory mode as way to comprehend experience)⁵³ is inherently metaphorical in the exact same way as both authors understand metaphors – myth becomes a medium through which man can understand his own Self and *Geist*, through the more readily graspable elements of his natural, concrete environment (light as thought etc).

However, contrary to what Lakoff and Johnson say on the metaphorical structuring of the so called “ontological metaphors,” Cassirer and Eliade seem to view the metaphorical character of MRC differently. For the former duo, ontological metaphors presuppose knowledge of physical objects and “substances,” which “allows us to pick up parts of our experience and treat them as discrete entities or substances of a uniform kind.” Concepts of objects as entities seem to form the basis for more elaborated understanding, and this might be the case when we think of a theoretical, developed mind.⁵⁴ However, for MRC, such metaphors as TIME IS MONEY is a pure abstraction, which is based on industrial and capitalist institutions and elaborated concepts. Clearly, the examples given for those “ontological metaphors” and

⁵¹ Mythical stories and their retelling as a preservation of the culturally inherited knowledge regarding existentially important techniques such as fishing and net-weaving, farming, smithing etc.

⁵² Ricoeur reminds us for Nietzsche metaphors, synecdoche, and metonymy “do not constitute ornaments added onto a discourse that is by right and nonfigurative but instead are inherent in the most basic linguistic functioning”. See: P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁵³ G. Lakoff, J.M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, London 2003, p. 185.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

numerous other metaphors that Lakoff and Johnson summon up are not of the same kind.⁵⁵ Only the more primordial ones (e.g. HAPPY IS UP, which they call “orientational”) could have the relevance for MRC and the basic experiential grounding we find in myth. However, as previously mentioned, before any idea of a “discrete entity” could be used in a metaphorical structuring, it must be first established gradually based on a more elemental religious and affective experience.

However, here we come across the problem of the grounding of metaphors (and myths) and a common answer to it. Such grounding, which they call “natural kinds of experience,” in which they are focusing on our concrete bodies and interactions with physical environment, is also based on “our interactions with other people within our culture,” and this is in fact in line with the religious experience, on which we are focusing in this work in terms of MRC.⁵⁶

To Lakoff and Johnson, it appears that there must be a limit to such elemental “building blocks” of meaning and this is why “experiential gestalt” – a *whole* composed of inseparable parts – becomes a necessary part of the theory of metaphor.⁵⁷ Such gestalt rather than elementary idea could be the simplest form for the consciousness, where further theoretical deconstruction and analysis could miss the meaning of such *whole*. Ambiguity of mythical symbols, but also their unconscious, collective component, again shows similarity in that those cannot be brought down to any single meaning, but always are associated with their opposite or with some other cluster of meanings.

Already, in this early work in the field of 4E cognition we can see many common points as well as conflicting views with the theory of myth of Cassirer and Eliade, yet these should not be overstated. According to Lawrence Shapiro, the research in the field is very dynamic, and although 4E cognition is gaining consensus, there is still much debate as to how much of it is canonical is still a matter of debate.⁵⁸ The point here is that throughout the gaining momentum of 4E cognition, we can see the uncovering of the shortfalls of traditional Cartesian theory as well that motivates the philosophy of Cassirer, Eliade and others like Ricoeur.

⁵⁵ Those elaborated kind of metaphors Lakoff and Johnson are discussing (the examples include INFLATION IS AN ENTITY or THE MIND IS A MACHINE metaphors) are working on a different, advanced, and almost entirely conscious level and as such, they have no (or almost no) relationship with mythical symbols of MRC.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

⁵⁷ For experiential gestalts which also deny any kind of elementary “building blocks” of meaning for Lakoff and Johnson, see: *Ibidem*, pp. 69–70, 81–82.

⁵⁸ Lawrence Shapiro confronts classical cognitive science with embodied cognition, breaking it down to the theory of conceptualization (where an organism relies on its body in order to understand its surrounding world), so called “replacement,” where interaction with its environment replaces the need for representational processes, and finally “constitution,” where the body is the constituent and not merely causal influential on cognition, giving the most credit to replacement theory. While he criticizes Lakoff for his linguistic determinism, he also fails to present cognition in its wide cultural aspects like that of myth and religion, focusing mostly on opposing the theory of computationalism (where cognition is understood as computation) and the emergence of connectionism. Regardless of the fact that the robotics arguments of Shakey and Cog are convincing, the research is ongoing, and many experiments still need to be devised to prove or disprove either approach. See: L. Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition*, *op. cit.*

Conclusion

Through mythical work, as explicated by Cassirer and Eliade, we have uncovered the significance of MRC in its elementary world-building and meaning-giving function. Reality as such can be viewed objectively as an empty space with a collection of “solid,” separate objects which change in time and are affected by physical laws. This is a very effective approach in traditional, experimental science, even if we find space and time relative. Reality can also be viewed subjectively as *Umwelt*, the lived world around us or rather lived experience of a certain now, memory, and anticipation. This “subjective” view bears significance for our identity and individuation before anything else, while participating in the formation of some kind of basic ontology and cognition. At this level, we find affects themselves as universal, “experiential gestalts” and due to that, an inter-subjective as we see in the commonalities of mythical narratives and religious symbolism across various *Kulturkreis*. Before we learn to grasp things with names and language through theories, we learn to avoid pain, crave pleasure, but also to learn other affects much more compound and ambiguous like love which can flip into hatred, while remaining very simple at the same time.

As we have tried to show in this article, a specific category of the sacred seems to have a key role in the process. In such a way, through the study of myth and MRC, we not only remind ourselves – however trivial it may sound – that man is not an object but also learn that he is not a (purely cognizant) subject. Rather, he is emerged within certain history and everyday life, rooted in culture and society. A study on MRC reminds us that even if man is encouraged to become intellectually independent, and becomes creative and contributes to society (which may be a contribution he would never expect or strive for), he still remains a beneficiary of countless generations that came before him and is to a certain extent a product of particular thought collective.

Thus, through studies on myth, we tend to see knowledge as embedded within a certain perspective, within some preexisting, collectively agreed paradigms, within more elementary forms of meaning, such as symbols, myth, and rituals. Through studies on MRC, we see the formation of knowledge as a continuous collective process of the transformation of human experience into symbols and their incorporation within elaborated concepts, all of which remain interdependent. Such understanding in – its broadest sense – seems to be emerging as well in modern cognitive science during the ongoing research on AI, which needs to be not just algorithmic but also needs to act and think *like humans* do.

Furthermore, there are necessary existential considerations which one must take in order to explain the enduring permanence of MRC in our contemporary culture and its unwavering success *en face* the constant progress of scientific knowledge, dependence upon technology, and the significance of scientific world-picture for contemporary education, public and daily life. In particular, how can the unprecedented emergence of quasi-religious movements and behaviours in a largely secular world be explained and understood, if not by the means of something that slips through the focus of traditional “objective” science, education systems and other, modern, democratic institutions that are gradually losing their trust? In the increasingly complex

world of the 21st century, which is overflowed by information (fragmented within various disciplines and without a centre or coherence), in a contemporary culture, largely devoid of any conscious, religious rituals, we strive unconsciously for coherence, meaning and psychological integrity to alleviate our alienated *selves* and unite atomized societies, in spite of the widespread growth of depression, lack of profound self-confidence and belief. Similarly, we invent new myths to revitalize our culture and break the nihilistic encroachment of *mal du siècle*, still present in our times.

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