

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

Introduction

In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes: "There is no ... system for the interpretation of myths, and there never will be any such thing."¹ Nevertheless, to engage with mythology as an academic subject of systematized study, it is necessary to have *some* kind of guiding structure to help organize our thinking.

As with most subjects, there are many directions from which you can approach the study of Mythology. You can look at the text and structure of the stories, in which case you're studying it as literature. You can look at the statues, carvings, cave paintings, mosaics, etc., left behind by past cultures, in which case you're studying it as art and/or art history. You can look at the stories in relation to other environmental influences on the culture, in which case you're studying it as history ... and so on.

For our purposes, we want to study Mythology as an expression of *the experience of being human*, so we'll look at it as art, history, theater, literature, music, sociology, psychology, philosophy, politics, and, yes, religion.

Joseph Campbell said that Mythology can "... teach you how to live a human lifetime, under any circumstances."² In other words, through the study of mythology a person can come to know themselves as fully as possible, and thence to know themselves in relation to friends and family, tribe, neighborhood, community, city, region, nation, world, and the universe-at-large.

So, if we're going to explore Mythology as an expression of culture and society, what do those terms mean?

"Culture" is defined as: "the beliefs, behaviors, objects, and other characteristics common to the members of a particular group or society," and "society" is defined as: "the people who interact in such a way as to share a common culture". The two terms are intricately related: A culture consists of the "objects" of a society, whereas a society consists of the people who share a common culture. More broadly, we can say for our purposes that "culture is who a people are" and "society is how people within a culture interact with one another". Mythology was one of the earliest ways in which humans described these interactions to themselves.

Some things will be familiar and comfortable; other things will be different and challenging; everything will be interesting — because we'll share the exploration and adventure together.

As with any discipline, a shared vocabulary is necessary for effective communication, so let us start by exploring some terminology.

¹ Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1949, 381.

² *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* (PBS, 1988).

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

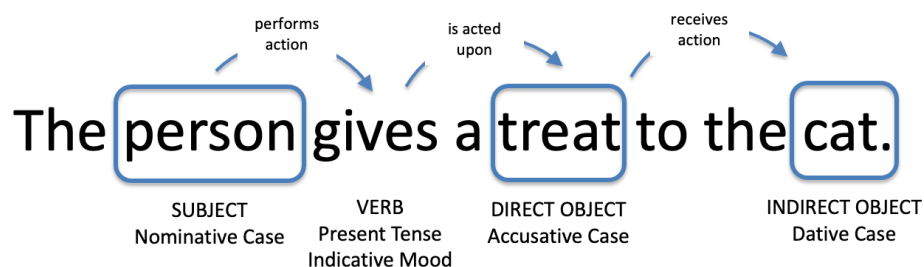
Epistemology

Epistemology is, broadly, *the theory of knowledge*, and it is a major subset of philosophy. It is relevant to our study of mythology in the guise of the question: “How do we know what we know?” For our purposes, knowledge (and how it is acquired) can be largely divided into two types, described by the Latin terms *a priori* and *a posteriori*. These terms and concepts are of central importance to the study of mythology.

The term ***a priori*** is Latin for “from the previous”, or “from the one before”, and references knowledge held to be true *but which is not based on experience or observation*. In this sense, *a priori* describes knowledge that *requires no evidence*. This kind of “knowing” can be thought of as “knowledge of the heart”, captured in terms like “intuition” and “instinct”.

In contrast, ***a posteriori*** — Latin for “from the one behind” — is knowledge based on experience, observation, data, and the veracity of such knowledge is considered to be true based on the quality, frequency, and repeatability of these sources. Thus, *a posteriori* knowledge requires not only evidence, but demonstrable, repeatable data collection. So, this kind of “knowing” can be conceptualized as “knowledge of the mind”, captured in terms like “science” and “research”.

These terms, then, are related to two ways of describing reality and the experience of it: ***subjective*** and ***objective***. Here, an example from language studies may be helpful. In the sentence, “The person gives a treat to the cat,” the *subject* of the sentence is the noun which refers to the person or thing engaging in the action referred to by the verb. Here, “person” is the subject noun, referring to the individual engaging in the action of giving (“gives”). The *object* of the sentence is the noun which being affected by the action described by the verb: here, the object noun is “treat”. It is the thing which is being given by the person³.



Objective reality (what Immanuel Kant called “noumena”⁴), then, is the *reality of the object*; the objects and events which occur as a result of the normal, natural processes of nature, and which *do not require the presence of an observer to be “real”*. Objective reality can be related to ***content*** and ***denotation*** (see below).

³ The cat, here, is the *indirect object*, the noun describing the receiver of the object noun being acted upon by the verb, but that is not relevant to our discussion.

⁴ To massively oversimplify, Kant maintained that while *noumena* (objective reality) does exist, it is not perceived directly by consciousness, so only *phenomena* (subjective reality) is “real” from an experiential standpoint.

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

In contrast, **subjective reality** (Kantian “phenomena”), is the *reality of the subject*; if you will; it is the “internal” reality, *comprising both experience and the reaction to it*. This reality can only be “real” in the sense that a consciousness is interacting with it. This can be associated to **context** and **connotation** (see below).

Content and Context (Denotation and Connotation)

Content is **denotative**; it is *explicit, descriptive, objective, concrete*. The word “apple”, for instance, is simply that: a word which refers to a particular variety of fruit. From a *content* perspective, it doesn’t matter what variety the apple is, nor does its size or color matter. “Apple” is “apple”, nothing more and nothing less; “egg” is “egg”; “dog” is “dog”, and so forth. In the denotative sense, an apple (or a car, or a bird) exists, *whether or not* it is being interacted with by another object. Its existence is not dependent upon anything else.⁵

Context is **connotative**; it is *implicit, conceptive, subjective, abstract*. In terms of *context*, “apple” can “stand for”, “imply”, or “suggest” more than itself. The word “apple” expands from being a thing-in-and-of-itself into being more of a sort of container for ideas and concepts. It serves as a *sign*, a *symbol*, an *implication*, or a *signification*.

For instance, an apple shape with a crescent cut out of it *represents* a particular technology manufacturing company and the products it makes; an apple on the cover of a book about nutrition *implies* health and vitality; an image of a basket overflowing with apples might *suggest* abundance, affluence, prosperity, etc.⁶ However, none of those concepts are inherent in “apple” itself; they are neither an intrinsic part of the word “apple”, nor are they realities that “come out” of an apple — the fruit does not produce cell phones or magically bestow physical well-being: just being in a room with an apple doesn’t make you healthier.

The awareness of (and distinction between) content and context, denotation and connotation, is central to the effective study of mythology. When an owl appears in a myth, for example, is it intended to simply refer to a bird of that particular species, or is it a symbol (metaphor) for wisdom? Is a book just a book, or is it a sign of knowledge?



nations.

Think of the ubiquitous Hammer-and-Sickle: this icon carries meaning, signifying the unification of the industrial working class (represented by the hammer), and the agrarian peasant class (represented by the sickle (scythe)), as the source of political/economic power and governance in a communist society. It is still the central motif of many political parties around the world, although it no longer appears on the flag of any major

⁵ I won’t go wandering off into the weeds here with a discussion of Schrödinger, Heisenberg, etc., though it is a fascinating jaunt.

⁶ We will encounter some very famous (infamous?) uses of apples as symbols in mythology during our explorations below.

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

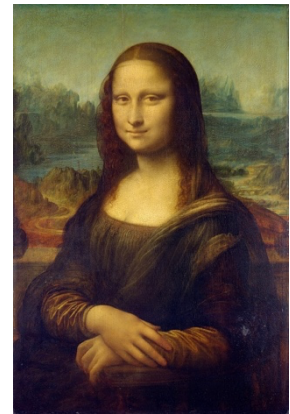
Further, if the object in question is being referred to *connotatively*, which connotation applies? The answer to that question depends on a number of factors: Which society/culture is using the symbol? Which segment of society is employing the symbol? At what time in history is the symbol being employed (e. g. a chain may at one historical point represent strength and unity, but at a different time refer to slavery and oppression).

Context and connotation are where the fun is: in Kant's view, only phenomena comprise subjective experience, and phenomena are a result of our various sensory organs and processes reacting to stimuli impinging upon them as a result of the existence and actions of objective reality.

Thus, for Kant, context (subjective reality) is *constructed* by consciousness in every moment from four components: 1) the *influence* on our sense organs of external objects and events (objective reality); 2) our *impressions* (reactions) to being affected by objective reality; 3) our *memory* (recollections of past instances of being affected by objective reality; and, finally 4) our *imagination* — the ability to conceive of a significant connection between objective reality and ourselves.

In simpler terms, we recognize, organize, and categorize (i. e. *contextualize*) the data of our sense impressions to *create meaning*. Think about the sheer power of this statement: it forces us to realize that *meaning is never inherent in the object*. “Things” just *are*. Their meaning is *only and entirely assigned to them by us*.

Consider the *Mona Lisa* painting by Leonardo da Vinci. It is currently housed in the Louvre Museum, in Paris, France, where it hangs on a wall behind several inches of plexiglass and is visited and viewed by millions of people every year⁷. It is considered one of the greatest works of art produced by human beings in the entire history of our species up to this point.



And yet, if every human being were to vanish from the face of the Earth tomorrow, the *Mona Lisa* would still be hanging on the wall of the Louvre, and *it would mean nothing*. Any-and-all meaning it has is assigned to it by consciousness, in the absence of which, meaning is non-existent. Further, think about what a painting *actually* is: it is ground up matter (pigment) suspended in a liquid (called a “binder”) and applied to a surface (e. g. canvas, board, plaster, paper, etc.) in a particular arrangement (composition).

The *Mona Lisa* is a painting; but, so is a child's effort from their preschool art lesson. Does one have more “meaning” than the other? If so, why; if not, why not? What determines the difference in the meaning of the two? Is the meaning of each the same for everyone, and, thus, universally acknowledged? Is there an objective scale upon which the meaning of each can be located, in order to determine a corresponding “value” of each?

⁷ Some of whom come away rather disappointed: it is very darkened by age, and not very large at all, only about 30 by 21 inches in size.

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

The wonderful (and sometimes infuriating) thing about context/connotation is that it is the *result of a choice*, and *choices can be reexamined, reevaluated, and revised*. Not only is meaning not inherent in the object, *it is not permanent, but fluid and dynamic*. In answer to the posing of the question about an artwork, “What does it mean?” the Zen master would stoically reply, “You make an incoherent noise.” The question has only a subjective answer, and therefore asking it of anyone else is a futile act.⁸

Logos⁹ and Mythos

We will encounter these two terms frequently during our exploration of mythology, so it is worth taking a few lines to introduce them.

Logos: the Greek root of the word “logic”, *lógos* means “a word, saying, speech, discourse, thought, proportion, ratio, reckoning”, and comes ultimately from the Greek *legein*, meaning “to speak”.

Logos is *rational, pragmatic, scientific* thought. Note that the root of the word “rational” is “ratio” and a ratio is a *mathematical* relationship. For instance, if you have two apples and one orange, the fruits are in a 2:1 ratio. If you were to increase the number of both apples and fruits by a factor of three, you would then have six apples and three oranges (6:3), but this is still a two-to-one ratio. Bearing in mind that “logos” is related to “ratio” helps us to remember that it is the word for formalized, regularized, quantified thinking and expression.

Logos is seen as the foundation of Western culture, beginning with Greek explorations into geometry and philosophy in the 6th Century BCE, and formalized as a doctrine during the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th Centuries CE. Modern science is predicated upon the concept of provability and repeatability, codified by René Descartes in the *Discourse on the Method* (1637).

In modern science, for something to be considered a fact, the source of the information must be identified as reliable, accessible to anyone seeking it, measurable and quantifiable, and subject to consistent repeatability via structured experimentation.

In this sense, logos is intricately connected to objective reality (Kantian *noumena*): the things to which facts relate are believed to have an existence independent of the observer and/or experimenter, and thus be free from what Roger Bacon called the “Idols of the Tribe” (*idola tribus*) – the variability of individual experience which make human perceptions unreliable as proofs of reality.

⁸ Note, however, that asking, “What does it mean *to you*?” is a very worthwhile and valuable question.

⁹ In some ontological philosophy, “logos” is used to refer to the rational principle that governs and develops the universe; in theology, it is often used, capitalized as Logos, to mean the divine word or reason which was incarnated in Jesus Christ, per the biblical passage in John 1:1-14 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” This is not the sense in which we use the term, here; we use it in its seminal Greek sense, as the root of the word “logic”, and referring specifically to rational exploration of the world and the expression of the findings of said exploration.

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

A room that feels warm to me may feel cool to you; however, a thermometer on the wall would indicate a single temperature (in whatever scale to which it is calibrated), for instance 74° Fahrenheit. The temperature indicated on the thermometer is not a matter of personal experience nor of personal preference; it is an *objective* fact, not subject to debate, and independent of the perceptions of those in the room.

Robert Pirsig, in *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*, wrote that “Scientific truth has always contained an overwhelming difference from theological truth: it is *provisional*.”¹⁰ What he meant by this is that the aim of scientific exploration is to continuously update human knowledge with new information. It is not that what we “know” today is “wrong”, but it is expected that it is *incomplete*. However much we know about a phenomenon, the scientific assumption is that there is always more to know – more to discover. There are entire institutions, called *research universities*, whose purpose is to reveal that *what we currently know is only part of the whole picture*.

While this means that our knowledge is constantly growing and expanding, it also means that we are by no means certain about anything related to objective reality. Thus, the common aphorism that “change is the only constant.” As Jack Fraser says in an online article at *Forbes* magazine:

“You cannot prove anything. You can never have 100% proof of anything. There will always be doubt. You can gather *evidence*. That evidence will never be 100% — there’s always the chance that everything you think you know turns out to be false — but the evidence allows you to make current-best-evidence-guesses (for want of a better term) about the behavior of the universe. We can build up piles and piles of evidence for ideas. When the pile reaches a certain height, it behooves us to begin to take it rather seriously.”¹¹

However, though an experiment may be repeated a million times by thousands of experimenters and all of the results are always the same – there always remains a chance that a future instance of the experiment may return a different result. While no theory can be proven, *all theories can be disproven, by a single experimental result that contradicts all other results*, no matter how many there have been. Evidence and experimentation can bring you statistically closer and closer to the likelihood that you have discovered a fact about the universe, but that statistical likelihood can be demolished in a single experiment.

This means that in modern, science-oriented societies, certainty is impossible. However, this is psychologically uncomfortable for human beings. We like to be able to at least *tell ourselves that we are certain about some things*; that some knowledge can be relied upon to always be true; that some aspects of life are dependably predictable.

¹⁰ Robert M. Pirsig, *Lila* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1991)

¹¹ Jack Fraser, “There’s No Such Thing As Proof In The Scientific World - There’s Only Evidence,” *Forbes*, December 14, 2017, [Page #], accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2017/12/14/theres-no-such-thing-as-proof-in-the-scientific-world-theres-only-evidence/?sh=5ee09e6d5392>.

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

This is where mythos comes in.

Mythos: The ultimate origin of the word “mythos” (Gk. *mýthos*) is unknown, which seems utterly appropriate for a word that encapsulates the awareness of and appreciation for the “...mystery that underlies all forms [which is] beyond all categories of thought.”¹² In ancient Greek, it came to mean “speech”, “thought”, or “story”, and it is this last definition which connects it to the storytelling aspect of mythology.

Mythos was regarded by the ancients as the *primary means of acquiring knowledge*. This makes sense; mythos, being associated with mystical and spiritual existence is about *experience*. All conscious creatures interact with the objective (noumenal) reality in which they find themselves, and we call those interactions “experiences”. Poke an amoeba with a pin and it will move away from the irritating stimulus.

Human beings were having experiences long before we started thinking about and attempting to analyze those experiences. Think of it this way: a dog having a fear reaction to thunderclaps isn’t asking itself¹³ “What is that noise? Where is it coming from? Why is it making me afraid?” It is simply afraid, and seeking to escape the thing or the environment it is associating with that fear. It is the same with the amoeba; it finds the poking sensation unpleasant, so it moves to avoid it – but it is not cogitating on the source of the poking, and it certainly isn’t coming to any judgements about itself in relation to having experienced a poking sensation¹⁴.

Human beings, on the other hand, are capable of asking those sorts of questions (and we do), and of judging ourselves and each other in relation to the experience. That is what led to the development of logos in human consciousness; but, originally, we simply reacted to fear stimuli in the same way the amoeba or our family pet does, today.

Hence, mythos represents the primary means of acquiring knowledge because it relates to *non-contextualized experience*, which Gary Zukav says, “... is not bound by [logos] rules ... it is more *real*.”¹⁵ It is concerned with the *timeless* and *constant* in existence. While fear of a particular thing or situation may pass, fear, itself, as a form of reaction to noumenal reality antecedes any specific species of fear, and remains as an option for future reactions. Getting over a fear of thunder does not automatically “cure” a fear of snakes.

In modern English vernacular, “myth” is often used as a synonym for “false”, or “untrue”; as in: “Don’t believe that – it’s a myth.”¹⁶ This is not the sense in which the word is used here. In our study of mythology, a myth is a story which expresses an *a-historical*, universal truth about human experience. The word “a-historical” means “outside of history”; while a myth may be set in ancient Greece or India, the message it carries about human experience is not particular to the specific culture. Referring to the above discussion about fear: all human

¹² *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* (PBS, 1988).

¹³ That we know of, anyway.

¹⁴ Again, as far as we know.

¹⁵ Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview Of The New Physics* (HarperOne, San Francisco, 2009).

¹⁶ In fact, in this context, the proper term would be “urban legend”, (which is also problematic in its own ways).

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

beings feel primal fear of certain stimuli (the unknown, violence, etc.) – there is not a “Greek version” of primal fear which is in some way different from an “Indian version” of primal fear.

This is where myths differ from other folklore such as fables, fairy tales, etc. In the latter, the specific milieu (setting) of the story is relevant to the message the audience is expected to understand from it. For instance, an Inuit story about a trouble-making polar bear would make little sense to a Tuareg tribesperson of the Sahara desert. But, a story about a camel with a bad attitude would also make little sense to the Inuit. Whereas, a story about another person making mischief would be easily understandable to both.¹⁷

This also highlights that *mythos-truth* is of a different species than *logos-truth*. For instance, Herodotus wrote a history of Greece which was based upon Greek mythology and the epic poetry of Homer dealing with the Trojan War and its aftermath – events which (if they were even actual historical happenings) occurred hundreds of years before Herodotus’ own lifetime. In contrast, Thucydides wrote an account of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta – *in which he had personally taken part*¹⁸. Thucydides wrote about things he personally experienced, or, if he had not been present at a particular battle, he gathered information from people who had been there. The unreliability of eyewitness evidence notwithstanding, Thucydides at least attempted to write a logos-based history, based upon known, verifiable facts which were devoid of personal, emotional coloring. In contrast, Herodotus wrote a mythos-based history which was composed entirely of oral history, mythology, and traditional tales.

This is not to say that Herodotus’ history wasn’t *true*, in its way. It was a genuine expression of how the Greek people of his time saw their place in the world and their relationship to it. It was “true” in that it accurately described how the Greeks saw themselves – the fact that others very probably had a vastly different view of Greek culture and its importance in the world has no real relevance.¹⁹

Thus, mythology is concerned with the *significance* of life, its *context* rather than its *content*. A myth about a person building a house is not an instruction manual for building a house. It is an account of what being able to build and live in a house rather than crouching in a natural cave, *means* to the person (and, by extension, to all human beings). The house is *symbolic* of intelligence, knowledge, ability, independence, the power to manipulate the

¹⁷ This is where the archetypes come into play. See later for a more in-depth discussion.

¹⁸ In fact, he was a general at one point, but due to a battlefield failure, was exiled (to the land of the enemy, as it happens, which, had I been a Spartan of the time, I would have found highly suspicious....)

¹⁹ For this reason, Herodotus is often called “The Father of History”, because he was the first person in the Western tradition to attempt to compile a document which explained a people and their origins to themselves; whereas, Thucydides is sometimes called “The Father of Modern History”, because he was the first in the Western tradition to attempt a factual, verifiable, objective history of a particular event in a people’s chronology. Hence, my use of the terms “mythos-truth” and “logos-truth”; Herodotus’ history may be said to be a “mythos-history”, while that of Thucydides might be called a “logos-history”.

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

material of the natural world to suit one's own needs and desires. It is about how being human is different from being, say, a bear, and how that different experience causes humans to see themselves in relation to the world around them.

In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Robert M. Pirsig writes:

In the past our common universe of reason has been in the process of escaping and rejecting the romantic, irrational world of prehistoric man. It's been necessary since before the time of Socrates to reject the passions and the emotions, in order to free the rational mind for an understanding of nature's order, which was as yet unknown. Now it's time to further an understanding of nature's order by re-assimilating those passions which were originally fled from. The passions, the emotions — the affective domain²⁰ of man's consciousness — are a part of nature's order, too: the central part.²¹

The European "Enlightenment" left Western thought with the misapprehension that anything not quantifiable and reproducible wasn't "real": that such experiences and events were the realm only of obscure philosophical cogitations, and not only had little to do with everyday life, but were actually detrimental to the average person's success.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The modern (correctly structured) study of mythology reminds the student that science is *one* way of understanding "reality" (certainly a way of attempting to control *physical* reality), but it is relevant *only to those matters which it embraces*. Western science tends to ignore (and sometimes deplore) all contexts with which it cannot effectively interact to create "understanding" and "control". For example, while most astrologers readily acknowledge the value and worth of astronomy, you'll be hard-pressed to find any astronomer who'll say anything positive about astrology.

The human psyche needs *both* mythos *and* logos to function fully and successfully in the Cosmos, and the proper study of mythology is the route to that inestimable goal. Ignoring the psycho-emotional aspects of human experience shuts one away from cognizance of fully half of the grand scheme, awareness one needs to in order to be able to encompass a comprehensive understanding of the human experience.

Logos has "coincidence"; mythos has "synchronicity". (Both of these words, by-the-way, mean *exactly* the same thing: "happening at the same time"; the former is from Latin, the latter is from Greek, a fact about which an entire essay in itself could be written.)

For example, imagine that you are thinking of someone you haven't spoken to in a long time; your phone rings, and when you answer, the caller is the person you were thinking of. Science (including psychology), would call this event "coincidence". It would definitively declare that there is no demonstrable causal connection between you thinking of the person

²⁰ The emotional side of human behavior.

²¹ Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (London: Vintage Books, 2014).

Mythology Matters

by Martin M. Conrad II

and their decision to call you in that moment. In a universe as complex and vast as ours, even the most unlikely events have some positive probability of occurring.

While it may be that *scientifically* (logically) there is no relationship between your thinking of someone you've not spoken to in a while and the next phone call you receive being from that very person, Carl Jung recognized that psychologically, it *seems to you that there is a direct connection*. Whether or not there's any *scientific, measurable, quantifiable* connection between the two events, *you react to them happening close to one another in time as if there were a connection*. Your subsequent behavior is dependent (at least in part) upon that *perceived* relationship.

Jung believed that ignoring this aspect of human reaction to the experience of the world guarantees that any theory you form of human behavior will be incomplete, at best, and dangerously naïve at worst.

This brings us to a discussion of context and its relationship to culture.