

Myth, Truth, and the Meaning of Life:

The Case of Aristophanes and Genesis

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Myths are often considered products of superstition. Many “facts” suggested in myths are proved wrong in science, giving a general impression that myths are of no use today. In fact, myth is not the best way to articulate absolute truths, especially those in natural science. Myth is valued for being friendly to ordinary people. As shown in Genesis and Aristophanes’ myth in *The Symposium*, explanations given in myths about human affairs or physical phenomena can be easily understood. Humanity and abstract ideas are presented in real-life context familiar to the audience. Since the message conveyed by myths can be grasped by most people, myths are more persuasive than science in many occasions.

Myths are characterized for their simplicity in explaining deep truths. They make difficult matters readily accessible to ordinary people living in the past and in modern era. People want knowledge of the truths to settle their worries about the uncertain fate. Many topics related to fate are, however, difficult to be understood in a science perspective. One of the difficult matters is the origin of suffering. Any a human, rich or poor, would like to know why human beings are subject to sufferings in their lifetime. Philosophers

suggest that a person has an imperfect personality which is never satisfied. Economists account for human sufferings by pointing to economic models which do not allow wellbeing of everyone. Academic researches in the fields have been discovering truths, but they are too difficult for ordinary people to understand. In the antiquity when scientific knowledge was poorly developed, people were largely obsessed with uncertainties about survival. So myths are created to grant people hope, at least some false hope that they can grasp their future.

Myths reduce difficult truths to simple stories, often in human logic familiar to the audience. Take the origin of sufferings as an example, suffering is said to be a result of human's betrayal of the Christian God in a myth found in the Book of Genesis. In Eden, Eve was deceived by the serpent to eat the Forbidden Fruit with her husband Adam. God punished the two for not obeying his command, which is named "The Original Sin" later. Since then human beings are subject to various sufferings: women feel severe pain in giving birth to children, wives are dominated by husbands, and foods have to be obtained with hard labour. Everything is explicit and simple in the myth. There is a superbeing who possesses human emotions. He interacts with human beings and informs them about a forbidden treasure which ancient people can imagine—a tree with sacred fruits. Human beings suffer because they owe the superbeing debt, just like people punished for owing debts on earth. The whole story is within the scope of imagination of the audience. It also gives hope in a difficult life. People would believe that obedience to God ensures better livelihood. Scientists might be able to give the causes of the pain during labour, of the formation of patrilineal societies and of the difficulty of food production. Yet these explanations cannot be

readily understood, and so less persuasive to the general public. If the use of knowledge is to make life easier and more certain, myths serve the function better than science.

Myths are welcomed not only for their simplicity, but also for their humanistic way of interpreting truths. Science has been proved effective in explaining facts in the nature, which can be fit in rules, but weak in articulating facts in humanity out of bounds of rules. For the nature of Love, scientists may say that affections come from “Love Hormones.” They can tell the methods to prove properties of the hormones and the conclusions based on certain theory. It is said that “Love Hormones” only last for three years, beyond which period a stable relationship has to be maintained by injection of the hormones. Notably, “Love Hormones” is not the only origin of Love, or hardly a marriage can last. The claim should have missed some factor about humanity.

Aristophanes demonstrates a humanistic way to articulate topics in humanity. In *The Symposium* he creates a myth to give a humanistic account of the nature of Love. The myth says that humans are originally some double-sexual creatures of male-male, of female-female, or of male-female. Some time ago they were cut into halves and each half is desperate to look for its another half. The myth attributes human beings’ spontaneous desire for a partner to destiny, that every individual has a destined unique partner. It is humanistic to say that the cut creatures are not comfortable with living alone, but to restore the body with two genitals. The affection is out of emotion, not compelled by biological impulse. The humanistic logic of this myth forms a contrast with the scientific approach. It is not supported by evidence, except the Immortals of Olympus who were familiar to the audience. The

myth of Aristophanes does show the limit of myths; no further explanation is given about the origin of destiny, about how people are paired before they are cut in halves. When both science and myths give limited explanation of the same matter, myths do better works on topics of humanity. They present human matters in human ways, which is more friendly and appealing to the audience.

Not all myths are about humanity, many of them convey abstract ideas which cannot be easily expressed by other means. Scientists articulate abstract ideas by breaking down a single idea into several and defining each of them. The original idea can then be deduced by relationships between the defined ideas in multiple perspectives. To analyze the nature of Pride, one may try to define the subjects and objects of Pride, the cause for Pride to build and the cause for ceasing to be Pride. Then the nature of Pride can be figured out by the interactions of those defined factors. The scientific way of examining abstract topics is useful for in-depth research. It ensures that every detail is given equal attention and each possibility to be explored. But this way of derivation keeps the message abstract. Most people who only look for messages meaningful to them would be puzzled. Myths only show a limited scope of the idea in simple stories. Important characteristics of an abstract idea can be made explicit.

As in conveying ideas of humanity, myths do the magic by presenting abstract ideas in human perspectives. Abstract ideas often mean more to us when they are put in specific context. There is a myth about the Tower of Babel in Genesis. In the story people wanted to build a magnificent tower to show that they are as great as God. Their pride irritated God that He messed up languages of human beings to stop the construction. The story literally gives

the origin of various languages. Its chief message is, however, between the lines. It shows in an exaggerated way that people are likely to look down on others when they gain strength. Even God would be despised. The story shows the nature of Pride by putting people in a context familiar to the audience: people gained strength and had to make a decision whether or not to let Pride go. This is more persuasive than derivation of an abstract definition, since many abstract ideas are originally created to articulate real-life situations. Myths simply present abstract ideas in its original appearance.

Myths were first invented to explain the nature and to settle people's worries on their fates. They do not seem to convey truths to the greatest details when compared with science. Yet myths remain popular among most people owing to its characteristics of story-telling. When it comes to explaining humanity and other abstract ideas, myths reproduce more accurate impressions of the ideas articulated. They explain humanity in humanistic ways and abstract ideas in context. The value of myths lies in areas where science can hardly express.

