

The Place of the Sacred in Cassirer's Philosophy of Mythology

[O lugar do sagrado na filosofia da mitologia de Cassirer]

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Abstract

In this essay I defend Cassirer's account of mythical culture against a series of critiques raised against his philosophy of mythology. Cassirer has been charged with neglecting the profane dimension of mythical culture and with presenting an inconsistent account of sacred being. In order to make headway on these critiques, I first demonstrate that Cassirer does in fact acknowledge the profane and its place in mythical culture. Through close conceptual and textual analysis, I reconstruct Cassirer's account of the sacred and the profane in "Myth as Form of Intuition" in the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. After demonstrating the presence of this distinction in Cassirer's texts, I reconstruct Cassirer's account of the *emotive origin* of the sacred in mythical culture. Finally, I show how Cassirer's law of mythical culture is not inconsistent with the sacred, but is a further articulation of the form of sacred being.

Keywords: Mythology; Magic; Symbol; Philosophy of Culture; The Sacred.

Resumo

Neste ensaio, defendo a posição de Cassirer sobre a cultura mítica diante de uma série de críticas levantadas contra sua filosofia da mitologia. Cassirer foi acusado de negligenciar a dimensão profana da cultura mítica e de apresentar um relato inconsistente do ser sagrado. Para avançar nessas críticas, primeiro demonstro que Cassirer de fato reconhece o profano e seu lugar na cultura mítica. Por meio de uma análise conceitual e textual rigorosa, reconstruo o relato de Cassirer sobre o sagrado e o profano em "O mito como forma de intuição", no segundo volume da *Filosofia das formas simbólicas*. Depois de demonstrar a presença dessa distinção nos textos de Cassirer, reconstruo o relato de Cassirer sobre a origem emotiva do sagrado na cultura mítica. Finalmente, mostro como a lei da cultura mítica de Cassirer não é inconsistente com o sagrado, mas é uma articulação adicional da forma do ser sagrado.

Palavras-chave: Mitologia; Magia; Símbolo; Filosofia da Cultura; O Sagrado.

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1. Introduction: Magic and The Problem of the Mythical Law

Cassirer's philosophy of mythology begins from a recognition of the facts of mythical consciousness, one of which is the practice and belief in magic. Given that there are such magical facts, Cassirer asks a *transcendental* question about magic: given the practice and belief in magic in mythical culture, what is the condition for the possibility of that fact (Cassirer, 1955, p. 23)? Cassirer argues that the facts of mythological culture can only be accounted for by the law of "[...] the concrescence or coincidence of the members of a relation" (Cassirer, 1955, p. 64)².

Cassirer has a thoroughly *symbolic* view of culture in general. Accordingly, Cassirer expresses the law of mythical consciousness in a symbolic articulation defined by the law of the identity of the relata. Given that all symbolic representation is constituted by the relation between the sign and the signified, mythical culture is defined by the law of the *identity of sign and signified*. At first the world of language, like that of myth in which it seems as it were embedded, preserves a complete equivalence of word and thing, of 'signifier' and 'signified.'³

This identity of sign and signified is a transcendental condition of one of the distinguishing features of mythological culture: *magic*. Given that the human being has the capacity to manipulate the sign, and the sign is not distinguished from the thing signified, the human being believes that they can manipulate the thing signified by manipulating the signs alone. Indeed, this is magic – the belief in one's capacity to manipulate things by the use of signs.⁴

For the mythical view of language, the word-sign is identical to the thing that it signifies. Hence, one can manipulate a thing by manipulating the name that denotes it. The following Egyptian legend illustrates this well:

Whoever knows the true name of a god or daemon has unlimited power [Macht] over the bearer of the name; an Egyptian legend tells how Isis, the great enchantress, tricked the sun god Ra into revealing his name to her and how she thus obtained dominion over him and all the other gods (Cassirer, 2021, p. 52)⁵.

Ernst Cassirer's transcendental critique of mythical consciousness offers a powerful explanation of the magical dimension of mythical culture. By manipulating the sign, the magician attempts to manipulate the signified – by manipulating the image of the person the Tuvan magician aims to manipulate the person themselves.⁶ Without the identity of the sign and the signified, the manipulation of the sign cannot ensure a transformation of what is signified. Accordingly, Cassirer's law of mythical consciousness can account for the very possibility of magical belief and magical practice.⁷

² In the new edition, Lofts translates this passage the same way. Lofts notes that the term for relation is 'Relation' (See Cassirer 2021, p. 81).

³ Indeed, in mythical language there is a "concrescence of name and thing [...]" (Cassirer, 1955, p. 25). Again, Cassirer reiterates the point: myth is "concrete because in it the two factors, thing and signification, are undifferentiated [...]". In myth there is a "concrescence in an immediate unity" (Cassirer, 1955, p. 24).

⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer also acknowledge the close ties between thought and reality in magic such that "thought and reality are not radically distinguished" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, pp. 6-7).

⁵ Indeed, the law of mythical culture explicated in "Myth as Thought Form" does not account for the division between the sacred and the profane, which is constitutive of mythical consciousness and forms the subject of Part Two of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thinking*. In order to provide a more complete account of Cassirer's account of the sacred, one should first reconstruct Cassirer's account of the sacred and the profane in "Myth as Form of Intuition" by close textual and conceptual analysis.

⁶ See Zorbas, 2007, p. 53. Balgan, a local shaman, reports that he can perform "love magic" and magically manipulate a person by staring at a photo of them. Such practices are employed not only as a way to regain the love of a former spouse, but also to exact revenge for past wrongs.

⁷ Because the sign is the signified, the magician possesses omnipotence over the signified. However, Cassirer argues

Despite the power of Cassirer's account of myth, the importance of this law of mythical culture has formed the basis of a number of critiques of Cassirer's account. One line of critique argues that Cassirer's emphasis on the mythical law leads him to completely neglect the profane and ordinary elements at work in mythical culture.⁸ A second critique acknowledges that Cassirer does in fact make such a distinction between the sacred and the profane, but such a distinction is fundamentally inconsistent with the identity operative in the mythical law.⁹ As is evident, the first two critiques are inconsistent with each other, for the first critique supposes that Cassirer fails to accommodate the profane in his account of myth, and thereby fails to grasp the form of mythical culture. The second critique acknowledges that Cassirer does in fact make such a distinction, but argues that Cassirer's law of mythical consciousness is inconsistent with that distinction. Without successfully addressing these two objections we cannot gain a complete vision of Cassirer's concept of the sacred and its relationship to the law of mythical consciousness.

Indeed, the law of mythical culture explicated in "Myth as Thought Form" does not account for the division between the sacred and the profane, which is constitutive of mythical consciousness and forms the subject of Part Two of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thinking*. A more complete account of Cassirer's concept of the sacred requires a reconstruction of Cassirer's account of the sacred and the profane in "Myth as Form of Intuition" by close textual and conceptual analysis. In order to make headway on these critiques, I first demonstrate that Cassirer acknowledges the profane and its place in mythical culture, and how he accounts for this distinction. After demonstrating the presence of this distinction in Cassirer's texts, I discuss Cassirer's account of the *emotive origin* of the sacred in mythical culture. Finally, I answer the second objection by showing how Cassirer's law of mythical culture articulates the form of sacred being.

2. The Sacred and the Profane in Mythical Culture

Although he is a sympathetic reader of Cassirer, Verene argues that Cassirer's philosophy of mythology fails to "give an adequate description of the kind of thinking the primitive employs in his daily life and crafts" (Verene, 1966, p. 561). While Cassirer is right to emphasize the place of magic in mythical culture, not all human activities are magical. The mythical concept of the world is also constituted by bodies of knowledge, such as agriculture and ship building that cannot be fully circumscribed or reduced to magical practice. Verene draws on the important work of Malinowski, especially his "Magic, Science, and Religion," in which he argues that in addition to the magical ordering of the world, in order to successfully grow crops, the farmer must possess knowledge of soil conditions, weather patterns and the like. As a result, Verene is skeptical that Cassirer's account of myth is complete. Echoing Verene's anthropological critique, a similar critique is raised in the field of semiotics. Juenghani argues that Cassirer does not recognize the way that mythical consciousness distinguishes between the image and the object. As a result, he argues that Cassirer misses the vital role such a

that the very same identity engenders an absolute subjection to the material world. Because these signs are material, mythical consciousness cannot recognize the sense of what is signified as *independent* of the given material. Because of this identity of sign and signified, mythical consciousness encounters the meaning of the sign as an *external* material, which is given *independently* of any act of consciousness. Thus, mythical consciousness experiences its own signs as *external material entities* that determines it from the outside. The importance and power of this mythical law of the identity of the relata cannot be understated, for it accounts not only for the possibility of the practice and belief in magic (and magical ritual) as a form of culture, but it also undergirds the inherent contradiction between freedom and determinism that is operative in mythical culture. For more on this dialectic, see (Cassirer, 2021, 192).

⁸ See (Verene, 1966) and (Juenghani, 2020).

⁹ See (Silverstone, 1997).

distinction plays in the life of mythical culture.¹⁰

If one limits one's analysis to myth as a thought-form, one might be under the impression that Cassirer does not acknowledge the profane dimension of mythical culture. However, such impressions are misleading. In the *Myth of the State*, Cassirer too cites Malinowski's work in the Trobriand Islands. Cassirer notes that there is always a sphere that is not affected by magic and myth—a so called “secular sphere”. For example, in the production of an implement, no magic may be necessary. Myth is invoked when people are faced with an “unusual” and/or “dangerous” situation (Cassirer, 1974, p. 278). As is evident, Cassirer certainly acknowledges the technical know-how of mythical peoples, and by no means denies the significance of such knowledge. Indeed, it would be absurd if there were no “secular” sphere. What is more, Cassirer observes that in the language of mythical peoples the “semantic use is never missing” (Cassirer, 1974, p. 282). When people sit down for a meal, and one person asks another to pass them some bread, the person is not asking for the other to pass them the sign for bread. No – they are asking for bread itself. There may be an additional magical or mythical significance to the request, but the request engenders a distinction between sign and signified that is constitutive of language as a cultural form. Although the “magic word has predominance” in mythical culture, the semantic use of language (and its correlative distinction between sign and signified) cannot be eliminated. Thus, Cassirer's philosophy of myth certainly does recognize the way that mythical consciousness distinguished between the image and the object.

In point of fact, this distinction between the sacred and the profane is a distinction Cassirer invokes throughout his whole career. In “The Basic Opposition” in Vol. 2 of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer distinguishes between the sacred and the profane (Cassirer, 1955, pp. 93-104), and even identifies it as the specific character of mythical intuition and the mythical feeling of life:

For myth also presupposes a spiritual “crisis” of this sort – it also takes form only when a separation takes place in the whole of consciousness through which a certain separation penetrates the intuition of the world-whole [Weltganze], by which a dissection of this whole into different strata of signification is effected. This first separation contains in germ all subsequent separations [...] (Cassirer, 2021, p. 88).

In fact, Cassirer is adamant that “everything that myth grasps” is “drawn into this division” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 79). Forms of mythical thinking, such as astrology, alchemy, and almagabala presuppose forms of mythical intuition, and thereby presuppose the division between the sacred and the profane which constitutes that intuitive relation to the world (Cassirer, 1955, p. 70). Far from ignoring or underplaying empirical knowledge and forms of meaning constituted by a difference of sign and signified, Cassirer is careful to emphasize these elements as central of mythical culture (and human culture more generally).

Although Cassirer acknowledges the difference between the sacred and the profane in mythical culture, is this difference really operative in mythical culture? Throughout the “Basic Features of a Morphology of Myth: Space, Time, and Number” Cassirer identifies the various the way that the sacred and the profane operate in the mythical intuition of space, time, and number (Cassirer, 1955, pp. 105-186). In order to keep the analysis manageable, I will limit my discussion to a few examples from his analysis of mythical space, time, and number.

The concept of *templum* which originates in the Greek *τέμενος*, signifies a sacred precinct that belongs to a god. The stem of the term ‘tem’ means ‘to cut’ such that the sacred precinct is marked-off land (Cassirer, 1955, p. 100). In short, the temple is a sacred or holy space that has been “hallowed” – it is a separate zone detached from ordinary spaces. The sacred space is not necessarily limited to a parcel of earth, for even the heavens as a whole can appear as a sacred

¹⁰ See (Juenghani, 2020, p. 137).

zone, inhabited by a divine being (Cassirer, 1955, p. 100). In Roman mythology, while Jupiter has dominion over the whole sky, particular gods dwell in particular regions, or even particular dwellings (Cassirer, 1955, p. 101).

The division between the sacred and the profane is especially visible in the worship of *Threshold* gods. The threshold of the temple marks the boundary between the sacred and the profane—it separates the sacred from the profane world. As Cassirer reports, at the festival of the Terminalia, “the boundary stone itself was crowned with a garland and sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial beast” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 103). Even contemplation — “Contemplari” can be traced back to ‘templum’ — the marked off space where the augur would observe the heavens for signs (Cassirer, 1955, p. 102). The division of time, space, and number into the sacred-profane distinction further exemplifies the *non-homogenous* character of these forms of synthetic unity. The scientific worldview may treat each space as qualitatively indistinct from the others, e.g., each space is a ‘here’ among other ‘heres’; *qua* spaces they are qualitatively indistinguishable. However, mythical space *qualitatively* distinguishes spaces from each other — all spaces are not equally sacred.

Time too is saturated with the division between the sacred and the profane. If one considers the traditional and restricted understanding of myth as *theogony* and “narrative of the Gods” as Schelling considered it, myth “begins with a genesis,” when “a becoming is attributed to demons and gods” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 104). Cassirer notes that a common way to establish the sanctity of “usages, customs, and social norms” is to derive them “from institutions prevailing in the primordial mythical past” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 105).¹¹ While the historical past is itself historical, and has its own ‘why,’ the mythical past “requires no explanation”. It is not itself historical. Rather, the mythical past is the “why of things” for which there is no further account. Citing Schelling's *Philosophy der Mythologie*, Cassirer designates the mythical past a *pre-historic* time (Cassirer, 1955, p. 106).¹² Athena's birth from Zeus's head is prehistorical and establishes the sacred character of her divine being: “From his own head he gave birth to owl-eyed Athena. The awesome, battle-rousing, army-leading, untiring. Lady, whose pleasure is fighting and the metallic din of war” (Hesiod, 1993, pp. 921-931). For those mythical cultures with gods, gods are individuated by their mythical past, their *pre-historical* time. As a result, “a rigid barrier divides the empirical present from the mythical origin and gives to each its own inalienable character” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 106).

Just as in the case of time and space, the mythical perspective resists a homogenous treatment of number. Within the mythical form, where “two quantities appear equal in number” one uncovers a “common mythical ‘nature’” — a unity of essence (Cassirer, 1955, p. 142). Depending on their place in the system of relations, different numbers possess *different powers*, on account of which some are elevated to a sacred position. For example, the *Corpus Hippocraticum* elevates seven to a sacred number, for it determines the number of winds, seasons, and ages of life (Cassirer, 1955, pp. 148-49). Within some North American religions, the number four is a sacred number that is associated with the cardinal points, with victory, defeat, sickness, and death (Cassirer, 1955, p. 147). Consider too the medieval church, which hallowed the number four. Here the four points of the cross are identified with the four zones of heaven and the various phases of Christian salvation (Cassirer, 1955, p. 148).

Cassirer's anthropological survey leads him to conclude that:

All being and all events are projected into the basic opposition of the “sacred” and the “profane,” and in this very projection, they acquire a new content

¹¹ This kind of explanation does not only apply to gods. Cassirer explains how even the empirical properties of entities are explained by a great primordial event in the mythical past. Cassirer cites Fritz Graebner's *Das Weltbild der Primitiven*, who relays stories from Australian aborigines of this kind, e.g., “red spots in the plumage of the black cockatoo and for a certain hawk originated in a great fire”.

¹² For Cassirer, time in the mythical past is itself timeless (Cassirer, 1955, p. 106).

[Gehalt] – one that they do not simply “have” from the beginning but that they acquire in this form of contemplation, in this, as it were, mythical “illumination” (Cassirer, 2021, p. 96).

Given Cassirer’s assumption that mythical culture differentiates all phenomena into either the domain of the sacred or the profane¹³, Cassirer cannot forgo an account of the sacred and the profane and must integrate it into his account of mythical culture. Given the fact of the distinction, what is the *origin* of this distinction?

3. The Origin of the Sacred

The sacred *transcends* the profane – the ordinary. As such, it is *extra-ordinary*. Insofar as the sacred appears as extra-ordinary, it appears as something which cannot be integrated into profane existence. Accordingly, by encountering the sacred one encounters that which *cannot be integrated* into the ordinary course of experience. As a result, the sacred appears as something *incomparable* with that world and its objects, as something *unique*: Cassirer writes that “each object that engages and fills the mythical consciousness pertains as it were, only to itself, it is incomparable and unique” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 74). Because the sacred is experienced as transcending the common empirical world, the sacred cannot be understood on the model of those objects and that world. Mythical consciousness has the sacred only insofar as it is “overpowered by it” such that in the sacred experience myth “lives in the immediate impression, which it accepts without measuring it by something else (Cassirer, 1955, p. 73). Because it transcends the any available model of understanding, Cassirer argues that the sacred has its origin in the experience of astonishment – *θαύμαζειν* (Cassirer, 1955, p. 78). Just as science and philosophy begin in wonder, so myth does too.

Cassirer emphasizes again and again the primary role of feeling: “Only those individual impressions, which because of their special intensity and force stand out from the common background, are separated out from this indeterminacy of feeling” (Cassirer, 2021, p. 239). All thought and perception in mythical culture “rests on an original foundation of feeling” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 95) such that things only exist for the self if “they affect it emotionally” (Cassirer, 1995, p. 200).

In astonishment the sacred transcends the profane: “This distinctive feature of ‘transcendence’ always connects all the contents of mythical and religious consciousness with one another” (Cassirer, 2021, p. 95). Although Cassirer identifies religious consciousness with a mode of signification in which the sign signifies a meaning that transcends the material world, and myth signifies a meaning that is identical with a material sign, he nonetheless argues that both cultural forms institute a distinction between the sacred and the profane. In religion, the sacred transcends the body, while in myth the sacred is identified with something material.¹⁴

One cannot catalogue *a priori* and in advance of human experience the kinds of objects and relations that will astonish human beings. In order to uncover the objects of astonishment, one must consult human experience, and the empirical, ethnological study of culture. Because the sacred is set apart from the ordinary as an object of astonishment, and *anything* can be an object of astonishment, the sacred is not the property of any particular kind of object. Regarding myth Cassirer emphasizes that “it designates a certain ideal relatedness rather than a certain objective constitution” (Cassirer, 2021, p. 96). The ideal relation is here emotional in content – it signifies an emotional relation that confers sacred

¹³ Indeed, Cassirer writes that “everything that myth grasps” is “drawn into this division” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 79).

¹⁴ See the dialectic of mythical consciousness for an in-depth analysis of the relation between myth and religion. (See Cassirer, 1955, pp. 235-260).

being. As long as it captures the “mythical interest” it can constitute sacred being (Cassirer, 1955, p. 75). The difference between the sacred and the profane is “qualitative” such that particular values are inserted into a reality originally devoid of them, such that myth divides the world into the “mythically significant” and “mythically irrelevant” sphere (Cassirer, 1955, p. 78).

Every mythically significant content, every living relationship that is raised out of the sphere of the indifferent and the everyday forms, as it were, its own ring of existence, an enclosed and cared for [umhegen] region of being that is separated from its surroundings by fixed barriers, and only in this separation does it achieve its own individual religious shape [Gestalt] (Cassirer 2021, p. 127).

Cassirer's account of the origin of the sacred and the profane is not merely a theoretical construct, but also “throws light on phenomena illuminated by empirical research,” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 75) such as the empirical research on the concept of *mana*.

Cassirer finds his theory of the origin of the sacred confirmed in the phenomena of *mana*, a topic which was of great interest to philosophers and anthropologists in the first half of the 20th century.¹⁵ Mana is first introduced by Codrington, an anthropologist who argued that the concept is central to Melanesian culture.¹⁶ According to Cassirer, mana has exact correlates in various cultures, such as the *manitou* of the Algonquin¹⁷, the *orenda* of the Iroquois, and the *wakanda* of the Sioux people (Cassirer, 1955, p. 76).¹⁸ Mana can belong to any physical thing, and is not necessarily ensouled – some life has it, while others do not. In mana one cannot even differentiate a strong distinction between substance and force. Mana cannot be classified with any particular set of objects, as Codrington and others attempt to do. Rather, Cassirer's eidetic variation locates the essences of mana in “[...] the impression of the extraordinary, the in-habitual, the ‘uncommon’” (Cassirer, 2021, p. 98). The idea of mana: “[...] opposes the layer of everyday existence [alltäglichen Daseins] and the event of running, in the customary beaten path, along another layer that clearly stands out from it” (Cassirer, 2021, p. 98). Thus, mana is one expression of the sacred, that domain that is set apart by *θαύμαζειν*. Rather than functioning as the foundation or definition of religion, mana is an expression of a more fundamental opposition between the sacred and the profane.¹⁹ In mana we find one “consistent form of predication:”

Mana and its several equivalents do not denote a single, definite predicate; but in all of them we find a peculiar and consistent form of predication. [...] whereby the holy is divided from the profane, and set apart from the sphere of the ordinary, in a religious sense indifferent, reality. By this process of division the object of religious experience may really be said to be brought into existence (Cassirer, 1946, p. 66).

¹⁵ For example, see (Buber, 1970, p. 71) in which Buber employs the concept of mana to argue that mythical peoples do not yet have an I-It relation because they do not yet have a determinate or discriminate I-You relation either. Adorno and Horkheimer also thematize the concept of mana as “undifferentiated” and is “not a spiritual substance in contradistinction to the material world”. See (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 10). Heidegger too engages with the concept of mana in his review of Cassirer's second volume, in which he argues that mana should be integrated into the ontology of Dasein. Heidegger claims that “In thrownness, accordingly, all disclosed beings have the ontological feature of overwhelmingness (mana)” (Heidegger, 1976, p. 43).

¹⁶ While Codrington interpreted mana as a supernatural, spiritual power, which he interpreted along animist lines. Cassirer rejects the animist reading of mythical culture, and argues that within mythical culture there is no clear delineation between psychic and physical reality (Cassirer, 1955, pp. 76-77).

¹⁷ Cassirer notes that when the Algonquin discover a new variety of fish, they apply the term ‘maniou’ as a term that connotes something that is unique or unusual (Cassirer, 1955, pp. 76-77).*

¹⁸ For these comparisons Cassirer draws upon Friedrich Lehmann's text *Mana*.

¹⁹ See (Cassirer, 1955, p. 78). Although Cassirer agrees with Marret's pre-animistic interpretation of mythical culture, he disagrees with Marret's “mana-taboo” formula, which Marret treats as the “minimum definition of religion” in his “The Taboo-mana Formula as a Minimum Definition of Religion”. For a classic and extended treatment of mana in the, see Mauss 2005, Chapter 4, “An Analysis and Explanation of Magic,” part 3 “Mana.”

As Pederson rightly observes, Cassirer's account of the origin of the sacred explicitly follows Rudolf Otto's account in *Das Heilige*, in which Otto locates the origin of the sacred in an *emotion*.²⁰ Regarding the sacred, Otto writes that "it first begins to stir in the feeling of something 'uncanny,' 'eerie,' or 'weird.' It is the feeling which', emerging in the mind of primeval man, forms the starting point for the entire religious development in history" (Otto, 1923, p. 20). Although mythical culture has its origin in the emotion, it cannot be reduced to an emotional experience of a subject or a collection of subjects. The practices and institutions of mythical culture have a life that outstrip and outlive the momentary and short-lived emotional experiences. The mythical distinction between sacred and profane remains intact despite the arising and passing away of the emotions of individual subjects. For mythical culture, the sacred objects, e.g., the gods, do not cease to exist with the passing of the relevant sentiments.²¹ Thus, although the sacred and the profane must begin in feeling, they cannot be reduced to feeling. Because the sacred has independence (or objective being) vis-a-vis the feeling of the subjects, the division between the sacred and profane can *only* be established if the feelings themselves are objectified or rendered independent of the subjects themselves (both individually and collectively).

Cassirer everywhere emphasizes that myth would be impossible without the objectification of mythical feeling. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol 2. Mythical Thinking*, Cassirer argues that the most primordial mythical images (such as nature Gods and demons) are objectifications of particular impressions (Cassirer, 1955, p. 201). The sacred comes to be only when: "the purely inward must be objectified, must transform itself into something outward" (Cassirer, 1955, pp. 103-104). Consider too Cassirer's famous work *Language and Myth*. Here Cassirer is adamant that: "subjective excitement becomes objectified and confronts the mind as a god or a demon" (Cassirer, 1946, p. 33).

Turning to Cassirer's late work, *Myth of the State*, we find that he here further clarifies the *anthropological* significance of mythical objectification. Like in his other texts Cassirer emphasizes how mythical symbolism "leads to the objectification of feelings" (Cassirer, 1946, p. 45). However, here he further considers how this differentiates the human being from non-human animals. Certainly, non-human animals are capable of emotional responses to objects in their environment. However, non-human animals do not objectify their feelings – they do not symbolize their emotional life. While the non-human animal may physically express their feelings, e.g., via a noise, physical posture, or other mode of expression, the human being *symbolically* expresses feeling by turning their emotions "into works" (Cassirer 1946, p. 46). Such works (such as a temple – the residence of the god) can persist as any independent physical object persists. Cassirer is keen to note that mythical works, such as mythical rituals, express of *the social life* of the human being (Cassirer, 1946, p. 46) – what astonishes the community as a whole. We could not properly understand or appreciate mythical culture if we considered myth to simply be the phantasmagoria of a sole individual. The worship of the gods and the sacrifice of individuals to those deities invokes and requires participation from the whole community, Myth is an affair of the whole community that defines the worldview of the people as a whole.

We would do well to remember that mythical symbols are a product of the *a priori* expressive function:

For myth the image of a thing or its name is equivalent to the thing itself. This indifference becomes truly compressible only if we consider that in the mythical world there is no logical representative or significative meaning,

²⁰ See Esther Oluffa Pedersen's "The Holy as an Epistemic Category and a Political Tool: Ernst Cassirer and Rudolf Otto's Philosophies of Myth" for a further comparison of Otto and Cassirer. As she notes, Cassirer's work on the sacred and profane is indebted to Otto. Unlike Otto, however, Cassirer does not inquire about whether the experience of the holy is a priori (Pedersen, 2008, p. 222).

²¹ Of course, one must also note that the objects of mythical veneration cannot survive if they are no longer able to evoke the proper emotional response in subjects to which they are separated and independent.

but that pure expressive meaning still enjoys almost unrestricted sway (Cassirer, 1955 [Vol. 3], p. 69).

The expressive function is the translation of the German term 'Ausdrucksfunktion' 'Ausdruck' means 'expression' though more literally it signifies an *outward pushing*. In myth emotions are pushed outwards. Consequently, the emotions themselves are separated from the agents subjected to them (Cassirer, 1946, p. 35) and they are pushed outward into independent existence. The amazement experienced before the sacred object is pushed out into the object, thereby transforming it: the object is *amazing*, and the source of amazement in subjectivity.

What are the tools of mythical objectification? In addition to language²², Cassirer follows Otto's analysis of the objectification of feeling by laying emphasis on mythical fantasy. Otto argues that all demons and gods spring from this origin in feeling, and the various forms of mythical *fantasy* are various ways that this experience of the uncanny has been objectified (Otto, 1923, p. 20). Although feeling is more fundamental than mythical fantasy (Cassirer, 1955, p. 219), mythical thinking is "embodied in the imagination" (Cassirer, 1946, p. 56) such that in myth objects are organized and classified by the "mythical imagination" and the "mythical animation of nature" (Cassirer, 1955 [Vol. 1], p. 299).

Thor, the God of thunder, is a particular, he is not a universal — he cannot be conceived by means of reason. Rather, as a particular image, I must *imagine* him to understand him. Likewise, to follow the story of Athena's birth does not require a capacity to grasp the universal features of anything. What is required is the capacity to picture Athena *arising* out of Thor's head. Insofar as myth consists of particular images, and imagination is that capacity whereby one can imagine particular images, the imagination is essential for mythical understanding.

Before myths can be understood by the imagination, they must first be formed by the imagination. Because mythical feeling does not remain a mere feeling, but is *transformed* into an independent being, imaginative objectification transforms the feeling into an image. The mythical imagination must be productive. For Cassirer, mythical objectification has its seat in the *a priori* function of the productive imagination:

Es ist doch eben diese Leistung der "produktiven Einbildungskraft," die uns allenthalben im Aufbau der einzelnen Formwelten entgegentreten ist und die gewissermaßen das einigende ideelle Band ist, das sich um sie schlingt (Cassirer, 2011, p. 183).

Signs exerts a "creative force" in all forms of culture, including myth, which is a "creative elaboration" (Cassirer, 1955, p. 23) of human feeling through the productive imagination. Because the products of the imaginative synthesis are contingent, and could always be otherwise, one cannot determine *a priori* how the imagination will be employed to objectify mythical feeling. Time and again, Cassirer recognizes the absolute need to consult the empirical study to mythology in order to uncover the various directions of the productive imagination.

4. The Law of the Sacred

Because Cassirer does acknowledge and thematize this important distinction between

²² Cassirer draws heavily on Usener's *Götternamen* and argues that by acquiring their own *proper* name the Gods acquire their own being. See (Cassirer, 1946, p. 20). Cassirer finds in Usener's account of the relation between Gods and language an application and reflection of his own view of language and naming, whereby naming confers independence on the objects named. For Cassirer "naming transforms the world of sense impressions, which animals also possess, into a mental world, a world of ideas and meanings". See (Cassirer, 1946, p. 28). For more on the objectifying function of language, see (Moss, 2014). In Cassirer's philosophy of culture, the relation between language and myth is complex, and deserves its own focused treatment. Here it should be sufficient to note that language is one component in mythical objectification. For more on the relation between language and myth, see (Weilandt, 2009).

the sacred and the profane, Verene's and Juenghani's concerns can be successfully addressed. Cassirer does not neglect the profane and ordinary element operative in mythical culture. The more significant problem lies elsewhere. Given that mythical culture is governed by the law of the identity of the relata, how in principle can the division between the sacred and profane be integrated into Cassirer's account of myth? As Silverstone states: "[...] the introduction of the sacred-profane dichotomy, which defines the space within which myth is to be found, and which generates its driving force, is itself slightly problematical" (Silverstone, 1997, p. 30). If the mythical law is all-encompassing, then there appears to be no space at all for the division between sign and signified. And yet, the division between the sign and signified seems essential to the form of profane existence. If the profane is incorporated, how can it be integrated without undermining the law of mythical identity? And further, given the existence of the domain of the profane, what is the form of culture that constitutes it? In order to show why Cassirer's law of mythical consciousness is not – in principle anyway – at odds with the distinction between the sacred and the profane, we must closely consider the origin of this distinction and how it operates in conjunction with the mythical law.

In "The Individual Categories of Mythical Thinking" Cassirer argues that myth employs the very same categories and forms of relation that are applied in other forms of culture, such as science and language:

Thus, taken abstractly, the same types of relation, unity and multiplicity, "co-existence" [Miteinander], "togetherness" [Beisammen], and "succession" [Nacheinander] dominate the mythical and the scientific explanation of the world (Cassirer, 2021, p. 77).

Myth and science both synthesize the intuitions given to consciousness according to the same relations: number, space, and time.²³ Indeed, the bulk of Vol. 2 traces the way that mythical consciousness employs these three forms of synthesis in the mythical construction of the world.

Although myth employs the same categories as science, myth diverges from science and every other form of culture by its distinct mode or *tonality*: "[...] language and myth each reveal a "modality" which is specific to it and in a sense lends a common tonality to all its individual structures" (Cassirer, 1955 [Vol. III], p. 13). In any form of culture, the specific categories can only exist in accordance with the mode or tonality of that form of culture. Each category is structured by a "universal" that "imprints its seal upon them" (Cassirer, 2021, p. 77). Cassirer is explicit that the mode or tonality of mythical consciousness is the "distinctive" "law of the concrescence or coincidence of the members of a relation [Relation]" (Cassirer, 2021, p. 81). This tonality not only differentiates the mythical form of synthesis from other cultural forms of synthesis, but it also constitutes the unique character of the sacred as such:

[...] the contents of mythical consciousness are not simply abandoned to unconnected singularities; rather there prevails in them also a universal – which, however, is of an entirely different kind and source from the universal of the logical concept. For precisely through their special character, all the contents that belong to mythical consciousness are rejoined into a whole. They form a self-enclosed realm – they possess a common tonality, by virtue of which they are singled out from the series of the everyday and ordinary, from common empirical existence (Cassirer, 2021, pp. 94-95).

Since it is the common tonality of the sacred objects by which they are singled out from the everyday, and the common tonality of mode of mythical consciousness is the law of the identity of the relata, it follows that Cassirer reads the mythical law as the principle in virtue of which the sacred is distinguished from the everyday. The mythical law is *the law of sacred being*.

²³ These forms of relation and synthesis are not exhaustive. Cassirer also invokes reality, substance, and causality among others. See (Cassirer, 2021, p. 77).

On this reading, Cassirer can simultaneously maintain the distinction between the sacred and profane without violating the mythical law. The mythical law defines the domain of the sacred, thereby setting it apart from the profane. Rather than stand in conflict with the sacred-profane distinction, the mythical law further *refines* it.

Indeed, Cassirer will further argue that in the domain of mythical *intuition*, the aspect of isolation [Absonderung] is a *universal* feature of everything sacred (Cassirer, 2021, p. 95). One might argue that this feature of 'isolation' is the tonality of mythical intuition, while the mythical law is a *separate* tonality or mode constituting mythical thought, such that myth itself would be constituted by a plurality of unique modes. However, this would not be consistent with Cassirer's own approach to the subject, for Cassirer never speaks of the 'modes' of mythical consciousness, as though there could be more than one – one mode for intuition, and another for mythical thought. In the very same chapter in which he argues that the mode of mythical consciousness differentiates the sacred from the profane, Cassirer continues to speak of the singular "mode of combination" by which mythical forms of space, time, and number are differentiated from other modes, such as science (Cassirer, 2021, p. 100). There are not two distinct modes of mythical synthesis. However, one can *relate* to this one mode in different ways, via intuition or thought. Myth *intuits* the sacred as unique, and *thinks* this uniqueness of the sacred according to the law of mythical thought.

To further illustrate the way Cassirer envisions the mythical law of sacred being, consider totemism. Cassirer proclaims that: "the structure of the totemic worldview, for example, can scarcely be comprehended except through this essential feature of mythical thinking" (Cassirer, 2021, p. 82). In totemism a sacred being is set apart from others, such as the red parrot.²⁴ The totem animal is sacred, and it is *intuitively* experienced as a unique and *extra-ordinary* being. However, the totem animal is not just conceived as something that is other to the ordinary, for the clan *thinks* about the totem animal as constituting their very identity. The animal is sacred, and in the totemic identification of human with the bird, the law of identification of the members of the relation, applies to the domain of sacred being.

If Cassirer really does limit the mythical law to the domain of the sacred, then it seems that myth is not an all-encompassing form of culture. Yet, this is impossible, for Cassirer holds that mythical culture is *omnipresent* in the experience of mythical people. Thus, by setting the law of mythical culture to one side of the sacred-profane distinction, one might reasonably object that Cassirer has contradicted his concept of myth as an all-encompassing worldview.

This objection too can be met with a closer reading of the text. Cassirer argues that the mythical law defines the whole of human experience, though this relation is dialectical:

The consequence of this twofold character is that in differentiating itself from empirical, profane substance, the sacred does not simply repel it but progressively permeates it; in its opposition it still retains the ability to give form to its opposite (Cassirer, 1955, p. 78).

The sacred defines the ordinary through its opposition to it. Were there no sacred being, there could not be anything profane. Indeed, the profane could not exist as "that which is ordinary" without the existence of the "extra-ordinary" that it excludes. By excluding the profane, the sacred gives the profane its determinate form. By negating the ordinary, the sacred determines the ordinary as profane, as *that which is not sacred*. Thus, the sacred and the mythical law that characterizes it, is omnipresent – either positively in the sacred itself or *negatively* as that which grants profane existence to ordinary beings. Profanity cannot exist without that which is hallowed – with the disappearance of the sacred, ordinary entities would still exist, but they would no longer exist with 'profane' valence – as members of a profane domain.²⁵ In short, even

²⁴ See Cassirer's discussion of the Bororos in (Cassirer, 2021, p. 82).

²⁵ Cassirer also emphasizes the fact that the mythical form is dynamic. The mythical form of consciousness progressively expands the territorial boundaries of the sacred, thereby shrinking the profane. However, the expansion of the

though the mythical law only directly applies to the sacred, in virtue of the fact that the mythical is responsible for the distinction between the sacred and profane, the mythical remains a complete and omnipresent form of culture.

The concept of the *taboo* offers a fitting exemplification of the negative way of mythical world-formation. The taboo limits and regulates the distinction between the sacred and the profane. As such, the taboo concept *implicitly* contains a reference to both the sacred and the profane. For example, in the case of totemism, there is a well-known taboo not to kill and eat the totem animal. The taboo sets the totem animal apart from all other animals through the prohibition. As a result, the taboo protects the sacred animal from the ordinary and profane course of life involved in the killing and eating of animals. Just as mana is an expression of the sacred-profane distinction, so too is the taboo concept. Far from being a foundation of religion in general, totem and taboo are expressions of the more fundamental relation of the sacred and the profane.²⁶

The sacred is the locus of mythical life. Eliade notes that the human being – in awe of the power of the sacred, is drawn to it. Mythical people conceived of the sacred as the center of the world, and “sought to live as near as possible to the center of the world” (Eliade, 1987, p. 43). The Achilpa carries the sacred pole with him in order to stay close to the center of the universe. On the one hand, the sacred is a force of attraction. On the other hand, the sacred is a repelling force:

For the sacred always appears at once as the distant and the near, as the familiar and the protective as well as the absolutely inaccessible, as the *mysterium tremendum* [fearful mystery] and the *mysterium fascinosum* [fascinating mystery] (Cassirer, 2021, p. 98).

If one violates a taboo, e.g., by killing and eating the totem animal, one risks *polluting* oneself. By violating the taboo, one blurs the difference between the sacred and the profane. Since this distinction is essential to the mythical world, treating the sacred as profane threatens the whole mythical worldview. The sacred has *the power* to curse anyone who would violate it and deny its transcendence – anyone who would dare to overstep the sacred threshold – the unifying difference – that maintains the mythical world. Accordingly, the sacred is not only an object of astonishment, but also of *fear*. As is evident, the mythical relation to the sacred is not only constituted by astonishment, but is saturated with other emotions too, such as fear and awe. The sacred is two-sided: it is not only that which fascinates and attracts us, but it is also that which is “forbidden” and “unclean”. Indeed, these opposed meanings can be read out of the very meaning of *ἅγιος*, the Greek term for the sacred. It is consecrated, set apart, holy, and *accursed* (See Cassirer, 1955, p. 79). As is evident, the negative way of world formation that constitutes myth is not only epistemic or ontological. Indeed, the sacred does determine the profane as that which is *not* the sacred. But the sacred is also that which polices the boundaries of the sacred with the threat of death – such fear is a practical and prudential negativity that constitutes and perpetuates the mythical worldview.

sacred never abolishes it as such. For example, while particular planets of heavenly bodies may originally be elevated to divine status, the mythical worldview develops into a worship of time itself. For more on this progressive incursion of the sacred into the profane, see Cassirer’s discussion of time in Vol 2, pp. 115-118.

²⁶ Because Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things,” he appears close to Cassirer’s account of religion (Durkheim, 2008, p. 46). Nevertheless, Durkheim holds that totemism is the “most primitive cult”. See (Durkheim, 2008, p. 77). Not only does Cassirer reject this view, but he also argues against modeling mythical relations on social relations. See (Cassirer, 1955, p. 194). For Cassirer, such a sociological model cannot account for the specific way that mythical life forms its world and understands those relations (in contrast to other forms of culture). Totemism is not the most fundamental form of religion; rather it is one more expression of the more fundamental mythical law that constitutes the sacred.

5. Concluding Remarks

Far from failing to acknowledge the distinction between sacred and profane existence in mythical consciousness, Cassirer both acknowledges and offers a theory of the origin of that distinction in the second volume of this philosophy of symbolic forms. Mythical consciousness, in the form of thought and intuition, has its origin in the *objectification* of emotional life. Far from being incompatible with the mythical law, the sacred is governed by that law, and constitutes the special tonality by which mythical consciousness is differentiated from other cultural forms. By recognizing the transcendental law of the coincidence of the relata as a *law of sacred being*, Cassirer's philosophy offers a compelling account of the form of mythical culture.

Cassirer is adamant that without an understanding of myth, we cannot understand any other form of culture, for all other forms of culture cultural forms that arise out of myth. Indeed, without grasping the form of magic or the form of the sacred, we cannot understand the meaning of disenchantment heralded by modern science. Hence, by better penetrating the law of sacred being that constitutes mythology, we uncover not only a better understanding of myth itself, but the historical movement(s) whose being rests upon the very negation and abolition of mythical culture.

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