

HOMO SAPIENS,
A PROBLEMATIC
SPECIES

AN ESSAY IN PHILOSOPHICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

BY
MIA GOSSELIN

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An Essay in Philosophical Anthropology

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University Press of America,[®] Inc.
Lanham · Boulder · New York · Toronto · Plymouth, UK

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4501 Forbes Boulevard
Suite 200
Lanham, Maryland 20706
UPA Acquisitions Department (301) 459-3366

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street,
London SE11 4AB, United Kingdom

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
British Library Cataloging in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014954311
ISBN: 978-0-7618-6519-3 (paperback : alk. paper)
eISBN: 978-0-7618-6520-9

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of American National Standard for Information
Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials,
ANSI Z39.48-1992

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Preface

The path of an academic career, at least in Belgium, but no doubt also in other countries, is not always predictable. At the Free University of Brussels the task of teaching philosophical anthropology was assigned to me in my younger years, though it was not my speciality. Probably it was expected of me that I would teach this discipline in the spirit of existentialism, an offshoot of German idealism which was very popular on the European continent. However, I had studied the work of Nietzsche, who like his *maître à penser*, Schopenhauer, was an anti-Hegelian. Being convinced that science based on empirical data offers the best guarantee for understanding nature and ourselves, even if, or rather because, the results of science can always be critically assessed and replaced by new ones if necessary, I rejected idealism and metaphysical explanations. A new type of philosophical anthropology seemed necessary.

Perhaps as a reaction to existentialism, its idealistic roots and its strong literary components, I specialised in the drier matter of epistemology and the foundation of science. I had received a thorough education in the history of philosophy, for which I am still grateful, and studying the growth over long periods of time of the Western conception of man and of his place in nature, I became aware of the contrast between this general conception as expressed in the work of philosophers and what we can learn about our species in different scientific disciplines.

The genealogy of Western anthropological views is the subject of the first volume of my book. In the second volume I study the scientific conception of the human species, how science pictured over time the nature of life and the origin of species in general and that of our own species in particular. I also try to understand what science says about, *inter alia*, what is specific to our species that makes us so destructive for our environment, why we are aggressive to our congeners, and many other features of our kind, most of them related to its problematic character.

It is not the place in the preface to this first volume to elaborate on the themes of the second volume, but the link between the first and the second one must already become clear. On the one hand Westerners have a specific view of the world that is anthropocentric, whereas on the other hand science considers our species to be only one amongst all others and studies it as a natural phenomenon. It is this unresolved contradiction that I want to expose.

Westerners have acquired a dominant position in the world and especially in world economy, from which follows its political power. It is in Europe that modern science developed and that, through technology making use of its results, the industrial revolutions took place, which in their turn gave rise to the welfare society of today. In many countries of the third world Western lifestyle was and is seen as identical with progress. It is not always understood that at its base is a fundamentally anthropocentric world view in which man is considered

as a reality apart from and even opposed to nature. The loss of the harmony between man and nature has important negative consequences. My aim in the first volume is to examine how this world view came about over long stretches of time and to lay bare its roots.

Here follows a short overview of its content.

- Part I. The general conception in prehistoric and ancient cultures was that the world was one (monophysism): nature, the Gods, the ghosts, all plants and animals, men, rocks and rivers formed one whole. First I try to grasp the psychology behind primitive thought (Chapter 1). Secondly, I try to understand the primitive conception of what it is to be a human individual and to analyse the logic of this type of thought. The latter is completely different from the logic Aristotle introduced in the West that was generally adopted for practical and scientific matters in Antiquity, but also in the Middle Ages and thereafter. (Logic is to be understood in its general sense of what is accepted by a cultural community as valid reasoning.) (Chapter 2). Even today our logic in daily life and in science is basically Aristotelian. Aristotle rejected the logic of his master Plato and stressed the advantages of his own theories on the subject. However, transcendent metaphysics claims that Aristotelian logic is not suitable for philosophy and reverts to more primitive ways of reasoning. (I think the fact that in European culture, save in religious and metaphysical matters, Aristotelian logic was used, explains in an important, but not exclusive way, why modern science developed in Europe). (Chapter 3).

- Part II. The first Greek philosophers saw man as a natural phenomenon, an integral part of the rest of reality. To them the major question was how out of the original chaos the ordered world, the cosmos, had arisen. Absorbed by scientific and practical matters, religious and moral questions were not central. They were famous in their own time, but a fundamentally different philosophical approach to reality replaced their views. Man was in this new idealistic conception exalted as a spiritual being, the only creature possessing a soul reaching out for a reality behind reality. Atomism, a successor of the philosophy of nature, combating superstition, never became as popular as philosophies that promised under one form or another life after death (Chapter 4).

The religious source of inspiration, Judaeo-Christianity, is of course all-important. Man is created by God to whom he owes his existence and he is given by him the assignment to reign over nature. This separate creation of mankind means that we are willed by God, chosen to exist. We are a necessary part of the divine plan and have a mission; we must contribute to the realisation of the Kingdom of God on Earth. At the moment of the conception of each individual God breathes life in him or her and thus we are endowed with a soul determining what kind of person we become. We have free will and are judged by our deeds, but also by our intentions.

Christian religion, in order to become well-established in the Hellenistic world, had to give its rather simple doctrine an intellectual structure that could appeal to more educated people and more powerful members of society. The spiritual leaders of early Christianity saw the dangers for their faith contained in Greek philosophy and the latter was only acceptable as, like it was termed later on, the “servant maid of theology.” It seemed to the Church Fathers that the best choice for their purpose was Platonism and neo-Platonism. The eternal soul, its purity and life after death were for the believer what really mattered. The body and its urges had to be kept in check; the material world was unimportant in the light of the promise of salvation for those who were pure of heart. Aristotelian logic (called dialectics in the Middle Ages) should not be applied to matters of faith, because it could lead to conclusions that were in contradiction with the main dogmas, such as the Holy Trinity. It is only in the thirteenth century that the philosophy of Aristotle, after a long struggle and in a Christian version, was accepted by the authorities as an alternative to Platonism. The eternal soul and life after death remained the central issue.

Though at the end of the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance the picture of our solar system profoundly changed and though the excellence of man was no longer only due to the grace of God, but to his own creative force, the picture of man remained the same on a more fundamental level. The earth now turned around the sun rather than the other way round, but man was still the crown on the work of God (Chapter 5).

In Modern Times we can witness a profound contrast between rationalists and empiricists: if all knowledge comes from God and the concepts stem from him, we are the only rational beings; however, if we acquire knowledge through our senses, so do the animals and there is a certain gradual continuity between the species, between the animals most closely related to us and ourselves. It is rather difficult to know what the real religious convictions of these philosophers were, because in their time, the seventeenth and eighteenth century, they could not freely speak their mind. Descartes was always cautious not to offend the religious authorities. He insisted that the soul and free will existed, because otherwise there was no foundation for morality in the prospect of reward after death for living the good life. Animals had no soul; they were complicated and well-functioning machines. Hume on the contrary, who was a sceptic where biblical truth was concerned, expressed his conviction that neither the soul (an ego or self) nor free will existed. To him the continuity between animals and men was an evidence. We have to take into account that these philosophers, besides having different philosophical views, lived in different countries and in different periods (Chapter 6).

We could easily be tempted to believe that with the evermore rapid progress made by science everything would change at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century where the picture of man and his relation with the rest of nature is concerned, but if we read Hegel and Marx, respectively an idealist and Deist and

a materialist and atheist, we realise that both have a profoundly anthropocentric view and that for both all that matters to man is man. Hegel humanises nature by thinking it, Marx humanises it by transforming it by labour. Reality is a dynamic process that of necessity must lead to an end that can be compared to what for the Christian is the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth at the end of times. For Hegel it is the realisation of the World-spirit, for Marx the establishment of a society without classes. Reality must still accomplish itself through the thoughts and the actions of men, but that the final goal will be reached cannot be doubted. In both cases, the motor of the process is man, who has a mission in this world (Chapter 7).

In spite of a number of precursors, the first and to my knowledge only philosophers to break explicitly and radically with this millenary tradition of anthropocentrism and the belief the soul is a substance (i.e. can exist in its own right) are two atheists, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Schopenhauer insists that man *is* his body and by this fact is part of nature that is the expression of the Will, *das Ding an sich*, (reality as it is *in se*). Kant, who invented the concept, believed that reality as it is in itself could not be known by man, but Schopenhauer claimed that it could be intuited speculatively. In Nature there is only one law, the struggle for life, which man also obeys, leaving him bereft of free will. The world is not good, rational or divine. It is a vale of tears. When we witness the cruelty of nature, we must accept that we are not different. Influenced by Eastern thought, he sees as a solace universal compassion. Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer's metaphysics, his pessimism and universal compassion. Nevertheless, he has inherited many of his fundamental ideas. Thus he believes man is part of nature; we are a species amongst species. He adopts evolutionism and either we are going to evolve into a new kind of creature he does not define, save as utterly different from the species we are now, a creature he calls "Overman" or "Superman," or we become a superlative of what we are now, and we become "the last man," who in his eyes is despicable. He is an outspoken anti-humanist and never tires of exposing anthropocentrism and of showing it is a farce. He denies free will and rejects subjectivism. Body and mind are one. The role of consciousness and self-consciousness is exaggerated by idealist philosophers. Too much of them can even be negative, because by too much reflection and self-reflection we are prevented from spontaneously following our instincts, which he is the first philosopher to value positively. General moral values are to be replaced by the values each individual creates for himself.

Nietzsche became very famous, but he was not understood. The Nazis claimed him for their racist cause, he was wrongly considered a vitalist (vitalists see Life as a creative force, a substance existing in its own right), the existentialists saw in him a forerunner and some religious philosophers even denied he was a genuine atheist. His influence on the picture we have of ourselves and our place in nature was minor (Chapter 8).

Again, in the twentieth century we find the same old claims: reality is ontologically layered and man is unique by being at once a material and a spiritual being, by relating the material world to a transcendent reality. Man is necessary, he has a mission. Philosophical anthropology was an invention of the heirs of German idealism. They wanted to give an answer to the problem posed to metaphysics by Darwinism. Man could not be simply a species like all other species, he had to have unique qualities that explained the necessity of his existence and his role in this world. The common denominator of these anthropologies is clear: man is a unique kind of reality.

Next I treat of Teilhard de Chardin, who was a priest and a theologian, but also an archaeological anthropologist, quite famous for his scientific work. He courageously tried to reconcile his Christian faith and evolutionism. The Roman Catholic Church did not appreciate his views and forbade him to pursue this endeavour. He believed that species had evolved (not being a biologist, he was wrong on several points about how evolution took place). Behind evolution there was a divine plan, he assumed. Everything tended to an ultimate outcome, to God, or *Point Omega*, in which the circle was closed, an ever returning idea we can find in the philosophy of Plotinus.

The last section of this final chapter is devoted to Sartre, because I want to show that though he is an atheist, by inscribing himself in an old tradition and by declaring himself a humanist, he reiterates many themes of the Christian conception of reality under one form or another.

His starting point is the three H's: Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger. Reality is the product of our subjectivity; we are an ego or, but not an empirical one, determined by a genetic component and by a history of past experiences. It is an abstract ego that cannot be described in terms of qualities, but nevertheless lends us individuality. I can know who I am after I made all my choices at each moment of my existence. This is the explanation of his rejection of essentialism and of his famous dictum 'existence precedes essence.' We are not born with a specific soul instilled in us by God, that will determine at each moment our behaviour. This ego we are, and this is crucial, is on the contrary absolute freedom. If you ask if the choices I made were good or bad, the answer is that the only justification of my acts is that they are *my* acts. Sartre would have liked to be *causa sui*, his own cause and he thinks in our inner selves we all want this. As a child he experienced a crisis of identity: he was not necessary, he could as well not have been. Therefore, a recurring theme is this contingency he could not accept. Christians believe that they exist because God has willed it, or at least allowed it. Sartre lacks this faith and wants to become necessary.

Man is what is important to man. Like Hegel, Sartre is a Manichean: unreflective Nature is what he abhors most. A tree is there outside, but it is there as an *en soi*, an entity that is merely as it is; it is not there *pour soi*, for itself, because it cannot think itself. It needs a human being thinking: 'it is a tree,' to

become one. It is man who creates reality; without human subjectivity there would only be a second order reality, things as they are without reflection.

Sartre declares himself a humanist. Just like each human being by his or her deeds determines what he or she will have been at the end of his or her existence, each human being contributes to the essence of humanity. For all his atheism, Sartre remains a Christian, though one without God, because, like all Westerners, he is an heir of the most profound convictions of his culture. Free will is the cornerstone of Christian morality. Like Hegel, Sartre made out of freedom the hallmark of humanity, but, like so many others, he was blind to the fact it is an illusion. Ask the mother in the African Sahel desert, cradling her dying child in her arms, whether she can make choices and is free. Even if she assumes her destiny (or if you prefer her situation and that of her child) it is hypocrisy to say that all that matters is her unique way to assume it. If nobody helps her, she has no choice but to die with her child. If indeed she cannot choose, according to Sartre she is not a human being (Chapter 9).

It is of course not because of the predominance of Western culture and its peculiar nature that we are a problematic species. The reasons for it are to be found in characteristics common to humans in general. Yet the combination of these characteristics with the ideas and messages Westerners consciously or unconsciously spread, with their unwavering belief of progress through technology, enhances the destructive processes that are ongoing.

I want to thank my colleague and friend Joris Duytschaever who has read the manuscript and who corrected the language. The eventually remaining mistakes are wholly my responsibility and due to the fact that I am not a native speaker of English. Another dear friend, Martin De Beukelaer, made a number of very useful remarks, for which I am grateful.

I am the author of the translations of German and French cited texts except if otherwise mentioned. Occasionally I have used square brackets in these texts to add an explanative note. When citing a philosopher if I left out for brevity's sake some lines in a paragraph I signal this by using (...).

Antwerp,

Mia Gosselin.

Part I.

Before Philosophy

Chapter 1. The psychology of mythical thought

The first true philosophers were Greeks of the sixth century B.C. It was their vocation to explain how the natural order that we see around us came into being, constructing rational models, hypotheses, *which could be discussed*, starting from their sensorial experience. Instead of asking *why* things are as they are like in speculative thought, common in all cultures before them, they asked *how* they came about. They were philosophers and scientists at the same time, preoccupied by the general principles governing nature and not by ethical questions. In the following century quite other, even opposite, types of philosophy developed. This is not our subject here, but rather “what was there before philosophy?” The answer is myths and in a more developed form religion instead of theoretical knowledge of nature. Myths result from the capacity of humans to explain what is inexplicable using their imagination.

It is commonly admitted that religion is universal. Different cultures offer mythical religious world views that determine the conception we have of ourselves and of fellow human beings and therefore they are crucial for our subject, namely the origin of our view of man. The question why religion is universal has been answered in different ways. Scientists who were staunch believers were convinced that it is essential to human nature, as animals show no sign of even considering if the world makes sense and if they, as part of it, make sense; they are only occupied with the bare necessities of life. This explanation is about as accurate as the answer of the doctor in one of the plays of Molière to the question why opium induces sleep: by its *virtus dormitiva*, by its force to make sleepy.

Other scientists have asked what the benefit of religion is, implying that it is indispensable. Many answers can be given:

- it offers clarification when people are confronted with mysterious phenomena, with mysterious experiences and dreams; it explains the origin of everything.

- it offers consolation and is comforting, as it makes mortality less unbearable.

- it integrates the individual in a community and is necessary for sanctioning the social order.

- it offers a foundation for moral values.

These answers are certainly insufficient. Thus, for example, the consolation that is offered is very relative. Though primitive myths explained the natural order and made sense of it, they did not offer any consolation for human mortality. The deceased dwelled in the realm of the shadows where they joined the other ghosts. They were feared by the living, who had to placate them in order to be left alone by them. An eternal soul that would know the bliss of afterlife was

totally unknown to primitive people. Even in the great ancient civilisations after-life, in the sense of a full existence after death, was not evident. Though the Egyptian Pharaoh would live on forever as the Sun God, this was his royal privilege, and it took a long time before civilians who had the means to be embalmed could live on forever. The Hebrews believed that after death they became shadows of themselves and stayed in the Sheol, comparable to the Hades of the Greek. Pythagoras, founder of a new religion, introduced the idea of the reincarnation of an eternal soul that in between re-embodiments went to heaven to stay for a while between the stars. Plato, who was an adept of Pythagoreanism, believed in an eternal soul that was incorporeal, though it was again and again reincarnated as long as its owner did not attain perfection, but when this goal was reached it returned for ever to its birthplace between the stars.

Afterlife as we conceive it was the crucial Christian article of faith, made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Originally, however, religious belief did not have the function of reconciling people with death and bringing them consolation. The reason of the universality of religion must lie elsewhere.

Richard Dawkins, looking for the evolutionary benefit of religion proposes the hypothesis that the advantage it gives is not direct. Indeed it is very costly in terms of time and energy that could be spent for survival and reproduction. In consequence religion must, biologically speaking, be considered a waste, which is seldom tolerated in nature. If religion has benefit it must be indirect. He gives an illuminating example. Moths are attracted by light and burn their wings approaching the flame of a candle. This is an indirect consequence of behaviour that is useful for moths. They steer their flight by the light of the sun, the moon, the stars, all objects that are at optical infinity. They are programmed to fly in such a way that the light rays hit their compound eyes at thirty degrees. Doing the same when they are attracted by a candle they fly right into the flame, but the chance that this happens is small, compared to the chance that in their natural surroundings they adjust the course of their flight keeping an eye on celestial objects. Only, we mostly witness the moths that, wrongly, seem suicidal to us and not the hundreds of moths that use star light or moonlight as an accurate compass.¹ In the same way the universality of religion could be the side effect of behaviour that enhances survival. Human infants and young children are taught to obey their parents at once and without further discussion in serious situations. As humans in general and especially young children have a tendency to comply this certainly enhances their chances of survival. They have a natural tendency to believe what their parents tell them in a serious tone.

Theoretically children might learn from personal experience not to go near a cliff edge, not to eat untried red berries, not to swim in crocodile infested waters. But, to say the least, there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you. Obey your parents; obey the tribal elders, especially when they adopt a solemn, minatory tone....²

The universality of religious beliefs is a vast subject that we shall not further pursue. It must be distinguished from the origin of the similarities in its expression that is of more interest for our subject, namely how men originally conceived of themselves and why it is that in primitive myth all over the world the same themes recur. The latter can be explained by the fact that though each human being is unique, all of them share "the human condition." We are all born, pass through the different stages of life and in the end we all die. Moreover, we have "common human interests," the basic human needs are everywhere similar. Our experience of these basic facts of life is individual, yet it can be supposed that they remain similar in all times, to whichever community we belong and to whichever culture.

A most interesting explanation of the psychology of mythical thought is offered by Joseph Campbell. In the first volume of his vast study of mythology, *The Masks of God, Primitive Mythology*,³ he tries to make a synthesis of those theories that pertain to his subject. He recognises the major contribution of psychology, especially of the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Jung, to the understanding of the great myths. However, he will try to give the unconscious, which is presupposed in psychoanalysis, a fresh content derived from scientific data.

This must be seen in the context of the time the work was written. In the sixties of the previous century a new biological discipline developed, namely ethology, the science of animal behaviour. Campbell thought at once it could be useful for his purpose. He was more in particular interested in the study of instinct by N. Tinbergen and in the theories of animal behaviour presented by K. Lorenz. Before that time little had been known about the unconscious level of our mind where our instincts are at work, and now a consistent theory became available. Animals respond instinctively to key stimuli in their environment, and it can hardly be doubted by biologists that humans show instinctive behaviour too. There are, however, important differences. Humans show "neoteny"; they are born before they are fully developed and they retain for some time characteristics of earlier stages of their ontogeny, which makes them "plastic, liable to undergo changes." This characteristic explains that the period during which they can learn is longer than in most other animals. (Neoteny had played a crucial role in the philosophical anthropology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was used as a key-argument for the ontological uniqueness of our species). Campbell, like many others, stresses that we do not have as many stereotyped, key-tumbler responses as the other vertebrates and that we are less rigidly patterned in our instincts. It is more difficult to chart our instincts than those of other animals, because most of our behaviour even if it is based upon instincts is also culturally determined. Both elements must be taken into account.

Thus Campbell explained the origin of myths in a double way and produced a hybrid account of them. On the one hand he acknowledges the merit of psy-

choanalytical theories, while on the other hand he attaches great importance to the biological mechanism of “imprinting.” Let us start with the ethological part of his explanation. His theory is that our instincts are the basis for the establishment of the imprints images make upon our mind. He opposes this imprinting to the fixed instincts we have, and he calls it “open,” because its expression is not totally predetermined. Indeed, the duckling that hatches and shows a lifelong “filial” attachment to the first living being it perceives normally becomes attached in this way to its mother, but if accidentally it is not its mother that is present at the moment of its hatching, but a creature belonging to another species the mechanism works as well. This is exactly what happened during one of the experiments of Konrad Lorenz. While he was watching, a duckling set sight on him when stepping out of its eggshell and from that moment on it followed him everywhere. He concluded that in this way an irrepressible rigid pattern of behaviour based upon an instinct can be triggered off, behaviour that is determined by the impressions of the moment. It is highly improbable that Lorenz, who introduced the term “imprinting,” would have agreed with Campbell’s extrapolation of the concept that is originally purely biological to cultural contexts. Lorenz defines imprinting as follows:

- a) It is confined to a fixed and very limited period in the organism’s life.
- b) The stimulus situation which will, later on, elicit certain responses, is determined at a time when these responses have not yet matured.
- c) Unlike all other types of learning, this process is irreversible....⁴

I believe that if we follow Campbell we should understand the term in a looser sense. One thing is certain, what we are taught in our early childhood can provoke emotional reactions during the rest of our lives. Thus in small children who are warned there is a God, who is invisible, but who knows all about us, even our most secret thoughts and all our sins, this idea becomes so deeply engraved in the unconscious part of their psyche, that the mere thought of him triggers off a totally irrational fear. Even for many adults it is extremely difficult to get rid of this reaction.

Imprinting is at work at the unconscious level and its neurological basis is similar in all the individuals of a species, but at the same time it is moulded by individual experiences. This is why Campbell sees in it a plausible basis for explaining mythical themes recurring in cultures all over the world. According to him, in humans imprinting can be caused by events inducing very strong emotions. The peculiar impressions we receive in our early experiences can determine our lifelong immediate response to certain stimuli. Moreover, like many other animals, we do not only react without previous learning to certain stimuli of our environment, but also to artificial stimuli bearing a similarity to the natural ones, and if certain characteristics of them are enhanced, this can make them even more effective. Thus he explains the universality of certain mythological images, acting as “supernormal” sign stimuli, in which he recog-

nises the “archetypes” of C. G. Jung that belong to the “collective unconscious.”⁵

He warns us, however, that the fusion of the personal and the universal is different in the psychoanalytical view and in mythology. In the former, he says ironically, it is an endeavour “to translate the whole cultural inheritance of mankind back into nursery rhymes,” and this view has not to be taken all too seriously.⁶ Mythology is a powerful cultural means that has in the first place the most important function of integrating the individual person into the group and to balance the individual and general interest. Campbell fully appreciates that the use of psychological “complexes,” which have their origin in specific traumatic events in the childhood of individuals, as a key for the scientific understanding of the mythology and ceremonies of the group, is “about as appropriate as to mistake a pancake for a soufflé.”⁷ He is not the only one to have criticised, and rightly so, the account of the functioning of our mind and of normal psychological and cultural phenomena in terms of the pathological.⁸ He also remains critical of Freud’s too exclusive attention for the neurotic in which he translates everything and this into the terms of infantile sexuality; This translation is the predicament of the neurotic, “but if the doctor does so too where do we get?”⁹ Indeed, following Campbell Freudians show not only the tendency to put too much stress on sexuality, but also the tendency to rely too heavily upon a regressive explanation, i.e., by referring to the infantile experiences of individuals.

Another point of divergence is the a-historical character of psychoanalytical theories of the motifs of the myths and the rites of different people. These myths and rites are the result of *particular* social experiences and cannot be explained in general psychological terms, because they have in the course of history been adjusted to amongst others geographically determined conditions of existence. They are also, according to Campbell, derived from “millenniums of meditation on the recognized natural order of the living world.”¹⁰ Therefore:

... in the reading of myth such a [Freudian] reductive method commits us to the monotony of identifying in every symbolic system only the infantile sources of its elements, neglecting as merely secondary the historical problem of their reorganization: pretty much as though an architect, viewing the structures of Rome, Istanbul, Mhenjo-Daro and New York, were to content himself with the observation that all are of brick.¹¹

Rather than starting from the pathological, Campbell founds his theory on the most normal experiences. The first experience all human beings share is birth, the traumatic character of which is stressed. The extraction from an existence in the darkness, warmth and comfort of the amniotic water of the womb and the arrival in a totally different world full of light and sounds is a brutal event. Suddenly surrounded by air, there is a brief moment of suffocation, circulatory congestion, then the lungs start to pump and the newly born baby begins to cry. Nobody can recall his own birth, but we can imagine that it must have

been a moment of great anxiety. Is there an imprint left in the unconscious layers of our mental activity? This remains a hypothesis, but perhaps it could explain the fact that the birth theme is prominent in the imagery of mythology and religion and that, with a number of variations, it is universally present. It is used not only for the moment of birth itself, but for all moments of abrupt change from one stage of life into the other, from childhood into adult life, from life to death.¹² The rituals that accompany such moments often represent a re-entry into the womb and involve a passage through water. In Christianity baptism, according to *Letters* in the New Testament is explained as a dying, as a going under, as being buried with Christ, followed by rebirth in a new life. It is a participation in Christ's death and resurrection, but also a cleansing from sins.

A quasi universal symbol related to birth, death and rebirth is the labyrinth, often represented by a spiral, which is the image for the womb, dark and silent and where time is lost. To go back into that darkness is frightening: here ends the conscious experience, we are in the realm of death. It can be supposed that in early cultures, youngsters who were about to begin a new phase of their existence and to become full members of the group had to leave their familiar surroundings.

They were plunged in the darkness of caves and left disoriented, lifted out of the context of their former existence. This was certainly a shock therapy, and when thereafter suddenly light was made, the images they saw on the cave walls were forever imprinted upon their minds. They returned afterwards for a while to their mother, but only to be reborn in another, adult life.¹³

The earth as a bearing and nourishing mother is central in the myths of both hunting societies and societies of planters. Nevertheless, the boons she offers must not be taken for granted; she must be treated with respect by observing appropriate rites. The psychology behind this conception is obvious and universal. To the child the mother is at once beatitude and danger. At first it lives in symbiosis with her: she suckles it, gives it protection and satisfies all its needs. Campbell refers to J. Piaget's *The Child's Conception of the World*, where it is shown that mother and child form a continuum, both physical and psychical. According to Piaget the child is at first completely self-centred. There is no distinction between the external and internal poles of its world and all is reduced to what it feels and experiences. Inevitably the moment comes, however, when the mother can no longer anticipate all it needs, and then the child becomes aware that the world does not necessarily respond to its desires. The absence of the mother is felt as threat, loss and collapse of the universe: "Hence, when the mother image begins to assume definition in the gradual dawn of the infantile consciousness, it is already associated not only with a sense of beatitude, but also with fantasies of danger, separation and terrible destruction."¹⁴

This aspect of the relation of mother and child is reflected in the many myths in which the mother becomes devouring, a cannibal ogress. As soon as the mother becomes a "thou" related to the "I" of the child, her power is thus

that though she is life-giving, she can decide to refuse to sustain it or even kill it. In this way the woman, source of all bliss, can become a danger to the male growing into his adult life. She can become a “femme fatale,” and the symbol of this cruel aspect of human femininity is the toothed vagina. (Campbell’s explanations are generally male-centred. Why the mother should not become a dangerous person in the consciousness of small female children, who certainly are as scared as male children about losing her affection, remains unexplained).

The attraction and antagonism between the male and female element is reflected in other myths. A family structure is biologically required to raise a child, which during the long period of dependence, must be able to rely upon its mother and father. Together with the child, they form a basic unit in human society. The division of labour creates two groups, that of the men and that of the women, and as we can see in primitive communities of hunter-gatherers, the women rear the children, they gather food, roots, nuts and berries in a sack, while the men go hunting and add a small proportion of meat to the diet. The domain of the men and that of the women are separate, and governed by different principles. In mythical thought concepts like birth and death, the male and the female are not only complementary but are opposed. As we shall see in the next chapter, oppositions play a pre-eminent role in myths and religions. To the little boy the centre of his life is the mother, and when he grows up she suddenly changes from being his mother into a woman, and now she can be sexually desired. To the little girl she becomes a rival for the affection of the father, and similarly, the little boy can see his father as a threat, a competitor in the strife for the love of the mother. The tragedies of Sophocles, *Oedipous* and *Electra*, have become paradigms of the expression of these conflicts, which are rooted in pre-historic thought.¹⁵

Of course there are other universal mythical themes, but from the foregoing can be concluded that in the original way of thinking of men the main human emotions are incorporated, in contrast with modern thought that is governed for the largest part by the emotionally neutral logic of Aristotle. The most important difference is probably that to primitive people there is no clear distinction between subject and object, while Aristotelian logic neatly separates them. Adult Westerners are generally able to distinguish the subjectively experienced and the objectively given, at least in matters of daily life and of science. In the thought of primitive people the borderlines exist too, but they are more equivocal. In their logic an object can be several things at the same time without contradiction. Even grown-ups take it for granted that organisms without a complex nervous system and even inanimate things have not necessarily a soul, but a kind of power, a kind of will. However, this does not mean that primitive people are not capable of gathering accurate knowledge about these same things. However, what they are remains ambiguous, just like in the fantasy of a child during play the broom is no longer a broom, but becomes a horse.

Sometimes the distinction between fantasy and reality is lost and the child takes an ordinary thing for something quite different, like in the following example given by Campbell. A little girl is playing with burnt matches, one of them representing in her game a witch. When she is completely absorbed by her fantasy, she shrieks with terror, because the match has *become* the witch and has the same terrible power.¹⁶ In grown-ups in general, primitive or modern, the borderline between fantasy and reality is seldom, except under special conditions, really lost, and the transition from one domain to another can be made at will.

We can see this from the different roles symbols can play. They seem to be essential for making sense of the world. A true symbol is something that stands for something else, like a flag or an anthem stands for a nation, and can bring tears in the eyes of the true patriot. Nevertheless, nobody believes the flag or the anthem really is the nation. This makes it clear that, though symbols refer in second order to something they do not refer to in first order, they are not identified with it. In some religious or magical contexts, however, the symbol possesses the force of its secondary referent. The representation in a gesture or a picture of an eye is just a representation, but they are also the sign of the “bad eye” and can prevent malevolent persons to cause harm. Holding up a cross or even making only the sign of the cross, and this accompanied by the words “*vade retro Satan,*” is merely a gesture accompanied by words, but it has the power to chase the devil away. E.H. Gombrich, in his *History of Art* warns us not to believe that we are completely rid of this ancient mentality. If somebody would give us a photo of a person we are particularly fond of, and ask us that we pierce his or her eyes with a pin, most of us would find it difficult to do so, though we know perfectly well that the picture is only a piece of paper.¹⁷

We must admit that in the adult the childish mentality is in part conserved. Thus, in a corner of the heart of many of us still resides the idea that reality as a whole is made for us, that we are part of it and that it simply cannot disappoint us in the end. In the words of Campbell:

We have noted that in the world of the infant the solicitude of the parent conduces to a belief that the world is oriented to the child's own interest and that it is ready to respond to its every thought and desire. This flattering circumstance not only reinforces the primary indistinctness between inside and outside in the child's consciousness, but even adds to this a further habit of command, linked to an experience of immediate effect. The resultant impression of an omnipotence of thought—the power of thought, a desire, a mere nod or shriek, to bring the world in heel—Freud identified as the psychological basis of magic, and the researches of Piaget and his school support this view. The child's world is alert and alive, governed by rules of response and command, not by physical laws: a portentous continuum of consciousness, endowed with purpose and intent, either resistant or responsive to the child itself. And as we know, this infantile notion (or something much like it) of a world governed rather by moral than by

physical laws, kept under control by a superordinated parental personality instead of by impersonal physical forces, and oriented to the weal and woe of man, is an illusion that dominates men's thought in most parts of the world—or even men's thought in all parts of the world—to the very present. We are dealing here with a spontaneous assumption, antecedent to all teaching, which has given rise to, and now supports, certain religious and magical beliefs, and when reinforced in turn by these, remains as an absolute conviction that no amount of rational thought or empirical science can quite erase.¹⁸

I quote this text in full, because it explains the psychology not only of mythical, magical and religious beliefs, but also of transcendent metaphysics, i.e., all forms of intellectual activity that implicate wishful thinking and that start from the conviction that there must be more to reality than the reality we experience with our senses. To most human beings the idea that we are born, live and die in a world without common measure with us and completely indifferent to us is unbearable. Therefore it cannot be. There must be something that, if we cannot directly observe it, is nevertheless real and gives sense and meaning to our existence.

An important function of mythical and religious thought is to integrate individuals into society, which in its turn is part of the world order. We must consider this aspect of religious teaching and ceremonial, namely that it is one of its chief aims to suppress as much as possible the sense of ego, and to develop that of participation.¹⁹ Ultimately, the suppression of the self can become, as in mystical experiences, its dissolution, which leads to the unification of the subject with the supreme source of reality, with the One and All, with God. In order to achieve this and to know the bliss of mergence with a superior reality, the believer must first suffer. He must go through an ordeal, he must be cleansed. His spirit must be purified before he can go beyond normal human experience and know the ineffable rapture of beholding "what the eye cannot see." Only then is he worthy to be initiated in the secret knowledge of the men that must not be divulged to the women. The rites of initiation not only mark an important event in the life of the adolescent, they are essential for the integration of the individual in the community. The young child does not participate in the communal life, he is pampered by his mother, plays with other children and as a youngster he shares his time with boys of his age. In more developed societies, the necessary integration is achieved through years of education; in primitive societies it is achieved more briefly and abruptly through rites of initiation. Through these rites, which play a central role in the consolidation of the social structure of his tribe, the youngster is transformed from an individual being, into the incarnation of a mythological, eternal form. The ego of the individual is expanded beyond the biography of the individual:

A woman gave birth to the boy's temporal body, but the men will bring him now to spiritual birth. They will continue and consummate his post-

uterine gestation, the long process of his growth to a fully human maturity, refashioning his body and his mind as well, joining him to his eternal portion, beyond time. Furthermore, in the ceremonials that he will presently observe the tasks proper to manhood will in every detail be linked to mythological fantasies of a time-transcending order, so that not only he himself, but his whole world and his whole way of life within it will be joined inseparably, through myths and rites, to the field of the spirit.²⁰

Campbell does not consider rites of initiation for women. From more recent anthropological studies we know that such rites exist in various societies. However, not as birth in a new condition, but to make them willing to accept their existence as a woman. There is no change of territory as in male initiations; the rites are performed in or near their domestic surroundings. The initiands do not gain access to secrets guarded by the female community. They are not allocated a totally new role; they have already learned from their mothers how to prepare food, how to care for children and what is the position of married women in the restricted family circle and in society. Once married, they will have to perform the same tasks as before, and this for the rest of their lives. The rites will help them to execute their duties willingly; they are meant to give a cosmic meaning to the monotony of their future existence. It is the total society that carries out the initiation with men and women playing different roles. The men exert a repressive force on the initiand (they may cut her, rape her or force her to work, to run or to stay up all night), the women support her (they may dress her, adorn her, or keep vigil with her).²¹ In our society too children and adolescents are educated to become useful members of society, well-adapted citizens, but modern Western culture is profoundly individualistic at the same time. The adolescents are taught that not only society has the duty to provide in the basic needs of its members, but that each of them has a right to achieve his or her personal and private happiness. To care for others, to serve the community, are additional virtues; they add to the value of life, but they are not considered to constitute the ultimate sense of human existence, except for those rare individuals with a vocation to sacrifice their proper interests for an idealistic cause. In other words society is subservient to the individual; the individual has duties towards society, but society is not his or her reason of existence.

The sense of the sanctity of society that is the expression of the world order has existed for an unfathomable long time. It still was present during the Middle Ages, when Kings could be rightfully deposed, if they did not rule according to the eternal moral and social laws ordained by God. From the Renaissance on, the decline of the precedence of society upon the individual begins; the strong bond between the world order and society, and between society and its members, will be broken. Yet, the yearning for a world that is "whole," for a sacred harmony, wherein all things have a natural place and the individual and the general are reconciled, remains, but now the search for a reunion with the sacred and the divine has become an individual quest. Those who cannot believe that

for a human being to be born, grow up, raise children, grow old and die is all there is to life, those who look for something either in this life or in a life after death to give meaning and sense to the fact things are what they are, turn in their despair to religion, to Freemasonry or, if they are more philosophically minded, to metaphysics. As we saw, there simply *must* be “something else,” a reality of an utterly different kind in or behind this reality. On the other hand, Western science gradually developed, and from the nineteenth century on, when education was generalised, an important proportion of the population was familiarised with at least a simple version of the well-established scientific theories of nature, of life, of man. Science, however, offers no comfort for those who have an intellectual, emotional and moral need to feel integrated in the totality of being. Some believe, wrongly in my opinion, that science can be reconciled with metaphysics and religion.²² The methodology of science forbids that metaphysical or religious conclusions are drawn by extrapolation from its theories *by scientists in their role of scientists*.

In the twentieth century society is secularised. The sacred can be found in religion, in mystical experiences or in metaphysical speculations, but in any case it is not nearly as vividly present in daily life as it was in the past. In countries where it is guaranteed in the constitution that church and state are separate, belief and faith are considered to be purely personal matters, determined by family tradition and upbringing. In this, as in other respects, our society is atomistic. Though rites of initiation are still practised in a religious context, they no longer serve the purpose of integrating a person in society as a whole, but only the integration in the religious community to which he or she belongs. Thus in the Catholic Church at the age of six is celebrated the “first communion” of the young boys and girls and at the age of twelve follows the “solemn communion.” The equivalent for the Protestants is the “confirmation.” The Jews celebrate the bar mitzvah, when their boys are twelve, and the Muslim community observes a similar rite. These rituals mark the entry of the adolescent into the religious community, but they are a bleak reflection of the much more sweeping rites of initiation of primitive societies.

Primitive religions are “monophysisms,” which means there is only one reality, comprising natural phenomena and supernatural phenomena. The rites of initiation are meant to realise the incorporation of the adolescents in the restricted community, where everybody knows everybody, and at the same time they are meant to incorporate them in the world order. In other words, these initiations have a cosmic and universal dimension. To primitive people the world is their world, the world they know. It has no complement in a transcendent reality. It is explained by a sacred myth, and the initiation not only transforms individual youngsters, who were hitherto spoiled brats, into genuine members of their community, but sometimes they are reborn into incarnations of mythical personages with a timeless dimension. As we have seen, the experience

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