

Humanities II

Notes and Comments in Preparation for Paradise Lost.

1. Comments and quotations from religious and philosophic sources.
2. Notes on Classical Mythology and Indian Creation Myths.

St. Thomas Aquinas:

The divine essence by its immensity surpasses every form to which our intellect reaches; and thus we cannot apprehend it by knowing what it is.

The Zen-Buddhist, Hsuan-chiao

You cannot take hold of it, nor can you get rid of it;
While you can do neither,
it goes on its way;
You remain silent and it speaks;
You speak and it is silent.

Alan W. Watt

'God is the most obvious thing in the world. He is absolutely selfevident--the simplest, clearest and closest reality of life and consciousness. We are only unaware of Him because we are too complicated, for our vision is darkened by the complexity of pride. We seek beyond the horizon with our noses lifted high in the air,--and fail to see that He lies at our very feet---we are like birds flying in quest of air, or men with lighted candles searching through the darkness for fire'

There are two ways of finding God---for the contemplative, the path of spiritual knowledge.
---for the active man - the path of dedicated action.

Aristotle: Ethics II:1.

We learn how to do things by DOING the things we are learning how to do.

Sir Arthur Eddington: from Nature of the Physical World.
(Chap.4)

If you take a pack of cards as it comes from the maker and shuffle it for a few minutes, all trace of the original systematic order disappears. The order will never come back however long you shuffle. Shuffling is the only thing which Nature cannot undo.

(Please recall Jocasta's certainty of her "everything is hit or miss" theory.)

Father Anselm. c 1200 an early Christian Philosopher.

I must believe in order that I may understand.
(Faith)

Peter Abelard c 12-1300 a brilliant and controversial priest of his time.

I must understand in order that I believe. By doubting we come to questioning and by questioning we perceive the truth.

Jacques Barzun. Contemporary scientist, humanist and philosopher. (French)

The pure sciences teach the behaviour of nature; the social sciences the behaviour of men in large groups; the humanities deals with the individual-- the whole man, body and soul, and his place in the universe of his being.

From the Rig Veda, the oldest manuscript in India comes the story of creation by the god Indra. In the beginning there were two warring factions of celestial beings, the Adityas and the Danavas. The Adityas were losing the battle so they asked Indra to be their champion. Now Indra had been born of Heaven and Earth when they were still one being. But he was so powerful and big that he terrified them and they split apart never to be rejoined. Indra occupied the space in between them. He promises to defend the Adityas if they will recognize him as king when he wins the battle for them. They promise and he wins, of course. At the end of the war the cosmic Waters which had been imprisoned by the Danavas were freed and were found to be miraculously pregnant. They soon gave birth to the sun. From here on Indra set everything in motion, as all the essential parts were now available. He established the distinction between Sat and Asat or between the Existent and the Non-Existent, and he was king of all.

INDIAN CREATION MYTHS

Sources: Indian Myth, Veronica Ions, Paul Hamlyn, London

Mythologies of the Ancient World, ed. S. N. Kramer, Anchor
Paperback A229

Brahmanic myth: Time is a continuous cycle of creation and destruction each cycle being 100 years of the life of Brahma. At the end of each cycle Brahma and all animals and matter are dissolved in the Great Cataclysm, Mahapralaya. Then follows 100 years of chaos and a new Brahma is reborn. One day in the life of the Brahma is equal to 4,320 million years on earth.

Actual creation, according to Vedic myth occurred when the golden cosmic egg, symbol of fire, after having floated in the waters of the cataclysm for 1000 years burst open and revealed the Lord of the Universe who took the form of Purush - destroyer of sins by fire. He was afraid of all the empty waters and took no delight in being alone so he split himself in two- one half male and one half female. But then he felt disunited so he joined himself to his female half, Viraj and they bore man. Thereafter they took the forms of all living things and produced offspring and thus started the world.

Later myth has Brahma creating the universe after he sprang full grown for the lotus of the universal spirit. Though omnipotent he was not omniscient and he made several mistakes. He created ignorance and threw her away but she survived and became Night and in turn bore the Beings of Darkness, who tried to eat their father; He persuaded them not to do such a thing and quickly created celestial beings to protect himself, and then went about the business of creating the rest of the world.

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A myth is a story whose primary purpose is not to entertain but to enlighten primitive man on matters which perplex him and cannot be made intelligible, as they can to us, by analysis or abstraction, since these are beyond his linguistic and mental resources. He is presented instead with a story which attempts to illuminate obscure subjects by providing a kind of historical antecedent or parallel to them. Something happens in the present because something not very unlike it has happened in the past or happens outside the familiar scheme of time. In a world where science and the scientific outlook do not exist and every natural event is shrouded in mystery, myths serve at least to make phenomena less formidable by relating them to more or less intelligible stories. In primitive societies myths perform the duties of cosmology, theology, history and science, and have a special round of duty in connection with the weather, the recurrence of the seasons, and the cycle of procreation, birth, growth, and decay in all living things. Primitive myths are often hard to understand because they assume connections which mean nothing to us and operate by emotional or visual associations in which we see little coherence. They are not conceived in a rational spirit of explanation but appeal to half-conscious and unconscious elements in human nature. To grasp their relevance we must not think logically of cause and effect but try to capture a mood or an atmosphere or an emotional frame of mind, in which individual images count for everything and must be allowed to make their full impact with all the echoes and implications and associations which they evoke.

Primitive Song

The primitive use of symbols differs from that in civilized poetry. First, though these lucent, concrete images may be said to symbolize something beyond themselves, such as the processes of fertility, they are not wholly separate from it but partake of its essential nature. In most modern symbolism a symbol may indeed embody much that is important to which it symbolizes, but it is separate from it, as the Cross embodies many Christian associations but it is not the same as Christianity. But primitive symbolism asserts a real identity. The whale and the womb, the roots of a tree and the male member, are treated, if not as exactly identical, at least as different examples of a single thing, which is both natural and supernatural and perfectly at home in the familiar world. Secondly, primitive song draws symbols from every day to bring the remote and the uncomprehended into a more approachable orbit. The parrots and the prawn help to make the mysteries of perpetual sleep and of re-birth less obscure. But modern poetry usually works in a different way. It uses an image to give a new significance or to cast a new light on what has been dulled by familiarity or devitalized by abstraction. Its aim is less to reduce a mystery than to enhance or revive one, or to reveal it where its presence has not been suspected, and this is natural enough in a world where much is understood and explained through general notions which indeed provide an approach to most experience but in the process discourage wonder and awe. Primitive man has these so abundantly that he feels no need to stimulate them by artificial means but wishes rather to keep them in control and to subject them to some kind of system. Thirdly, in modern poetry symbols are on the whole dispensable. They are not rare, but much poetry thrive without them. But in primitive song they are necessary for almost any subject beyond what is immediately seen by the physical vision, and even then they may be needed to explain its significance in a world where everything is explained by associations and similitudes.