

Benjamin Knepper

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### The Epistemological Power of Myths: An Empirical Ascent to Revelatory Knowledge

It is humanity's innate burden, as an intellectual species, to continually seek the greatest possible understanding of the universe. Over time, the methods we have employed for this task have changed, having gone from mythology, and more generally story-telling, to its contemporary foe: empirical<sup>1</sup> science. In our technological and materialistic society, we now often reject ancient myths as being ostensibly insufficient in the process of attaining this heightened sense of knowledge. However, I would propose that myths *are* still relevant today and deserve a valid place in this discussion alongside science, if not for the mere fact that many rely upon scientific principles. Furthermore, in this essay I will consider two foundational myths from two different cultures—Greek philosopher Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and the Hindu creation myth "Rig-Veda X, cxxix: In the Beginning"—to argue that myths present epistemological methodologies, characterized most notably by empiricism, which reveal how a person may obtain revelatory knowledge about an enlightened version of reality. While these two texts disagree on the role of gods or some other omniscient presence in this pursuit, they both maintain that empirical analysis is the key piece which ultimately unlocks the understanding our species has so desperately tried to acquire.

It is first necessary to consider the characteristics of myths in general before analyzing the inherent qualities of a few. Thomas Mann, a prominent German novelist and essayist during the beginning of the 20th century, commented on the role of myths in his prelude to *Joseph and*

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical: originating in or based on observation or experience (Merriam-Webster). In this definition and for the purposes of this essay, I would like to emphasize the importance of sight and visual experience, which allows for observation to occur.

*His Brothers*. In Mann's view, the myth serves as the vehicle through which we can both make sense of reality and further our questioning of it. He metaphorically describes a person attempting to achieve higher knowledge as a "stroller at the shore whose wanderings find no end, because behind each backdrop...lie new expanses to lure him onward to another cape" (Mann 1), as if to suggest that the answers to the questions we pose becomes less clear the deeper we delve. Complete knowledge of reality, therefore, can never be fully attained. Mann goes on to propose that amidst this uncharted state of being, a person may attach onto a narrative that can provide tokens of wisdom about the "timeless present," meaning "real life" (39). Myths, according to Mann, serve as this narrative as they combine both "past and future tenses" (39), and are thus able to give us an all-encompassing depiction of reality. In essence, they serve as the guiding path upon which a traveler walks with the mystery of the universe.

Following Mann's model, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" presents a systematic path of consecutive steps which may lead a person to a revelatory understanding of reality. These steps are not explicitly stated in the myth, so I have extracted them based on the succession of events that Plato outlines. Namely, the allegory depicts three distinct phases which together catalyze the "ascent of the soul into the intellectual world" (Plato 3):

- (1) initial supernatural impetus
- (2) transition between states of reality
- (3) enlightened understanding through empirical analysis

In order to initiate this ascent, a person must first be presented with an opportunity to achieve an altered perspective, such as a prisoner being released from the chains that prevent his head from turning, which Plato reveals is granted by purely supernatural means. Plato never directly

announces who frees the prisoners, except he asserts that the prisoners indeed “are released” (Plato 2) and his passive syntax grammatically begs a subject. Plato uses intentionally elusive diction to describe this subject as an enigmatic and supernatural “instructor” (2), suggesting that no familiar or physical impetus alone could have been responsible for their release, or else Plato would have described it more thoroughly. Only on the next page does Plato directly acknowledge that “God knows” (3) the full accuracy of his allegory, implying that He himself was somehow involved in the prisoners’ release. Plato’s logic is cogent, as we ourselves in our everyday lives do not have the mental capacity to conceive of a reality beyond our own and need an external influence to do so. Consider, for example, the qualities of the “Aha!” moment, which we arrive upon without our own conscious intent, that allows us to derive an unexpected conclusion. According to Plato, only after God, or some other supernatural entity, has guided one of the prisoners outside of their ignorant domicile can the prisoner then look around and gain a true sense of reality.

In Plato’s second step (transition between states of reality), one’s senses lose order and functionality as they emerge from the benighted into the enlightened reality. It is common that a person’s “eyes will be dazzled,” causing “sharp pains” (Plato 2) to occur when first introduced to the luminescence of the new reality. According to Plato, a person may naturally experience an initial discomfort in this adjustment phase of cognition; it is as if the mind and eyes are stretching to make room for a level of complex understanding that the person could not have conceived of before. However, this pain is only temporary and will fade once the person becomes adjusted to their new surroundings.

Once a person has emerged from their transition, Plato's third step (enlightened understanding through empirical analysis) occurs, and a person is able to fully acquire the revelatory knowledge through sustained and directed observation. Plato explains that a prisoner "would first see the sun and then reason about him" (Plato 2) in order to come to the realization that the landscape he has entered is the "real" reality. This process of thorough reasoning and observation resembles, in essence, the scientific method. Here, Plato places an important emphasis on sight, as it is the primary resource for synthesizing new information. Sight also allows for the prisoner to further his curiosity after witnessing the divine qualities of the sun, which further upholds Mann's model of unrelenting questioning and contemplation. Moreover, it becomes apparent that these three constitutive steps, specifically the empirical component, are not specific to Plato's allegory but also pertain to many other myths. For example, the Hindu creation myth "Rig-Veda" conserves these three elements while abandoning their consecutive progression, and placing a less important value on gods in the initial impetus.

As opposed to the allegory, the "Rig-Veda" fuses the steps together to establish a perpetually in-between and undefined state of being, wherein the laws of nature become paradoxically meaningless, serving as a blank slate for new knowledge. From the very first line, the "Rig-Veda" wastes no time in stringing together a series of dichotomies to describe the world's emanation as a state of neither "Being nor Not-Being" (line 1). By firmly ascribing reality to be "neither this nor that," the myth begs the question, "then what is it?" There surely does not seem to be much room for existence between the epitome of "Being," whose certainty is emphasized by the capitalization, and the lack thereof. This intentionality and awareness of the unknown creates a landscape of illusion very similar to the mind of a prisoner during Plato's

second step of transition, which contains enormous potential for revelation. Because this disjointed atmosphere prevails throughout the entire myth, it can be concluded that the “Rig-Veda” privileges an open and empty mind over an external impetus in the pursuit of knowledge. In fact, the “Rig-Veda” directly opposes Plato’s view that “God knows” (Plato 3) the true intricacies which catalyzed this process and instead submits that “perhaps he does not know” whether he “disposed” it or not (Rig-Veda, lines 30, 28). Evidently, the uncertainty which the myth invites through its ambiguous mood also applies to God as it abandons the notion of chain-of-being, setting both the higher power and humanity on the same level. Therefore, the “Rig-Veda” suggests that the complexity of the enlightened reality is even beyond God’s reach, and that it can only be understood once we rid ourselves from all our previous logic of how the universe functions.

One aspect of the pursuit of knowledge is certain, however, which is Plato’s third step of empirical analysis. In the “Rig-Veda,” the crux of the empiricism can be located in these two lines: “Wise seers, searching within their hearts. / Found the bond of Being in Not-Being” (lines 16, 17). The Hindu myth makes no mistake in describing its version of Plato’s prisoners as “wise seers” and not wise believers. They too attain revelatory knowledge about reality through a type of empirical scientific method: regardless of the figurative context, it is ultimately the act of “searching,” which inherently relies upon sight and observation, that enables the wise seers to “[find] the bond of Being in Not-Being.” Thus, empiricism allows them to reconcile the previously mentioned uncertainty between these two existential states and replace it with a certainty about their relationship. And just like the “Allegory of the Cave,” this enlightened state is not characterized by a sense of satisfaction and completion, but instead by continued curiosity

and questioning, as the “Rig-Veda” ends with a philosophical speculation and not a conclusion (30). Both myths, therefore, fulfill Mann’s proposition that the pursuit never ends.

While the scientific backbone of knowledge is confirmed through both of these myths, I now wonder how their differing views on the initial conditions prior to empiricism may be resolved. Perhaps there exists some less extreme middle ground between a complete supernatural intervention and a total disposal of all sense of reality. Both of these events are contingent upon the fact that reality is regular and routine, yet what if this were not so? What if we are not passively staring at a cave wall or wandering aimlessly through vast and empty space, but are instead in an opposite, more chaotic and distracting world? It may seem that life has patterns and habitual repetitions, but the law of entropy states that our universe actually becomes more disordered as time progresses.

Consider, for a moment, a man in a deep slumber who is suddenly awoken by a loud noise. He would naturally furrow his brow and blink his eyes in a drowsy haze of confusion as he attempts to understand what is happening around him. Normally, this period of adjustment would pass quickly, but what if before he could make sense of the sound, multiple beams of light flash on and off? He would simply not have enough time to ground himself in reason before the next stimulus steals his attention and prolongs his bewilderment. And so this haphazard succession of events would continue, as the color of the lights would change, the pitch of the sound would shift, the scent of the room would become bitter and so on, causing the man to perpetually be “waking up” forever. Waiting for a supernatural intervention would be irrational, and closing his eyes, ears, and nose would merely leave him in darkness, disconnected from his surroundings. Thus, the man’s only way to manufacture the initial conditions for revelatory

knowledge would be to direct his own gaze and to construct his own account of these events for further empirical examination; that is, to create his own myth.

Myths, therefore, are not simply obsolete, dust-covered scriptures from ancient times. Instead, the “Allegory of the Cave” and the “Rig-Veda” demonstrate that myths have profound epistemological relevance, since they serve as templates for how to achieve revelatory knowledge with empiricism as their foundation. Because science and mythology share this underlying empirical quality, an apparent overlap exists between the two which reveals the interconnectedness of our forms of reasoning, and that myths deserve the same respect as science in the pursuit of knowledge. So, as we advance our scientific understanding in this pursuit, which, according to Mann, is never-ending because complete knowledge of reality can never be fully attained, let us not abandon myths and the art of story-telling. Let us, instead, recognize that subjective truth has objective permanence, and let us adopt an interdisciplinary analysis which relies upon both science and mythology. After all, the greatest scientists in history have been visionaries like Albert Einstein, whose success depended upon his expansive imagination and thought experiments. Perhaps, then, in this interdisciplinary framework, we might approach the complete understanding of reality that was before inconceivable when relying upon only a single discipline.

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Signature: 

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