# The Sociological Function

The Sociological Function, which Campbell decried as having, “… taken over in our world … ethical laws, the laws of life in the society … what kind of clothes to wear, how to behave to each other … in terms of the values of this particular society”[[1]](#footnote-1), is associated with the **Trickster**, the archetype, itself, serving simultaneously a dual purpose (in true Trickster fashion).

The first of these, the ***admonisher***, encompasses what on the surface may seem to be mutually exclusive aspects. In the first, the admonisher is seen in the cautionary tales, which serve to depict what punishments may befall an individual who refuses to adhere to divine and/or social mores and expectations. This relates to the “Messenger of The Gods” characteristic of the Trickster, in which guise this archetype is often employed by the Moral Authoritarian Father god as a bringer of punishments to humans.

However, this aspect is also expressed in stories in which the Trickster is “back-tricked”: caught in its own trap, or has its own practices and methods used against it. Native American and African mythologies are rich with these kinds of Trickster tales. We observe Tricksters being punished by the negative consequences of their *own* actions (“…your sin will find you out”[[2]](#footnote-2)), by their leaders, or collectively by their communities, for engaging in misbehaviors such as refusing to share a bounty; for stealing rather than earning food or possessions; or, for causing disruption simply for the sake of watching the ensuing confusion.

The second aspect of the admonisher (we might call it the “***counselor***” role) is that of also pointing out that it is *not always the wisest choice to blindly obey the rules*, especially if those rules have become outmoded and inflexible. The young child in “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is performing this Trickster function by refusing to subscribe to the dangerous “group-think” of the elders who know perfectly well that the Emperor is naked, but who are all afraid to speak the truth for fear of rejection by the group. We also, however, see Tricksters in these myths “misbehaving” because limitations imposed on society are too rigid and thus detrimental to progress and growth (a prime example comes from the Greek tradition — Prometheus bringing fire to humanity in defiance of divine will). In this we find Campbell’s famous Trickster-Hero melding of archetypes.

The Trickster, thus, manifests across a spectrum from the *unconscious numbskull[[3]](#footnote-3)* who causes disruption unintentionally (sometimes as a result of a poorly planned and executed attempts to do good); to a *malicious spoiler[[4]](#footnote-4)*, who resonates to the baser drives of human nature and seeks self-advancement and personal pleasure at the expense of others. In this spoiler aspect, the Trickster also serves to remind a culture/society of what it values by profaning its sacred icons and institutions.

The Trickster is the most “human” of the primal archetypes, being able to associate with both mortals and with gods (Loki), perform feats of near superhuman daring and strength (Maui), and yet is fallible and often incurs punishment, or at least reprimand. As the *unconscious numbskull*, the Trickster reminds us that fallibility is part of human nature; however, as the *malicious spoiler*, it teaches that our errancy is not a justification for willfully indulging our basest nature. The Trickster reminds us that we are fallible humans, which can make us evil if we consciously choose to follow our darker impulses.

Finally, the Trickster is also the salve for human guilt over the need to kill to eat. Hunters, who are weaker, slower, and/or less agile than their prey, in order to obtain meat, must be able to trick animals in order to kill them: wearing a buffalo hide to get close to the herd; setting snares; dangling worms on hooks, and so forth. Especially among earlier cultures and those which are still “connected” to the natural world, there is an overriding awareness that while killing to eat is an unavoidable necessity, it nevertheless requires a certain abuse of power over other living things to achieve its aims. As Campbell says, in part quoting Schopenhauer, “ ‘Life is something that should not have been. It is in its very essence and character, a terrible thing to consider, this business of living by killing and eating.’ I mean, it’s *in sin* in terms of all ethical judgments, all the time!”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Where the Trickster reminds us that we are fallible, the Heroic reminds us that we are capable of transcending our limitations (real and imagined).

1. *The Power of Myth*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Numbers 32:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms.*, ed. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Power of Myth* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)