

## The Myth of the State

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The word "myth" is a very queer word. If you look it up in the dictionary, you will find it defined as "a tale, a fabrication, usually invoking the supernatural to explain natural phenomena". This definition is literally correct, or at least as correct as a dictionary definition can hope to be. You can test it for yourself; just see how neatly it fits the "myth of the state" we are going to talk about tonight. And yet, the rhetorical emphasis on the definition and its propagandistic aim are the exact opposite of what we today usually mean when we talk about the myth. What the standard definition conveys is that myth is a silly superstition, an old-wives' tale. At best it is tolerated as a harmless flight of fancy, as an ornament, a glittering trinket for children or for the leisure hours of the tired businessman. At worst, it is condemned as the invention of unscrupulous quacks--greedy priests, power-hungry demagogues, ruthless capitalists--who use it to frighten the gullible, uneducated and stupid into submission and tribute.

Now I am not saying that myth cannot be abused or misused--in fact, in talking about the myth of the state the main question is precisely: what is the proper, the right use of the myth, and what is demagogic, obscurantist, tyrannical misuse? But when we use the term "myth", we are nevertheless not talking about a superstition or an old-wives' tale. We talk about something that is real, rational and true: the symbolical expression of an experience common to all men.

The radical change in the connotation of the term means a radical change in basic philosophical concepts and beliefs, above all in the concept of human nature--a shift from a philosophy that sees man as reason, with the rest of his being: body, emotions, experience, either



an illusion or a weakness, to a philosophical position which again attempt to see all of man, that is, to see a being. The myth, as even the extreme 18th century rationalists saw, deals with experience. It deals with what we know, not with what we can deduce or prove. Experience is not reason, it is experience. To the Cartesian rationalist and to his successor, the German idealist philosopher, reality, truth and validity existed only in reason, and reason could only be applied to what was in reason to begin with. There was no bridge from the truth of reason to the illusions and phantasma of experience. Experience was not just non-rational, it was irrational. And the myth was worse: it was a lie. For every myth attempts to present the non-rational experience in a form in which reason can go to work on it. And that, to the rationalist or idealist is, from his point of view, the worst crime; it is a dishonesty which can only have the purpose of enslaving reason.

The moment, however, we see man again as a being--as a creature which has existence rather than as an isolated particle of reason, the myth becomes central. The myth symbolizes the basic experience of our existence as a being; and by symbolizing it opens experience to reason. It makes it possible for reason to understand and to analyze our experience, to criticise, direct and change our reaction to experience. Instead of being irrational, the myth is seen as a great rationaliser, the bridge between experience and reason.

The myth makes it possible for our reason to order experience in a rational, meaningful way, that is, it makes possible the ritual. It enables our reason to direct and to determine our reaction to experience; by making us understand what it is we know from our experience, it makes possible action which is our term for movement directed by reason, when otherwise there would only have been superstition.

Without the myth we would be slaves to panic; the myth enables man to walk upright; it liberates his reason from the nameless terror of the incomprehensible outside and in.

It is because it is so real, so central, so potent, that I say "Beware of the Myth". Because it is the basis of all ritual and of all institutions, it is all-important that it be a true myth, truly interpreted. For a false myth, or one that is interpreted falsely, is the most vicious, the most destructive thing we know. But, you may ask, how can a myth be true or false? Isn't it an open contradiction to apply such philosophical or ethical value terms to experience? But the myth is not just experience; it is the symbolical expression of experience, which means that the myth itself is already a product of our consciousness, of our reason, of our beliefs, the product of a decision what is relevant in our experience and what our experience actually means. And this applies with even greater force to the interpretation of the myth, that is to ritual and action.

You can say that any myth is a valid myth if it has stood the pragmatic test, the test of time. It could not have survived unless it expressed in a plausible symbol an experience common to the human species. The myth always raises the right questions, always registers the right seismic disturbances; but it does not by necessity give the right answers. In fact, it gives no answers at all. The answers are given by our interpretation of the myth and of the experience it expresses; they are given, in brief, by philosophy and theology, the two disciplines which are exclusively concerned with the analysis, interpretation and critique of the basic myth. These answers may be right, but they may also be wrong, dependent upon the principles, methods and aims of the philosopher and theologian.



All this, as you may not have realised, has been by way of introduction to my assignment tonight, to speak on the "Myth of the State". The people who first talked of the state as a myth did not understand the term to mean what I make it mean. On the contrary, by calling the state a myth they meant to say that there really is no such thing as a state, that there are only individuals existing by themselves, and that it is a lie and worse to pretend that there is a state. Nevertheless, the state is a true myth in the sense in which I have been using the term. The experience of belonging to a group, the experience that the group is real, has existence and has definite qualities and, you might even say, has a body, is one everyone of us has had. And we also know, beyond rational proof and beyond contradiction, that there are situations in which this phenomenon we call "group" has more reality and more life than the individual, situations in which the individual is willing to die so that the group may live. You may try to explain this phenomenon rationally and develop the state from the biological necessity of the family to care for infant and nursing mother, or from the utilitarian principle that half a loaf is better than no bread at all. But you won't get very far this way. Certainly you could not explain rationally that central political experience, the experience we call "allegiance". You can only deny that there is such a basic experience, that there is anything but the individual--but that makes little more sense than to deny any other basic experience, such as that of our senses; it also makes you incapable of any political effectiveness and action. If you are in politics, you must accept the reality of the organized group as a basic experience of man's life. You must accept the myth of the state as a real myth, that is as a symbolical expression of a genuine experience, common to all of us.



And it is a real myth, according even to the dictionary definition I gave you at the beginning: "a tale, a fabrication, invoking the supernatural to explain a natural phenomenon". We may not consciously personify the state as supernatural, though the process that gave us the person of Uncle Sam and the symbolism of the flag is probably not so very different from that that gave our ancestors the corn-goddess or the Sacred Oak of Dodona. But even without the externals of personification, we see the state as a supernatural being. We endow it with immortality and, though we cannot see it, we give it reality and effectiveness, which means that we give it the invisible body of the supernatural. All this, however, does not mean, as the rationalists thought, that we deal with a mere superstition which dissolves before the light of logic and reason. It means, on the contrary, that we are up against a reality and that the myth alone makes it possible for us to deal with it rationally.

It makes no sense then, to question whether there is a state or whether there should be one. The very fact that we have the myth of the state shows that the only question that is meaningful is: what myth should we have, and how should we interpret it, to have a true myth and a true state? Often the answers have been given in an indirect form, that is by changing the title of the myth, by putting a different term for "state"--tribe, polis, society, law, nation, race, etc. Of course, each new title starts out with a different meaning and is brought in with a definite propagandistic purpose. But very soon the same old questions come up in connection with the new title which, to answer once and for all, the new title had been devised for. Hence we have always been forced to do the job the hard way, that is, by working out the answers ourselves.

This job of working out the answers has been the central, perhaps the only problem of political philosophy over the ages. Therefore I can hardly be expected to give you the solution in the few minutes left to me tonight. But there seem to me to be implicit in the fact that it is a myth, certain absolute prerequisites for a true interpretation of the myth of the state. First, the organized group is undoubtedly a reality, not a fiction, an elementary experience, not something deduced, derived or secondary. Man is by nature a social animal, a "zoon politicon". He does not exist except in the group. Any interpretation of the myth which does not accept that, seems to me prima facie invalid and untrue, and likely to lead to untold harm. But secondly, the very fact that we have a myth of the state, that is that we can rationalise our experience, also shows that man is not all political animal, and that his existence is not described or circumscribed by his belonging to the group. Ants and bees are as much social animals as man. An ant or a bee can even overthrow the ruler of the swarm and establish his own rulership. But only man can change the basic order of the group itself, only man has the myth of the state. Hence man is also and always not a political animal that exists in the group, he also and always exists outside the group, that is as an individual. Finally, the myth of the state expresses always the non-belonging, the non-allegiance to all the other groups. It establishes a group ritual, it leads to group action, but at the same time it excludes from group ritual and opposes group action. Yet, the very fact that it is universal myth expressing an experience common to all men, black, brown and white, American, Russian or Hottentot, shows conclusively that as in all other essential experiences of human existence, we are alike in our political experience. No myth of the state, I submit, could be a true myth or be truly interpreted unless



it expressed the fact of separation of group from group. But no myth of the state could be a true one unless it also expressed our common humanity. In fine, the myth of the state, to be a true myth, truly interpreted, has to express symbolically the polarity of human existence. And, in the last analysis, to express symbolically that man is a dual being by his nature--animal and individual at the same time--is the basic purpose of all myth.