

Mythos and the Semiotic Reconstitution of Self, Culture, and World

Thomas Alexander

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, USA

Abstract

I discuss the human need or drive for meaning (which I call “the Human Eros”) and how this centers on various central or core meanings that become embodied so as to constitute definitive identities—identities of self, group, culture, and world. I call these “mythoi” (and not “myths” insofar as their key feature is their importance and value—“myth” carries with it the distracting association of “falsehood,” especially “unscientific falsehood;” science is loaded with its mythoi like everything else.) These mythoi must be embodied experientially and in cultural habits, actions, rituals, i.e., praxeis, in order to renew and reconstitute a sense of meaning and value in existence. That is, mythoi serve the Human Eros. These mythoi employ tropes or cultural types as structural principles. Tropes themselves tend to group in various relational patterns and tensions that I call “constellations.” Much of the “play of signs” in cultural creation lies in exploring, clarifying, and even antagonizing these relations as ways of deepening the world of meaning. “Play” explores possibilities, beginning with given actualities. It may explore relations that remain distant from the core of a culture’s or individual’s self-understanding. But it may approach and, at times, directly engage core meanings and values, possibly transforming them.

***Keywords:* myth, mythos, Human Eros, spiritual ecology, trope, semiotic constellations, Book of Job, Iliad, Bhagavad Gita**

In 2010, Werner Herzog released a documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, on the recently discovered cave in the Ardèche region of southern France, Grotte Chauvet, probably the oldest and certainly one of the most amazing of the great Magdalenian caves filled with artistic images of Ice Age fauna. It was discovered in 1995 by three young French explorers looking for signs of concealed caverns. What they discovered exceeded

any expectation. It was a message from thirty thousand years ago from our direct *homo sapiens* ancestors. Throughout the cave were vibrant images of bison, elk, mammoths, lions, horses, and other animals. In the far reaches was a square stone with a cave bear skull placed so that its canine teeth protruded over the edge. It was unmistakably an altar. One of the explorers recalled,

Alone in that vastness, lit by the feeble beams of our lamps, we were seized by a strange feeling. Everything was so beautiful, so fresh, almost too much so. Time was abolished, as if the tens of thousands of years that separated us from the producers of these paintings no longer existed. It seemed as if they had just created these masterpieces. Suddenly we felt like intruders. Deeply impressed, we were weighed down by the feeling that we were not alone; the artists' souls and spirits surrounded us. We thought we could feel their presence; we were disturbing them. (Lewis-Williams, 2002, p. 17)

This quality comes across in the documentary quite forcefully as well. One of the young researchers, for example, had to take some time off from his daily trips into the cave because his dreams had become filled with lions—dreams for which he was thankful, but from which he needed a rest. In some ways, the cave was a physical journey into the very origin of the consciousness that emerged alongside with our particular type of human existence. It was symbolic, religious, artistic, magical—in a word mythic. I was impressed by the way in which the encounters by the explorers and scientists led them to express feelings of mystery and reverence. They felt a response beyond that of scientific interest.

In thinking about the origin of our distinctive form of mind¹ or symbolic existence, so manifest in the early cave art of southern Europe and lacking in the artefactual remains of our Neanderthal cousins, we have a choice. On the one hand, we can distance ourselves from what seem to be barbarous, ignorant, and superstitious times, blights which the long crawl toward civilization has removed, so that the shamans and mystic celebrants of those unknown rites belong to the realm of “They,” “Those People.” This attitude then seeks all those semiotic markers that distinguish Them from Us, not least of which would be “science.” Or, on the other hand, we might feel the fundamental connection, as did the explorers who discovered Grotte Chauvet, the scientist who dreamed of lions, and Herzog himself. In this case, the creators of the art are seen as “Us” in another life, as it were. The images in the caves are moments of a vast symbolic existence, now largely lost, but—and this will be my main point—far from alien. I believe that we are fundamentally the same as those distant people and we deceive ourselves to think otherwise. In short, I believe that we exist in worlds of mythic dimension that our symbols struggle to articulate or, even more, allow us to enter. I think we are not only myth-makers but myth-dwellers. I also think that one of our myths, the myth of scientific progress, has concealed this truth to perpetuate the living dream of our having a mythless existence.

There is a problem, however, when we refer to anything as a “myth,” for the common meaning is that this is the equivalent of dismissing something as false. I think this is one

of the major obstructions to an understanding of myth. Myth, I propose, should primarily be understood as an *important* story—as something that is central in structuring a world of values and ideas. Let us leave to one side debates about the story being “true” or “false” or as occupying some nuanced intermediary status. Since the term “myth” is hopelessly compromised, I will use the term “Mythos” for this alternative sense. I think this is important insofar as Mythos is a primary way in which human beings create and inhabit worlds of meaning. We need defining narratives and we need to explore these narratives, their relationships, and the tension of their symbolic power. This will reveal the importance of “the play of signs.”

Before I try to explain how that is, let me make it clear that I am departing from several standard approaches to myth, especially those that wish to limit mythic thinking to so-called “primitive” peoples. Anthropologists and psychologists like to equate mythic thought with what the people they study do; they themselves of course are offering “scientific” understanding, which is what “We” do. Another binary offers itself in this approach: mythology deals with “the sacred” or the “time of origins.” In contrast to this is the profane, marked by “secular time.” This was the position of a great scholar of the subject, Mircea Eliade. In *Myth and Reality*, for example, he says:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in Primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings.’ In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in the myth are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the ‘beginnings.’ Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the ‘supernaturalness’) of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the ‘supernatural’) into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being. (Eliade, 1963, pp. 5-6)

Certainly, Eliade characterizes what a great many myths of a certain genre and a certain “inflection” have, such as those creation stories that are at the root of the Abrahamic religions. Myth is a manifestation of the sacred beyond the secular, for which he invents the term “hierophany.” But, aside from the underlying Platonism of Eliade’s approach and the stark dualism he proposes, to say these sorts of stories characterize the essence of all myth obscures the very point I wish to make. First of all, as I mentioned, I wish to see myth-making—Mythos—as a broad function in human experience, even an everyday activity, and not necessarily something so removed as the category of “the sacred.” Second, there are many instances of myth that have “supernatural” characters

but which do not have Eliade's rigid distinction of sacred and secular. A notable example would be the stories surrounding the various trickster figures so prevalent in Native North American mythology: Coyote, Raven, Rabbit, Iktomi, Gloosap. Tricksters are both holy and secular, foolish and wise, creative and destructive (Hyde, 2010).

Let us look at another classic characterization of myth, here one by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. His focus is on the role of myth in social life. He says:

Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. ... Studied alive, myth ... is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject matter; it is not an explanation in the satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom (Malinowski, 1954, pp. 100-101).

In spite of his regrettable use of the language of "primitives" and "savages," Malinowski does argue for the pervasive presence of myth in modern life. He sharply rejects the prevalent idea in his day of myth as a failed effort at scientific explanation. The real power of the myth, he argues, lies behind any verbal recounting and in "the traditional foundations of social organization" that are only learned by "living within the social texture of the tribe" (Malinowski, 1954, p. 115). It is a "cultural force" and as such applies to our own culture (Malinowski, p. 143). Indeed, he adds, "I do, however, want to emphasize the fact that anthropology should be not only the study of savage custom in the light of our mentality and our culture, but also the study of our own mentality in the distant perspective borrowed from Stone Age man" (Malinowski, p. 145). In light of this he urges that "Myth is, therefore, an indispensable ingredient of all culture" (Malinowski, p. 146). Unfortunately, Malinowski did not live to complete this side of his arch, and all we have are his classic studies of South Pacific peoples, but none of ourselves.

Like Eliade, Malinowski reserves the term "myth" for some basic, constitutive reality that determines the central ideas of life. As such myth reaches into the issue of "origins" that set up and determine today the way things are and ought to be. Myth is thereby connected necessarily with the numinous quality of "the sacred." It is difficult to see exactly why someone considering the subject from the standpoint of the European Enlightenment—from the ideals of scientific progress and rational criticism of social practices—should find any further reason to study "myth" in society other than to

eradicate its root and branch. Ernst Cassirer regards mythic thinking as simply the preliminary stage of human rationality. It has the suffused immediacy of poetry but only implicitly does it have a network of logical relations. Human beings stabilize the flux of phenomena with symbols, and mythic thought is a stage in this process. Eventually language allows for the development of those symbolic relations, such as in mathematics and logic, that leads to science. The powerful immediacy of myth, the qualitative intensity of experience, becomes purified as art. He says that language as artistic expression “recovers the fullness of life; but it is a life no longer mythically bound and fettered, but an aesthetically liberated life” (Cassirer, 1953, p. 98).

I think all three of these approaches operate upon the fundamental premise of regarding myth primarily as something “They” do—the primitive people who are the exemplars illustrating myth. The attitude taken is from the enlightened scientific or rational standpoint, as if science or reason stood clear of any mythic structure or even lay under a spell of mythic self-forgetfulness. Human beings have this deep tendency to divide the world into “Them” and “Us”—it is one of the most fundamental habits we have. The origin story of the Acoma Pueblo Indians has two women in the beginning, Ia’tik and Nao’tsiti: Mother of Us and Mother of Everybody Else (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984, pp. 97f.). Appeals to Us vs Them mentality often successfully circumvent rational self-criticism, even when it is not consciously present (Berreby, 2008). My point for now, though, is that there is something suspicious in the way this common mythic mode of thought enters so naturally and even invisibly into the discussions of “Them” (“those primitives”) vs “Us” (“scientifically enlightened people”).

Let me reiterate my proposed definition of mythos: A mythos is any narrative (or narratively rich symbol) that provides a sense of self-identity, whether of individual or group, a sense of world-meaning, or a sense of cultural reality. Mythos relates a story that is *important* in some or all of these respects. The stories contain or embody core ideas and values by which our human world of meaning is constituted. The emphasis is upon the idea of *importance*, which of course can be a matter of degree rather than something absolute. This definition makes no mention of the sacred or of primeval times, though mythoi can include such things. But there can be “secular mythoi” too. We engage in mythos when we tell the story of how the West escaped primitive mythic thinking and developed science and reason. This, after all, is usually how a history of Western philosophy begins. In the beginning, all was darkness and superstition and then God said “Let the Greeks be!” and that’s how science came into the world. Remember Alexander Pope’s variation on this: “Nature and nature’s laws lay hid in night./God said ‘Let Newton be’ and all was light.” So, we have a mythos as to why we don’t have mythos. True or false, this functions to constitute a sense of who “we” are; it is a mythos. I shall return to this point.

Before doing so, I wish to raise an even more general issue, namely the origin of meaning itself in human existence. Mythos serves our need for meaning in a very central way. You may know Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl was a Viennese

psychiatrist who, as a Jew, was sent to several Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz. Out of his experiences he began to pose the question as to what he could do under those degrading and nearly hopeless circumstances to help his fellow prisoners and himself find some sort of meaning to their existence. We ultimately do have choice, he concluded, even if it is the attitude we take toward suffering, that of others as well as our own. From this he developed his particular form of therapy, “Logotherapy,” which focuses on helping people find or create meaning in their lives. Unlike the retrospective, introspective approach of Freudian therapy, Frankl’s approach stresses the future and what actions the individual can do to realize meaning in their existence. Without getting into the details of his approach, what is striking is his basic thesis: “According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man” (Frankl, 1984, p. 104). Frankl even refers to it as a “will to meaning,” contrasting this with the Freudian “will to pleasure” or “pleasure principle.”

Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. (Frankl, 1984, p. 105)

Frankl relates an amusing story to illustrate what he means. He had a patient come see him after having tried Freudian therapy. He hated his job as a high-ranking American diplomat and his Freudian analyst had spent some five years trying to convince him this was all about his “unconscious hatred toward his father” (Frankl, 1984, p. 107). Frankl suggested he change jobs, he did so, and the problems disappeared. The individual was not afflicted with a neurosis but an “existential frustration”—the fact he hated his job—rooted in his life. There are times, as Frankl notes, when “suffering may well be a human achievement”—to hate a bad situation is a realization not some repression (Frankl, p. 108).

I want to focus on this “will to meaning” or, as I have called it, “The Human Eros” (Alexander, 2013). This touches upon something very fundamental in the kind of beings that we are, and yet it often goes without comment or inquiry. We had a century of Anglo-American or analytic philosophy devoting itself to the question of meaning without, to my knowledge at least, raising the question of *why* human beings need meaning. When we reflect on this, the more important it seems as a context within which all other issues of meaning must be placed. So here is the thesis of “The Human Eros”: Human beings need to experience life as embodying meanings and values that they find fulfilling. Though this is an ontological claim about us, I believe it is also a biological fact, as basic as our need for water, food, and air. Without the fulfillment of the Human Eros we suffer and die—or else the denial of meaning inverts Eros toward its destructive counterpart, let us call it “Eris,” or “destructive strife.” I wish to emphasize the biological reality of this need and urge that anyone who doubts it spend some time with a person struggling with serious

depression. Human life is the manifestation of a desire—an Eros—for meaning.²

“Eros” is a better term than Frankl’s Germanic expression “will.” “Will” suggests an inner power that is inwardly complete and self-directive whereas the root meaning of “Eros” denotes both an inner need or lack and an outwardly directed, object-focused intentionality, the way hunger seeks out food. When one loves something one both needs it and searches for it. Eros bespeaks the vulnerability of human existence and its capacity to break beyond its narrow cage of narcissism to something transcending the immediate self. The vulnerability Eros involves is powerfully expressed in one of Sappho’s poems, *Phainetai moi*. I quote here Anne Carson’s translation

He seems equal to gods that man
 who opposite you
 sits and listens close
 to your sweet speaking
 and lovely laughing—oh it
 puts the heart in my chest on wings
 for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking
 is left in me
 no: tongue breaks, and thin
 fire is racing under skin
 and in eyes no sight and drumming
 fills ears
 and cold sweat holds me and shaking
 grips me all, greener than grass
 I am and dead—or almost
 I seem to me.
 (Carson, 1986, pp. 12-13)

Many people misread this as a poem about jealousy; it is not. Sappho is fixated on the lovely woman sitting next to “that man,” who seems “like a god” because he is *not* vulnerable to her beauty. Gods are immortal, impervious; he sits there and chats. Sappho, by contrast, recounts to us the ways this woman’s beauty progressively robs her of speech, sight, hearing, her very body, bringing her close to death. I think this poem helps us understand why Eros is a need more than a “will.” And this is what Diotima emphasizes in her great speech in *The Symposium* (201d f.). The ever-moving psyche, the cycle of creative life, has the need of being even to exist as Becoming. The erotic object of the Beautiful is thus the perpetual possibility of the Psyche’s existence itself. The Psyche’s need makes it radically open to the being of the Beautiful in a way that some other Form could not. Forms include and exclude; they do not love and create. But the only way for Psyche to possess the Beautiful is to give birth to its temporal offspring and likenesses: the children of life, of art, virtue, intellect, and wisdom. Eros is thus generative and

creative because it is vulnerable and open to the beautiful. It needs the beauty of the world.

The “Human Eros” is the creative urge toward embodied experiences of meaning and value. And this is a natural fact as well as ontological condition about us, rooted in the kind of creatures we are. We need environments of meaning and value as part of our mode of existence, our “being in the world.” The primary way we accomplish this is through cultures. Cultures are symbolic environments or, as I call them, “spiritual ecologies,” within which the human need for meaning can be met. Though the particular symbol systems that constitute various cultural worlds are diverse, they all spring from a common need: to nourish and sustain the Human Eros. It is important that at birth we are not simply born into a physical environment but also a cultural or “spiritual” one, using “spirit” here in the sense of the German *Geist*. It marks out a range of determinate meanings and values that are symbolically embodied in language, behavior, thought, and even dreaming. Cultures are the great collective achievements of our species, but each one is so immanent to its inhabitants that it is often invisible, except when it is presented with a different culture. They are also dynamic and organic, that is, developmental and responsive. This makes them inherently temporal and historical, even though a given culture may have no sense of history or change.³

Now cultural or spiritual ecologies have structures, that is, they have webs of symbols and meanings that have importance in defining that culture to its members. These webs are deep in the flesh of lived experience and may have difficulty being consciously expressed. This is where the concretizing function of mythos and the exploratory nature of play enter in. There are often key cultural stories that help locate, determine, reawaken, and renew these central meanings and values. They do this through giving embodiment to key cultural tropes. A trope, in the sense I am using the term, is a generic or archetypal idea, meaning, ideal, or value that has importance for a cultural group. It is “archetypal” only in a functional sense: it works as a constant touchstone or resource giving depth to various ways of cultural expressions. (Thus, I do not intend any Jungian notions of a collective unconscious or some deep structure of the mind.) If the figure of The Mother is found as central throughout the world’s cultures, from the Pueblo Corn Maidens to the Feminine Principle of the Dao, it is because all human beings have mothers and they are important. Examples of key tropes from Anglo North American culture would include Individuality, Freedom, and Rebellion. Native North American cultures center about the key ideas of Transformation, Showing Respect, Directional or Centered Existence. Classical Hellenic culture centralized such tropes as Aretē or Excellence, Limit, and Proportion or Logos. Tropes are often tacitly buried in the symbols and mythoi a culture explicitly uses, but they function to gather together and make intelligible what would otherwise be a mere plurality. And the mythoi in turn provide a way of articulating the trope in a definite experience, thereby serving the Human Eros.

Tropes as such are inherently abstract and even indefinite insofar as they allow for a number of different manifestations or turnings, as the word “*tropos*” indicates. (Homer

describes Odysseus as “*polutropos*”: a man of many “turns,” a reference to his multiple talents for devising schemes. [Homer, *Odyssey* I.1, Lattimore trans., 1965]) Think of the many ways that the trope of Individuality maybe embodied in American culture. Remember that my term “Mythos” includes stories believed to be true as well as those that are folklore or consciously made up. From *Huckleberry Finn* to Joss Whedon’s science fiction/western series *Firefly*, from the familiar icons of our history books to recently celebrated and appropriated figures like Frieda Kahlo and Gloria Anzaldúa, we are provided with embodiments of the same underlying trope: the person who refuses to be defined by convention or society. While the trope as an underlying abstraction gives connection and depth to the embodiment, the embodiment gives the necessary concrete existence in cultural life that serves the Human Eros. We need to experience meaning in concrete ways. And so a culture has as one of its tasks providing moments and places where these revivifying concrete encounters with embodied meanings and values occur. This is done by a range of strategies, from stories and works of art to rituals and practices. We can call all of these *mimēseis*, “enactments.” (Again, think of all the ways in which the American trope of Freedom can be embodied, from characters in fiction to flags to rhetoric or abstract philosophical works like Rawls’ (1971), *A Theory of Justice*.) So: the experiential encounter with embodied tropes allows for an “enactment”—a *mimēsis*—that enlivens and renews the sense of meaning and value that feeds the Human Eros and revitalizes the spiritual ecology of the culture. The identities of self, group, world are reestablished.

In describing tropes as “webs of symbols and meanings” I do not wish to imply that cultures are inherently “systematic,” at least in the overly determinate way as some of the structuralists would have it. Tropes tend to be associated with certain other tropes, grouping themselves into what might be termed “constellations.” The webs of symbols may include conflicts, tensions, and expanses of vagueness. And this is where the “play of signs” comes in most strongly. One of the tasks of cultural reflection and creation is to try to mediate the dynamism and explore the possible relations of these constellations. Religion, art, philosophy, law, and politics try to explore the tensive areas between tropes, resolve conflicts where they become manifest, and articulate or explore the vagueness that surrounds tropes. Many of a culture’s or an individual’s most important mythoi have to do with the articulation of tensive relations and how they may be reconciled. I will illustrate this thesis with four different modes of “the play of signs” as exhibited in major cultural works. The four modes of play discussed are: *Unification*, *Clarification*, *Intensification*, and *Integration*. I will illustrate them respectively with the “Memphite Creation” of Ancient Egypt, the *Iliad* of Homer, *The Book of Job*, and *The Bhagavad Gita*.

First let us look at a trope that can simply unify a diversity of symbols without involving a systematic articulation. My example is the ancient Egyptian idea of “*ma’at*.” Anyone who has studied ancient Egyptian culture however briefly will realize that systematic rigor and consistency was not a prime value, whereas symbolic richness was. Not only were a staggering number of gods worshipped, but the relative importance of

each one varied from place to place and time to time, and the gods themselves blended and separated. Each of the forty-two nomes or states had its patron god and when a new dynasty was founded and a new pharaoh ascended, the patron deity of his nome suddenly rocketed to supreme importance. The august high god of the New Kingdom, Amun, was at first only the local god of Thebes, home of the founders of the eighteenth dynasty. To assure his importance he was merged with the ancient pharaonic sun god Re and so became Amun-Re. The mythology of the culture is filled with hundreds of variations or alternative accounts. It would, however, be hard to articulate the “theology” involved in this. If the Egyptians had wished for a logically unified theology, their mythology offered hundreds of opportunities for religious conflicts that would need to be resolved before this goal could be achieved. But (with the exception of the monotheistic dogmatism of Akhenaton) they remained largely at peace on the issue. For all the gods themselves were embodiments or symbols of the key trope in the ancient Egyptian world-view: *ma’at*. *Ma’at* is a word that means that which is level and stable, what is straight and right, what is true and just. It is the guiding expression in Egyptian architecture and art. It is the key idea in their account of the creation and so provides a key trope for the whole culture. The name of the creator god again depends. Some versions have Re. The so-called “Memphite Creation,” dating perhaps to the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt places the god Ptah as the creator, for he was the patron god of the new capitol located at the border of the Two Lands.

The story is fundamentally the same. In the beginning was a watery abyss, the waters of Nun. Out of these waters a hillock emerged—an image taken from the receding of the annual flooding of the Nile as land begins to emerge, heralding the growing season. Upon the primal hillock was the primal god (Ptah, Re, Atum, Amun, take your pick) and the god spoke the names of Shu, god of wind and air, and Tefnut, goddess of the moisture and rain, who gives birth to Geb, the Earth, and Nut, the starry heavens. Then step by step he produced an ordered world, a world morally founded and embodied in the social institutions. The idea of *ma’at* is that of a foundational moral order. It is represented in the pyramids themselves, images of the original hillock, the Benben. It pervades the moral literature of the Old and Middle Kingdoms. One of the favorite stories given to young scribes to copy was “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant” whose talent for making a series of lofty speeches about *ma’at* secures his victory in a complaint against a corrupt official. As the idea develops, *ma’at* becomes the basis for the ideal of immortality for the common people—a life lived in balance with this principle was able to stand rectified before the dread judge of the dead, Osiris, as the soul made the “Declaration of Innocence” before forty two gods while its heart hung in the balance against the feather of truth, of *ma’at*. The order that emerged as the basis of creation would sustain the soul in harmony with it.⁴ To see the pervasive way the trope of *ma’at* gave a unifying moral confidence to the Egyptian world-view one only need contrast it with the Mesopotamian outlook. Where the Egyptians saw moral right as the foundation of the world, the Mesopotamians saw conflict and struggle as basic. And for men, the only immortality was

the memory of great deeds, for, as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (see N. K. Sanders, 1972, pp. 118f.) tells, all of us, great and small, end up in “the House of Clay.”

Now let me give an example of connected tropes that are in tensive relationships, ones needing articulation, that is, a *clarification* through of “the play of signs.” Classical Greek culture saw the universe as a dynamism of various powers. It achieved order and balance through these powers doing two things: they exercised their power within their proper limits and they refrained from overstepping those limits. Zeus does not interfere in Poseidon’s domain and vice versa. This is how cosmos is maintained and the Greek idea of justice (*dikē*) is grounded in this idea of fair distribution and proportion. Plato’s *Republic* (e.g., Grube, 1974) is an essay on having justice as the overriding virtue in the soul for it thereby assigns the various powers of the soul to their proper functions. Thus the core trope of Greek culture, virtue or excellence (*aretē*), enjoins that one seek to realize to the greatest extent possible one’s constitutive function or purpose. “*Aretē*,” like its Latin cognate *virtus*, really means “manliness.” Striving to realize virtue is a core value. But it also involves the idea of limit, specifically self-limitation. This was what was meant by the Delphic injunction “Know Thyself.” It means “Know your limits; don’t overstep them.” Above all, it meant “Remember you are mortal, not divine.”⁵ To overstep one’s proper limits was to commit *hubris*, for which we have no exact corresponding term. *Hubris* can be rendered as “arrogance,” but it implies an incapacity to perceive one’s actual abilities and so to demand more than one is due in terms of honor. It implies lack of self-knowledge. So here is the tension: *aretē* demands one try to excel, but *hubris* warns one not to go too far. This tension is a central theme in many Greek myths: the hero does something great, but in a moment of self-delusion oversteps his limit and falls.

The *Iliad* is a masterful exploration of this tension in the context of the values of Homeric culture where virtue (*aretē*, literally, “manliness”) meant above all being a great warrior—not just a great fighter but one with nobility of character, an ideal that included a sense of justice (*dikaio sunē*) and self-mastery (*sōphrōsunē*). The story begins when the supreme war chief of the Greeks, Agamemnon, is forced to give up a female, taken as his war prize. Her father, a priest of Apollo, has offered a handsome ransom, but Agamemnon has boorishly refused and threatened him. The priest prays that Apollo shoot arrows of pestilence throughout the camp, which he does. Soon many men have died: “The corpse fires burned everywhere and did not stop burning” (Lattimore, 1951, I.52).⁶ Under pressure now by events and his war chiefs, Agamemnon is forced to surrender Chryseis, but now, without his “prize,” faces a public humiliation that he can’t abide—Homeric culture is very much a “face culture” or “shame culture.” “Find me then some prize that shall be my own, lest I only/among the Argives go without, since that were unfitting...” (I.118-19). An exchange of rash words follows, initiated by the hot-tempered Achilles calling Agamemnon “greediest of all men” since there are no more prizes to distribute. Let him wait until there are more prizes to be distributed and he can be repaid three—even four times over. The argument now quickly gets out of hand, ending with Agamemnon taking one of Achilles’ cherished slave women, one Briseis. Now, of course, Achilles, the

best warrior of the Greeks, is insulted and withdraws from the fight, taking his warriors with him. With Achilles gone, the Trojans eventually drive the Greeks back to their ships. Repentant, Agamemnon sends a delegation to Achilles offering apology with many rich gifts—gold, horses, and women, including Briseis, and the hand in marriage of one of his daughters (IX.115 f.). But Achilles' pride and anger have taken command unchecked, and he spurns these gifts, stating, in effect, there are no goods rich enough—not all the gold of Egypt—to match his pride and he wouldn't marry one of Agamemnon's daughters, "not if she challenged Aphrodite the golden for loveliness" (IX.389). To a Greek audience, this is a clear sign that Achilles' sense of self-honor has become *hubris*, excessive arrogance.

And so more disasters for the Greeks ensue. At last, Patroclus, Achilles' companion-friend, offers to join the battle, wearing Achilles' armor in the hope of restoring valor to the Greeks and causing fear among the Trojans. He is killed by Hector, and when Achilles hears the news he is filled with rage and grief. This is the key moment. Up to now Achilles has kept his heroic nature, though his rejection of the fitting apology anticipates his growing excess of self-esteem. Now, he is filled with an insatiable rage that veers ever closer to insanity.⁷ The conventions of noble fighting are thrown aside as he slaughters his way across the battlefield, killing those who beg for mercy as suppliants when they should have been spared.⁸ When he finally confronts Hector, Hector tries to establish that the victor will treat the body of the foe with honor: "Come then shall we swear before the gods? ... Brutal as you are I shall not defile you ... But after I have stripped off your glorious armor, Achilleus, I will give your corpse back to the Achaeans. Do you likewise" (XXIII.254-59). But Achilles will have none of that. There are no oaths between men and lions or between wolves and lambs. And so, after killing Hector, he disgraces the body and refuses it burial, dragging it behind his chariot daily around Patroclus' burial mound. Twelve days pass and the gods notice the offense now. Apollo says Achilles "has no feelings of justice" in his heart, and like a lion he "has destroyed pity and there is not in him any shame" and now he even does dishonor to the silent earth (XXIV.40-44).

Achilles' is risking his heroic honor by giving in to excess of anger. This is the real danger to his status as a hero. (Something that was oblivious to the makers of the recent movie *Troy* in which Brad Pitt played up Achilles' psychotic tendencies as his heroic virtues.) Homer ends the poem beautifully with Priam coming alone to Achilles to beg for his son's body and Achilles suddenly sees that his father too will soon mourn him as Priam does Hector. It is a moment of proportional restoration, a moral ratio or *logos*: Achilles/ Peleus : Hector/Priam. With that Achilles rescues his heroic nature, finds his proper, mortal limit and discovers the point where *aretē* ends and *hubris* begins. When Achilles comes to know himself, anger ends, and there Homer ends the poem. The poem does not end with the fall of Troy but with the restoration to Achilles of a sense of moral proportion. The tension of excellence vs. excess has become clarified and illumined by the narrative "play of signs."

Most of the really great works of a culture involve the semiotic exploration of these sorts of tensions. The aim is usually to resolve the felt dissonances or to make vague

relationships more definite. But sometimes the aim is to intensify and make manifest latent tensions between key tropes. This can be called an *Intensification* through the play of signs. One of the most important instances of this sort is *The Book of Job*. Written sometime in the fifth century BCE, it takes up two central tropes in the development of Judaism: the idea that God rewards those who are obedient and who serve Him according to the Law (call this the trope of *divine obedience*) and the idea that God embodies not only power but supreme justice (call this the trope of *divine justice*). These tropes come to bear on the problem of the suffering of good people like Job. If Job obeys God and God's Law, why is he punished with the worst of misfortunes? The *Book of Job* opens with a rather fairytale account of the story of Job, a man living in a removed place and time who was perfectly upright, to the point where God points him out to the Satan (who at this time is something of a prosecutor in the Heavenly Court). Satan challenges God—Job follows you because you are good to him, but take all that away and he will curse you. And so God gives His permission for Satan to do what he will, but not to “harm his person” (1.12).⁹ Job loses his worldly goods, his children, and, finally, his health. His wife tells him to “curse God and die!” (2.9), but he refuses. Job is then visited by three friends who at first seem to offer sympathy and comfort, but begin to imply that Job must be guilty of some transgression, since God is just. At last, Job bursts forth and curses the day he was born, asking, “Why is the sufferer given light?” (3.20). This provokes one friend, Eliphaz, to encourage Job with the conventional view, simplistic and false, that God will ultimately reward the just; Job's reassurance is his innocence: God “may give pain but He binds the wound” (5.18). Job responds with the first of many affirmations of his guiltlessness: “For never have I suppressed the Holy One's commands” (6.10). This exposes the real message behind Eliphaz's “reassurance”: Job must have done something wrong to suffer as he does. One of the dynamisms of the poem is this transformation of friendly commiseration to Eliphaz's ultimate denunciation, “Your evil is tremendous, your sins unending” (22.5).

Thus emerges the fully articulate statement of “the problem of evil” in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, a tropic tension that still makes itself felt. In the development of the Hebrew religion, the figure of God changed from a figure simply characterized by power to one who was morally just and good, a God who, as such prophets as Amos, Hosea and Isaiah affirmed, found acts of goodness for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger at the gate more pleasing than sacrifices. At first, it seems, the Hebrew God was not defined by moral goodness so much as by sheer power. But as goodness became a defining characteristic of God, the problem of the origin and nature of evil thereby also presented itself more insistently. And, some scholars argue, this is what lies behind the development of “*ha satan*” as a character in such later books as *Job*. (This of course exposes a tension with the contemporaneous development of the idea of full monotheism in the “Second Isaiah.”)¹⁰ As noted, in *Job* Satan is a member of God's Heavenly Court. By the time of Jesus he has become the tempter to turn from God and to worship wealth and power instead, as he offers Jesus.¹¹

The debates between Job and his “friends,” who in fact are his accusers, do not

resolve the problem at all, but reassert the question ever more urgently. And the ending itself is a mystical manifestation of God in which the vision of the immensity of creation silences Job without answering him. There is no theologically satisfying answer to the text. The problem, however, has been eloquently and unflinchingly exposed. Nevertheless, *The Book of Job* may be, as one of my Jewish friends once said, the most Jewish book of the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible. Job's faith lies in his relentless moral realism both as to his innocence and to the blunt fact of his suffering; he steadfastly refuses to accept the facile theodicies of his so-called friends, and it is to Job that God ultimately reveals Himself, chastising the friends. To Eliphaz, God says, "I am very angry at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken rightly about me as did my servant Job" (42.7). As Raymond P. Scheindlin puts it:

By using the conventional tale as the frame for the poem, the poet satirizes its claim that we inhabit a world governed by justice and meaning. He demolishes the tale's innocent faith by means of his imaginary dialogue, which brings to the surface attitudes that the story was designed to suppress. He transforms the meaning of Yahweh's reward of Job from an acknowledgement of uncomplaining suffering to an acknowledgement that Job has grasped and intrepidly maintained the most terrifying reality. (Scheindlin, 1988, p. 17)¹²

The "play of signs" in this instance does not *resolve* the tensions between these tropes but *intensifies* them relentlessly. Each attempt to expose a moral reason to Job's suffering is explicitly refuted. The insertion of the speech of Elihu, a young man who promises to answer Job, is thought to have been a later addition by some writer who could not abide the failed efforts of the friends.¹³ But it simply repeats points made (and refuted by Job) earlier. In this sense it does not find an intellectual resolution in the relation of these tropes but holds them up, illumines them and their problematic connections, insisting upon them while yearning for understanding, making this ultimately both a poem of moral realism, mysticism, and faith.¹⁴

I will briefly look at one other work that illustrates the "play of signs" in terms of trying to explore and harmonize a large diversity of potentially conflicting cultural tropes, that is, through *Integration. The Bhagavad Gita* although not having the status of the Vedas, authoritative scripture, by its poetic quality and capacity to integrate a variety of religious ideals makes it a central devotional text of Hinduism. The primary concern is to reconcile the teaching of the *Upanishads* that only Brahman is real and their affirmation that the aim of life is union by adopting an ascetic life. i.e., yoga, with the demands of society that one perform one's duty or *dharma*.¹⁵ Behind this tension, which we might superficially distinguish as that of "the practical and the mystical," lies the pervasive acceptance of the idea of reincarnation as the central fact of existence and the possibility of transcending its karmic fate through a special effective knowledge. (This is a common presupposition not only in the various forms of Hinduism but in the heterodox systems of Jainism and Buddhism.)¹⁶ The *Gita* undertakes to display the various types of dharma

and the various proposed forms of yoga and to reconcile them in relation to the problem of salvation and practical action. Its solution is the idea of selfless, devotional action or “bhakti yoga.” It also seeks to integrate the rather stark, impersonal ideal of the Ultimate, Brahman, of the *Upanishads* with more personal, accessible forms of theism. The *Bhagavad Gita* was composed sometime between the fourth century BCE and the first century CE. It was inserted into the national epic of the *Mahabharata* (itself the product of many hands). The poem begins as the great, culminating battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who have cheated the noble Pandavas of their birthright, is about to begin. The Pandava hero Arjuna, asks his charioteer—the god Krishna—to drive out in front of the battle lines so he may observe those whom he fights, and in so doing he realizes that on the opposing side are many friends, teachers, and relatives. As a warrior, his true purpose is to uphold dharma—not just duty but, as noted, the order of the moral universe. Yet in fulfilling his obligation to fight he will be destroying dharma and degrading society with the results of the war, which he sees clearly. This fills him with an eloquent despair and he falters.

They are teachers, fathers, sons,
Grandfathers, uncles, grandsons,
Fathers and brothers of wives
And other men of our family.
I do not want to kill them,
Even if I am killed, Krishna;
Not for kingship in all three worlds
Much less for the earth! (I.34-35)¹⁷

The rest of the poem consists of a series of lessons, culminating in Krishna’s revelation of his true, infinite, and overwhelming infinite form. (We must imagine that time has been suspended for this discussion to transpire, as the battle is impending.) Krishna tells Arjuna that the self endures through birth and death, so “never in the future/shall we cease to exist” (II.12).¹⁸ “Be intent on action,/not on the fruits of action (II.47),” urges Krishna, so that in this way action is freed of karmic consequences and becomes a form of yoga, *karma yoga*. In any case, one cannot escape action—even meditative contemplation or understanding (*jñana*) is a form of action (III.4). So: “perform action as sacrifice!” (III.9). This is done through devotion (*bhakti*)—this, too, becomes a discipline or yoga, *bhakti yoga*. Krishna teaches Arjuna to see the divine as immanent in all (“I am the taste in the water, Arjuna,/the light in the moon and the sun/OM resonant in all sacred lore/the sound in space, valor in men,” VII.8). In this way Krishna reveals himself to be a finite symbol of the infinite. Arjuna requests to see this infinite form and the wish is granted for a brief, horrifying, stupendous moment. This is too much for the mortal mind to bear and so Arjuna asks Krishna to restore himself to his beautiful finite form, which now is seen as a mask of the infinite. Thus the Gita reconciles theism (indeed polytheism, since many

symbols are acceptable) with the austere impersonal Brahman of the *Upanishads*. The relation of yoga and action is reconciled also as Arjuna recovers his heroic will to perform his *dharma* as a form of liberation. The poem also presents itself as a metaphor of the conflicts within the self and how they may be integrated and organized—and this is how Gandhi read it: the battlefield Kurukshetra is the heart of each of us. Thus the poem finds its place at the heart of Hinduism in the last analysis because it strives to *integrate* such a diversity of tropes into one poetic vision that gives an orientation in daily life.

I wish now to return to my original claim: There is a basic need we have for the experience of meaning and value, a Human Eros, and culture provides an environment of symbols, a spiritual ecology, to serve that end. There are core tropes or archetypes that give a sort of structure or symbolic landscape to a culture and these tropes need to be made determinate and embodied for the experience of meaning. We need images, actions, stories, structures that provide even if only tacitly the direct experience of these meanings and values. These experiences are enactments or *mimēseis* of the meaning of existence. Mythos is one of the primary ways in which this happens. Mythos, recall, is any narrative that is important in revealing the identity of oneself, a group, or the world: it reveals an important meaning or value. I objected to those theories of myth—or Mythos—that made it too remote and too cut off from our everyday experience, especially since so much of it is just beneath our skin, as it were. Mythos operates on a personal, daily level. We hang a picture of people we love on the wall or frame a diploma, the outcome of a “hero quest” we undertook. We tell a new friend something personal about ourselves that we would not tell a stranger to deepen the relationship. We are constantly weaving narratives that embody these mythoi. One writing exercise I have used in aesthetics classes is to have students write about a place that is important to them. It is amazing how, once a subject like this is raised, how much poetry and feeling and good writing goes into their work. The places often have to do with their younger selves and the stories, though simple, show a vital rootedness in the experience that continues to live in their subconscious, just below the skin, as I said. Mythos is a primary way our lives become connected, not just to our individual history but to our group identities and the general face of the world. It is our power to create mythoi that sustains our eros or desire for meaning. When we contemplate the animal images from 35,000 years ago in Grotte Chauvet, we look back at ourselves (and begin to appreciate the significance of the play of signs).

Notes

- 1 By “mind” I do not mean to limit the range to conscious experience, but to include the dimensions of cultural habit, language, religion, and the unconscious, all permeated with symbols.
- 2 See Ch. 5. of *The Human Eros* (Alexander, 2013).
- 3 For extended discussion, see “Eros and Spirit: Toward a Humanistic Philosophy of Culture,” in Alexander, 2013, pp. 392f.
- 4 See Breasted, 1934, esp. Ch. III. For the text of the Memphite Creation see Pritchard, 1958, pp. 1f.

- 5 A good example can be found in the fourth Book of the *Odyssey* where young Telemachus compares Menelaus' palace to Zeus's on Mount Olympus. Menelaus overhears and quickly tells Telemachus how his wealth was won only at great losses (such as the death of his brother Agamemnon) and struggle.
- 6 I am using the translation by Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1951).
- 7 The word "anger" (*mēnis*) is the first word of the poem: "Of the anger of Achilles, sing goddess..."
- 8 For example, the death of Lykaon, XXI.24 f.
- 9 Raymond P. Scheindlin, trans. and ed., *The Book of Job* (Norton, 1998).
- 10 Biblical scholars argue that the "Second Isaiah" (the post-exilic author of the second part of The Book of Isaiah) is the first unequivocal indication of a monotheistic attitude. See, for example, Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Fourth ed., Prentice Hall, 1984).
- 11 Luke 4.1-14, Matthew 4.1-11.
- 12 See also: "[Job's] anger arises from his own demand for meaning, from a refusal to yield emotionally to the pointlessness of our suffering. Job is never reconciled; his heart demands meaning, even though intellectually he intuits (and we know) that he cannot have it. ... Job knows and hates the truth, hates it precisely because he remains engaged in life" (pp. 25-26).
- 13 See Scheindlin's analysis and defense of the role of the speech of Elihu, even if it is an addition, pp.38f.
- 14 For a similar reading see Solomon B. Freehoff, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Union of American Hebrew Congregation, 1958).
- 15 *Dharma* is a rich semantic trope barely hinted at by our word "duty." Its root is a verb, "to support or sustain." It came to refer to all the social functions that "uphold" what is right in the social order, not merely in a secular sense but most of all in a sacred sense.
- 16 "Heterodox" in the sense they do not accept the Vedas (including the Upanishads) as "revealed" or divinely authoritative texts.
- 17 Translated by Barbara Stoller Miller, *The Bhagavad-Gita* (Columbia University, 1986).
- 18 The 19th sloka or verse in this chapter ("He who thinks this self a killer/And he who thinks it is killed/both fail to understand/it does not kill nor is it killed) formed the basis of Emerson's famous poem "Brahma."

References

- Alexander, T. (2013). *The human eros: Eco-ontology and the aesthetics of existence*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Anderson, B. (1984). *Understanding the Old Testament* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Berrebby, D. (2008). *Us & them: The science of identity* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Breasted, J. H. (1934). *The dawn of conscience*. New York, NY: Scribners.

- Carson, A. (1986). *Eros the bittersweet*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cassier, E. (1953). *Language and myth* (S. K. Langer, Trans.). Mineola, NY: Dover.
- Eliade, M. (1963). *Myth and reality*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Erdoes, R., & Ortiz, A. (1984). *American Indian myths and legends*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Frankl, V. (1984). *Man's search for meaning* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Homer. (1951). *The Iliad* (R. Lattimore, Trans.) Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Homer. (1965). *The Odyssey* (R. Lattimore, Trans). New York, NY: Harper and Row, Publishers.
- Hyde, L. (2010). *Trickster makes this world*. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.
- Lewis-Williams, D. (2002). *The mind in the cave*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Malinowski, B. (1954). *Magic, science and religion*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Plato. (1974). *Plato's Republic* (G.M.A. Grube, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Co: Indianapolis.
- Pritchard, J. (Ed.). (1958). *The Ancient near east*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press.
- Sanders, N. K. (Trans). (1960, revised 1972). *The epic of Gilgamesh*. London, UK: Penguin Books.

About the author

Thomas Alexander (talex@siu.edu) grew up in New Mexico with a vivid appreciation of the Native American and Hispanic cultures. Graduating from The University of New Mexico, he obtained a doctorate in philosophy at Emory University, focusing on the thought of John Dewey. Most of his teaching career has been at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He is the author of *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (SUNY Press, 1987) and *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence* (Fordham University Press, 2013). He has served as the President of the Society for the Advancement of American Society.