

Thinking in Narrative:
Seeing Through To the Myth in Philosophy

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Philosophy and mythology are generally thought of as different methods of describing how the world and its nature can be disclosed by human beings. In *Myth and Philosophy*, Lawrence Hatab writes, “the world can be disclosed in many ways, leading to a pluralistic notion of truth(s)” (298). Where philosophy attempts to disclose truths by following the path of rationality, mythology discloses truths through the product of the imaginal. In myth, the psyche produces images which offer additional disclosure through further expansion. Both methods describe a world; both disclose valid insights. Hatab further suggests, “The problem with philosophy is not that it moved away from mythical imagery but simply that it took itself to be *nothing like* myth” (299). The paradoxical and soulful mix of light and dark that myth contains is exactly what is rejected by philosophy. Rational disclosure tries to delineate only what is a surety, what can logically be derived.

Rational disclosure, however, implies some form of narrative, and narrative can always be tied in some way to myth. Once the rational conception we call a “word” is used for the purpose of disclosing any sort of information, it enters into a narrative. As Ernst Cassirer describes, “no matter how widely the contents of myth and language may differ, yet the same form of mental conception is operative in both. It is the form which one may denote as *metaphorical thinking*” (84). Language is both rational and metaphorical. In *The Literary Mind*, Mark Turner suggests that literary narrative is the fundamental way our mind works, forming the basis of how we perceive and conceive of

our world. The key event occurs when mental conception, actual thought producing a concept, is written or spoken and becomes a metaphor so that it will make sense to those who did not conceive the thought. Metaphor is a simple, poetic narrative. James Hillman, especially in his text *Healing Fiction*, explores the use of archetypal narratives and how they allow us to intuit them for use in understanding and moving past our pathologies. The philosopher's rationality also begins with internally produced thought which then becomes expressed in narrative. In this context, philosophy becomes more similar to myth than first perceived.

Hillman writes, "Modes of knowing are never altogether purified of the 'subjective factor,' and this factor is one or another imaginal person who casts our consciousness into specific epistemological premises. Thus the first task of knowledge is knowledge of these premises, or Know Thyself" (*Healing* 77-78). Hillman circles to Plato, exploring how we might understand our worlds by understanding ourselves through the images our psyches create and the narrative fictions that follow from them. We then communicate our insights to others through the use of metaphorical narrative. The philosopher is no different. His/her rational thoughts issue from their imaginal psyches and can be considered narratives when they disclose them through communication meant for others. When we recognize the imaginal narrative in the philosopher's work, the relationship between myth and philosophy becomes clearer. While Hillman uses healing fictions by specifically applying them in the service of working through pathology, philosophy creates a narrative that can be seen as healing our discomfort in a world we are trying to understand. We can see examples of this when we examine widely different philosophers such as Rene Descartes and Jean-Paul Sartre.

They employ their methods as philosophy. On a narrative level, we can see through their work to the myth that lies within. While this may be beyond the original intent of their own work, this is meant to bring an understanding of their narratives to the reader and thinker of today's world.

Descartes began the formulation of his views by deeming "everything that was merely probable to be well-nigh false" (5). He methodically considered each of his thoughts and beliefs, casting away any he could not prove to be completely true. The first thought he decided he could use as a base for the rest of his work was "*I think, therefore I am*" (18). With that statement, Descartes began his narrative. He proceeded to a second truth, which is that his substance that thinks is a soul. This soul, distinct from his body, would still exist without the body. He then acknowledged doubt in these two truths, which made him "search for the source from which I learned to think of something more perfect than I was, and I plainly knew that this had to be from some nature that was in fact more perfect" (19). He decided a perfect something placed knowledge of possible perfection in his mind, and he called that perfect something, God.

As soon as Descartes proceeds to speculation about a soul, his argument can be analyzed as coming from the imaginal, a pronouncement out of the psyche. Though he is disclosing a rational view of the world by using thinking as the basis of his method, expressing thought is an imaginal method using metaphor. He sees his argument as rational development, but I believe we view what follows as a healing fiction. By positing the soul as distinct from the body, Descartes discloses a view that cannot be proved rationally. He moves to an imaginal narrative when he accepts the soul as non-material,

but still real. A possible rational argument against this declaration might be to consider the body a casing around a thinking soul, suggesting the possibility that if the casing is destroyed, perhaps the soul would also be destroyed. However, Descartes does not make that argument. As something with no definite, rational physical dimension, his conjecture on the soul is metaphorical language.

Descartes also writes, “A body can easily perish, whereas the mind by its nature is immortal” (55). He continues his narrative here, making an imaginal pronouncement by disclosing a story about the mind being immortal. Descartes believes this, and presumably wants his readers to do the same. However, if we do not believe his presumption, we can easily view it as coming from the imaginal. A rational question to Descartes, such as “Is the mind contained in a child, or even a baby, that dies, surviving immortally as an undeveloped mind?” is actually extrapolation into metaphorical terrain. The metaphorical language being used approaches myth. By myth, I mean the language of metaphors for ideas that cannot be explained, let alone known. Descartes often admits to having doubts with regard to his assumptions, which could be seen as the paradox of myth, the balancing opposites in production of a third. His argument is a third, produced between doubt and reason. The third is what myth discloses upon creation between two opposites.

Descartes continues with his narrative argument. How does he “plainly know” there is some perfect nature, simply because he understands that he is imperfect? Recognizing imperfection should only allow further recognition that everything can be imperfect, not an implication of there actually being something perfect. The imaginal

nature of Descartes' thought is again illuminated and can be seen as the next plot point in his narrative. His psyche is producing an imaginal narrative that he takes to be a rational argument explaining his world which he understands and accepts. This is a perfect example of creating a healing fiction, seeing through a story to the underlying myth, which here is the creator/creation myth. Being a myth, Descartes offers his own contradiction, writing "provided we but remember that our minds are to be regarded as finite, while God is to be regarded as incomprehensible and infinite" (52). With a finite and imperfect mind, there is no rational way to know or comprehend an infinite, perfect and incomprehensible being he calls God. In the very rationality in which Descartes creates his argument, we find an imaginal premise. Logically, we may follow his steps, but this logic must be recognized as a fiction, almost immediately jumping to a being that cannot be described through rationality or logic. This archetypal creator can be seen through as the healing fiction allowing Descartes to understand his world. At one point in his narrative, Descartes explicitly approaches this mythical disclosure. He writes, "Although one idea can perhaps issue from another, nevertheless no infinite regress is permitted here; eventually some first idea must be reached whose cause is a sort of archetype that contains formally all the reality that is in the idea merely objectively" (74). This archetype he considers to be his actual God. Descartes' does not believe he has created God, but that God he has posited placed ideas and understandings into his mind. Jungian understanding of archetypes would recognize the presence of this God archetype as being inherent in the structure of the human unconscious, not an idea that would necessarily lead us to rational belief in the existence of this actual, perfect being called

God. By naming this first idea, we see Descartes building his rational argument upon grounds that truly begin building a mythical narrative.

Descartes questions whether his God's perfections are inside of him; he decides the imperfectly gradual rate of increase of his knowledge proves he can never be perfect. The question of his God's perfection being within him approaches a depth psychological analysis, but his argument against his own perfection shows he had no recognition of his argument as the beginning of a mythical narrative. However, his assumptions regarding his rational thoughts can be seen as myth themselves. He states, "I have no choice but to conclude that the mere fact of my existing and of there being in me an idea of a most perfect being, that is, God, demonstrates most evidently that God too exists" (80). As a healing fiction, this is a common humanly created story: "There is a perfect God, who has created me and put thoughts into my head, though my being and my thoughts are both imperfect." Descartes believes in God, and believes his existence proves God's existence. He accepts a healing fiction when he writes, "For since I got my power of understanding from God, whatever I understand I doubtless understand rightly, and it is impossible for me to be deceived in this" (84). By positing this God, Descartes has accepted a metaphor for something that cannot be known, which functions as a healing fiction because it gives him his place in the world. Cassirer eloquently writes of this metaphorical acceptance:

The spirit lives in the word of language and in the mythical image without falling under the control of either. What poetry expresses is neither the mythic word-picture of gods and daemons, nor the logical truth of abstract determinations and relations. The world of poetry stands apart from both, as a world of illusion and fantasy – but it is just in this mode of illusion that the realm of pure feeling can find utterance, and can therewith attain its full and concrete actualization. (99)

Even as Descartes saw rationality in his argument for God, we are able to see the beauty in his narrative, the “pure feeling” that lies behind his rationality and the metaphorical attempt he makes at placing an unknowable God in the world.

While understanding Descartes’ thought as a product of his time and its place in philosophical history is necessary and worthwhile, it was my intention here to re-vision his work to show additional relevance for the modern world and our understanding of myth and communication. By examining Descartes’ work in this way, building a foundation for viewing James Hillman’s work in a new way, namely, as philosophy, begins to seem possible. Hillman writes, “Living one’s myth doesn’t mean simply living *one* myth. It means that one lives *myth*; it means *mythical living*” (*Re-Visioning* 158). In simple terms, mythical living means being aware of the myths in play around us through which we live our lives. Adding to the earlier quote from Hillman which borrowed from Plato, he goes on to write, “Know Thyself is the self-reflexive moment, a psychological *a priori* within all moments, that laugh of self recognition glimpsed in the images of one’s selves in all things” (*Healing* 78). The story here is one, brief moment when we glimpse the unknowable, are able to laugh at seeing ourselves in that unknowable, and then the moment is past. Just like the metaphorical feeling Descartes conveys by his belief in the perfection of God, Hillman here conveys a similar metaphorical feeling, not of God, but of seeing ourselves where Descartes saw God. Between Descartes and Hillman, the philosophical work of Jean-Paul Sartre blends a story of philosophy with a type of mythical living, entwining them impossibly together.

Sartre’s work needs to be examined because as a philosopher, he focused much of his attention on literature and the concepts of narrative and story as they applied to life.

He accepts Descartes' thought that the perfect must exist because he himself is imperfect, but this acceptance is not based on the existence of any perfect being. As he writes, "in our own apprehension of ourselves, we appear to ourselves as having the character of an unjustifiable fact" (*The Philosophy* 168). God is not what calls attention to our lack of perfection, but the lack of perfection itself. We have ground to make up if we wish to approach it. The tension between our lack and any possibility of getting nearer to perfection is again a classic dialectic that mythology deals with: opposites coming together to create a third, new possibility. Sartre analyzes two opposites in terms of narrative, but as he does so often, he is writing about both literature and life. "This is what deceives people: a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything which happens to him through these stories; and he tries to live his life as if it were a story he was telling. But you have to choose: live or tell" (*The Philosophy* 58).

He explains how one night he realized the difference when it struck him that the story he was living – café nights with a tall, dark woman – was actually the story he was stuck in. The living he was doing was preventing life itself, which for Sartre is the telling of the story that was lived. He reveals his valuation of telling the story when he writes, "I wanted the moments of my life to follow each other and order themselves like those of a life remembered. I might as well try to catch time by the tail" (*The Philosophy* 59).

Metaphorically, this *as if* living life, events following one after another, has less power than telling the story of those events. By telling the story, the creative power of the human being becomes present. The events resonate deeper in the re-telling than in the happening, because of the power being released through the story for those hearing (or

reading or watching a performance of) it. Descartes might believe the power in narrative is recognition of a perfection that we cannot aspire to. Jung would call this power release the archetypes being activated. Hillman would see it as the moment we understand the story we are in and recognize ourselves in every aspect of the universe, before the story ends and we can move on to another.

If philosophy and mythology are both ways to reveal, or disclose, the world, Sartre makes a key observation. He writes of “the consciousness that human reality is a ‘revealer’, that is, it is through human reality that ‘there is’ being, or, to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested” (“*What Is* 48). This not only reminds one of Descartes’ pronouncement “I think, therefore I am”, but can be seen as a truth behind Hillman’s work. When one is living in a story, but is unaware and has not had the story revealed in any way, there is no way to stop living that story. When the story does get revealed, life and possibility are manifested. The relationship Sartre describes as, “to our inner certainty of being ‘revealers’ is added that of being inessential in relation to the thing revealed” (“*What Is* 48), is also similar to Hillman’s patient/analyst relation. Though an analyst assists in revealing the patient’s narrative to them, the truth in the reveal is for the patient; that particular realization is essential only to him/her. However, the patient does not have realization without the analyst.

Sartre continues, “I cannot reveal and produce at the same time” (“*What Is* 49), reflecting back on his thoughts about living and telling. Living is producing, but the telling of the story allows something to be revealed; only it is not revealed to the teller. The writer or storyteller puts their own creativity and thought into the work, but only someone else can extract additional power or insight from it. The creator’s insight came

right before he/she put that insight into the work (*What Is* 49-50). Specifically acknowledging the need for both creator and reader to complete the creation of the third, Sartre further writes, “It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others” (*What Is* 52). The writer and the reader combine to create the power that arises in the reader. The parallel with Hillman’s method remains strong in the sense that the analyst and patient combine to create the power, the understanding really, in the patient. Hillman believes once the story is revealed, the power of understanding created, the story is over. A new story can be started, what Sartre names as living, for which insight will only be revealed when the myth is identified, what Sartre names as telling.

To further connect not only Hillman and Sartre, but also philosophy and myth, Sartre writes, “the reader is conscious of disclosing in creating, of creating by disclosing” (*What Is* 52). Creating by disclosure is also what Descartes did. He disclosed his imaginal and rational thoughts, creating an argument for his idea of the reality of the world. Sartre uses the idea in the service of art and specifically the art of writing and literature. By reading, a reader discloses a view of the world, which the reader is also simultaneously creating in his mind, word by word. He writes, “Each word is a path of transcendence: it shapes our feelings, names them, and attributes them to an imaginary personage who takes it upon himself to live them for us and who has no other substance than these borrowed passions; he confers objects, perspectives, and a horizon upon them” (*What Is* 53-54). Hillman also writes of the disclosure of myth, creating meaning through an understanding of how life can parallel myth by seeing through to the story.

Hillman then takes it a step further by creating new life, moving past Sartre's horizon, moving past the disclosure, and entering into a new myth. At this point, I would say Hillman's work becomes philosophy. Mythical living becomes more than a descriptive phrase and truly means an enactment of understanding and wisdom of life, of being truly present in, and mindful of, the world.

A great similarity also exists between Descartes' ideas of imperfection, Sartre's ideas of human transcendence and Hillman's use of Alfred Adler's work on inferiority. All three discuss human recognition of imperfection, though they arrive at different understandings of what that eventually means for us. Descartes arrives at the existence of God, a perfect being that must exist because the imperfections in Descartes could not exist in the perfect being. His conclusion is that imperfection in himself is owed to overreaching what he is capable of, his errors "owing simply to the fact that, since the will extends further than the intellect, I do not contain the will within the same boundaries; rather, I also extend it to things I do not understand. Because the will is indifferent in regard to such matters, it easily turns away from the true and the good; and in this way I am deceived and I sin" (84). The morality of the perfect being cannot be attained by the imperfect human, creating a world in which that moral perfection cannot be attained, and only imperfectly recognized. Sartre also writes of a human lack, but recognizes the human is capable of more. Our recognition of this lack, often through the experience of story, whether written, oral or by reflection on the life lived, allows us to persevere and continue the attempt at further living. He writes, "Human reality is its own transcending toward what it lacks" (*The Philosophy* 170), but he also writes "Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of transcending its unhappy

state” (172). Thus, perseverance is a key action for Sartre. Even though we seek to attain what we lack, the almost mythical paradox is that we cannot attain it. He offers a vision of life that can only move forward knowing it will never actually become perfect, even though the possibility is what drives us to keep trying.

Hillman uses Adler’s work to address this very issue, arriving eventually at a philosophy that adds compassion where Sartre is unable to. He asks, “If there is a primary inferiority in each and yet the basic human urge is for perfection, how can we recognize our lowness and rise to our heights?” (*Healing* 97). Whereas Sartre denies the possibility of happiness because of the constant ill-fated attempts at perfection, Hillman turns those attempts into what actually heals the psyche. “One feels purposefulness, that there is a way and one is moving on a way, a process of towardness, called by Adler striving for perfection, by Jung individuation” (*Healing* 105). The end result is not the reason we strive for this perfection; it is the journey itself. Understanding the journey through literature as Sartre might do is the same process in the end as Hillman’s idea of healing fiction. We understand our creative ability for constant invention by seeing through any story, allowing us to then move to a new story, or a new path on that road of striving for perfection. Descartes’ idea of turning away from the true, which he calls sin, is the point at which Hillman shows we can still progress. When we understand we have turned away from something, we can then move in a new direction.

Hatab writes, “For conceptual reason the mark of truth is consistency, that is, the conforming of a thing to a general law, classification, or empirical regularity. The utterly unique is a kind of outlaw and comes to be dubbed an illusion. But in myth [...] *anything*

of existential significance or displaying affective power is important and hence real” (35). For Descartes, the utterly unique becomes a sin; something the human is actually incapable of understanding and being. For Sartre, the illusion of human reality is that though we continue to strive for transcendence, its non-existence means we shall never attain it. Though we are unhappy in our striving, we must continue to do so in order to survive. Hillman allows for an understanding of the unique. At this level, myth becomes a rational tool to use in attaining that understanding. By accepting the existence of shadow elements in ourselves, we can use story, the healing fictions, to acknowledge them. We can move past an unhappy existence by creating a new thread in our life. We may soon be entering another unhappy fiction, but there is always the possibility of understanding that one as well. Sartre writes that we are “Always ready to bog down in the materiality of an image, thought escapes by flowing into another image, and from it to still another” (*The Philosophy* 87). Where he finds unhappiness in a constant striving for an end that we will never attain, Hillman finds an experience to learn from, allowing us a brief respite from that unhappiness.

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