

# More Than Allegory

On religious myth, truth and belief

Bernardo Kastrup



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## Other books by Bernardo Kastrup

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I am thankful to my mother for having planted in me, at a very early age—before my intellectual development would have made it impossible—the seeds of religious transcendence. I would discern their meaning and value only much later in life, having denied them at first.

Finally, my girlfriend Claudia Damian has been the inspiration behind this work. Her spontaneous, genuine and intimate connection with religion rekindled in me a way of being I'd lost touch with. Her example gave me courage to acknowledge views and events I thought I'd never dare to acknowledge. This book exists largely thanks to her, though it is not meant for her: she doesn't need it.

Introduction by Jeffrey Kripal:

## Reading Inside God's Brain

I was so delighted when I found Bernardo Kastrup's books. Actually, I didn't find them. A mutual colleague working in Paris on medieval Christianity, Troy Tice, read us both and encouraged me to read Bernardo. He thought our books somehow spoke to one another, and that I would appreciate Bernardo's books. Troy could not have been more right. I read all five of Bernardo's previous books within a few weeks. Just gobbled them up.

I have thought about why I did this. I seldom read this many books by a single author. Indeed, at mid-life, I barely have time or energy to read at all. But this was different. I just dropped everything and read, and read, and read. Why? What did this author's words awaken in me? What glowing ember did he spark back to life in this exhausted middle-aged professor?

Part of my enthusiasm was a double function of Bernardo's philosophical precision and contemporary relevance. Obviously, here was a man who could *think*, but who could also speak to the digital age on its own terms and against its own obsessions and naïve uses of computer metaphors for understanding consciousness (more on that in a moment). Part of my pleasure was also a function of the fact that the author is an unapologetic idealist, that is, someone who is convinced that mind or consciousness is the fundamental nature of reality. I was very familiar with this position, but I had never actually met an idealist. They are terribly rare these days, at least in the academic circles in which I move.

Oh, I had read plenty of idealists within my own historical area of research, and Bernardo sounds *a lot* like the comparative mystical literature to which I have given my life—

except that, unlike my historical sources, he answers my e-mails. There is Meister Eckhart, the great Dominican professor and philosopher whose sermons on the always-happening incarnation of the Word in the individual soul and the Now of eternity read like medieval versions of the books of Bernardo Kastrup (or Eckhart Tolle). But Meister Eckhart died almost seven hundred years ago. There is Ramana Maharshi, the great South Indian Hindu mystic of the immortal Self, or what I like to call the Same in us all. But he left us over sixty years ago. Much closer culturally (and digitally), there is Philip K. Dick, the great American science fiction writer who realized through an encounter with the Logos or Cosmic Mind that “reality is a giant brain” that appears to work like a binary computer code network.<sup>1</sup> But he died over thirty years ago.

Dick is worth dwelling on for a moment here, as his weird thought eerily reflects the more precise and calmer books of Bernardo Kastrup. Both certainly share a digital or computer-based model of intellectual cognition. Both also understand that consciousness is not intellectual cognition. Here is a typical passage from Dick’s *Exegesis*, the 8,000 page private journal that Dick scrawled in the last eight years of his life after getting energetically zapped in the winter of 1974 by a cosmic Mind that he came to call “VALIS,” for Vast Active Living Intelligence System:

All that I could fathom was that the conventional picture that we normally get—and seem to share—is not in fact what is there; what is there is not even in time or space, nor is causation involved. There seems to be a mind and we are in it . . . “We are all but cells in a colossal mad brain that both makes and perceives reality”—something like that, the main thrust being that there is some relationship between the creating of reality and perceiving of it . . . the percipient is cosmogenitor [literally, “creator of the universe”], or conversely, the cosmogenitor wound up as unwilling percipient of its own creation.<sup>2</sup>

You will see, in due time, just how close Dick’s Valis is to the

idealist vision worked out in the following pages. In Bernardo's system, the conventional picture of material reality that we assume to be the case is simply false. It's an extremely elaborate hoax. More accurately, this material world can be thought of as a kind of dream in which God incarnates through sexual reproduction and evolutionary biology in order to reflect back on itself and come to know itself inside the dream. We are all living in God's brain. More on that in a moment, too.

So there was Bernardo's philosophical precision and contemporary relevance, and there was the uncanny way that his words resonate with the comparative mystical literatures I know and love. But there was also something more that drew me to these books, and to this book in particular: the fact that Bernardo Kastrup emerged from the professional fields of physics, mathematics, and computer science and is a successful computer engineer in the corporate world. I confess that I was so pleased by this because I have long found the pretensions of the Artificial Intelligence world to be patently stupid. That's a bit inappropriate, and it is certainly crabby, but it is nonetheless honest and, I think, quite accurate.

Here is why. The AI community has long been laboring under what Bernardo calls the deprived myth of materialism. This very practical, very common consensual delusion states that mind or consciousness is an emergent product of material processes, and that, in the end, all there is is matter, that is, little tiny dead things bouncing or waving around in empty space in perfectly random and mechanical ways. If this base axiom were true, of course, one could well expect sufficiently sophisticated computer chips to become conscious. That makes perfect sense. The problem is that such a claim is not an established fact but a metaphysical interpretation of the scientific evidence. Moreover, and most importantly, the same materialistic model continues to fail us, and spectacularly so, when it comes to the "hard problem" of consciousness. This utter failure suggests that the materialist paradigm is not up to the task, is not sufficient to the question. We don't have the slightest bit of evidence that matter produces consciousness,



nor do we even have a clue how this might work. Probably because it doesn't.

Indeed, if Bernardo Kastrup and the idealist mystical literatures of the world are pointing us in the right direction—and I think they are—the materialist hypothesis is the exact opposite of the truth. It is fantastically wrong. Mind does not emerge as a fragile and temporary product of matter. Matter emerges as a fragile and temporary product of what Aldous Huxley famously called “mind-at-large” and its own mathematical structures and symmetrical beauty. Or, if you prefer, what we so pathetically call “mind” and “matter” emerge from some deeper superstructure or symmetry that is at once mental and material, at once mind and math—a kind of Möbius strip of Material Mind or Mental Matter, then.

We do not need to get into the philosophical arguments here (Bernardo does this for us in his six books, including now this one). It is enough to point out that the AI scene is a perfect example of how materialist assumptions and the computer modeling of mind can lead us astray, and why philosophical training and a profound understanding of comparative mystical literature are both crucial to any real grasp of the nature of consciousness—scientific, philosophical, or otherwise. I will just say it: *any future, truly adequate philosophy of mind or science of consciousness will have to go through the study of religion, and in particular the comparative study of mystical literature.*

This, of course, is exactly what Bernardo is doing here. He is thinking comparatively through the idealisms and nondualisms of Advaita Vedanta, Mind-Only Buddhism, mystical forms of Christianity, and a select number of creation myths, which he reads not as descriptions of some past creation event but as “icons of the now,” that is, as scripts of consciousness itself. He understands perfectly well that as long as philosophers and scientists do not engage these literatures seriously and respectfully, as full and equal partners in the question, there will be no adequate understanding of mind, which is to say: there will be no adequate understanding of us or the universe in which we find ourselves as intimate and

bizarrely successful knowing expressions.

Why *do* we know so much? Why *does* math work so well? Because we participate in and are expressions of the deepest structures of reality. Because we *are* that universe and those mathematical structures.

Bernardo understands all of this. Accordingly, he treats the mystical literatures with a seriousness and a thoughtfulness that is extremely rare in the technological fields. He takes comparative mystical literature as seriously as mathematics. He does not confuse the two realms of human knowing. He does not turn to one to establish the other. But he puts them into deep conversation and emerges on the other side with a most extraordinary story or “myth” of who we are and why we are here.

This is where his idealist mysticism morphs into a contemporary or emergent mythology. This is where mind expresses itself, as in a dream, through a narrative or story. And this is where we, as a culture now, always stumble. Entranced by the technological successes of science and engineering, we have come to think of reality as composed of invisible numbers. Everything real is numerical. Anything worth knowing can be measured. Anything not worth knowing cannot be measured. The only real form of knowledge is mathematical or scientific knowledge. Such is the claim, anyway. It’s more than a claim. As I write this, the education minister of Japan is issuing a decree to “abolish” all of the social science and humanities programs of the Japanese universities. Of the 60 national universities, 26 have agreed to do so in some measure.<sup>3</sup>

What Bernardo shows us, as a computer engineer no less, is that this materialist paradigm that wants to reduce everything to practical numbers is a half-truth and, if taken as the whole truth, a profound mistake with morally and existentially awful consequences. His message is not simply a negative or polemical one, though. He also has a powerfully positive message. He wants to show us that the fundamental nature of reality expresses itself not just through math but also through myth, which is to say: *through symbol and story*. Reality is not

just made of numbers, it turns out. It is also made of words and narratives. We are not just living in a gigantic machine. We are also living in a whirl of stories and dreams.

It's not "just a story," either, as the story always tells us something about the story-teller, just as the dream always tells us something about the dreamer. The project then becomes not simply one of measurement, but also one of meaning. The question becomes not "How can we measure or prove the dream?" but "What is the dream trying to tell us?" We are not after explanation here. We are after understanding, wisdom, gnosis.

The same wisdom leads to another question. "Do we like the story we are dreaming in now? Does this dream lead to human flourishing and long-term sustainability? Or to yet more intercultural violence and existential depression? Why *are* we fighting over our dreams and myths? And why *do* we deny the dreamer?" These are difficult questions, but there is a shimmering silver lining here. After all, if we are dreaming our own stories, we can always dream others. We can tell new stories. We can develop new myths, perhaps even myths that point back to the myth-maker. We do not have to keep living in stories that have long ago spent their shelf lives. We do not have to be so naïve.

Toward such ends, Bernardo tells us a story. He weaves a modern myth whose message goes something like this. We are embodied forms of cosmic mind, split off "alters" in some vast multiple-personality order. These alters have entered God's dream through sexual reproduction and evolutionary biology (note that eros becomes the energy and portal of divine incarnation here) in order to wake up within the dream, look around the physical universe as the interior of God's brain, and reflect on our own cosmic nature within this same neural galactic network. Here is how he summarizes it: "Put in another way, *the universe is the scan of God's brain*; except that you don't need the scanner: you're already inside God's brain so all you have to do is to look around. Your perceptions of the sun, rainbows, thunderstorms, etc., are as inaccessible to God as the patterns of firing neurons in your brain—with all their

beauty and complexity—are inaccessible to you in any direct way.”

We are the universe becoming self-aware. We know what God does not know. In the symbolic and mythical terms of Bernardo’s Cologne Cathedral realization, we are all Christs, crucified on the cross of space and time: “we are all hanging from the self-conceptualized cross of space, time, confinement and impermanence. His divine nature is our true nature as timeless mind taking particular, seemingly limited perspectives within its own dream. That Christ is both God *and* the Son of God born into God’s creation is a hardly disguised way to express this symbolically.”

Obviously, the present book is not simply an idealist tract, an abstract philosophical exercise for the curious. It is a piece of profound story-telling based on the author’s own scientific and technical training, his own mystical Aha!, and his own subsequent philosophical conclusions. It is an exploration of how cosmic consciousness projects itself into narrative forms, into story, or what we have come to call “myth,” and then wakes up out of that same story or myth to know itself not as other but as Self.

Myth for Bernardo, of course, is not some falsehood or superstitious embarrassment, something we can easily leave behind. But neither is it some literal truth or map of history. Rather, myth is “symbolic.” It points. It evokes. It reminds and remembers. But it never quite speaks literally, and for a simple reason: that of which and from which it speaks cannot be captured in language, in number, or by any other act of intellectual cognition. It is simply beyond, or before, all of this. Symbols speak of and out of consciousness, but never literally. A myth here is a story that recalls a mystical experience of transcendence. At any point, it may shock, trip or “flip” the listener-reader into a similar awakening through an “involuntary shift in cognitive perspective.” Here is Bernardo: “the full realization of transcendence is a kind of quantum leap: it happens spontaneously, suddenly, in one swift movement without any apparent cause. It’s a kind of grace.” As such, the myth teaches us nothing new. It simply causes us to

remember who we really and already are.

Do not kid yourself. This is no ordinary book. It is a tangle or reflexive loop in the brain of God. To invoke an image from Bernardo's earlier book, *Why Materialism Is Baloney*, it is a whirlpool in the mercurial Ocean of Mind that, at any point, might suck itself into the same infinite and immortal waters. It is certainly not a book to provide your already overloaded life with yet more information or mere data. It is not about information at all. It is about the knower of any and all information. Read on, then, inside God's brain, but be careful. You just might wake up God.

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### Notes

- 1 Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem, eds, *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*, Erik Davis, annotation editor (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 588.
- 2 Ibid., 717-8.
- 3 See: <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/social-sciences-and-humanities-faculties-close-japan-after-minis-terial-decree>

# Overview

This book is a three-part journey into the rabbit hole we call the nature of reality. Its ultimate destination is a plausible, living validation of transcendence. Each of its three parts is like a turn of a spiral, exploring recurring ideas through the prisms of religious myth, truth and belief, respectively. With each turn, the book seeks to convey a more nuanced and complete understanding of the many facets of transcendence.

Part I will resonate especially with those who yearn for the richness that religious myths can bring into life, yet cannot get around the fact that these myths aren't literally true. It tries to reach those whose souls are at war with their intellects. One of its goals is to restore the meaning of human life by helping the intellect give itself permission to accommodate the intuitions of the soul, without sacrificing reason or plausibility. Indeed, Part I puts forward the controversial notion that *many religious myths are actually true; and not just allegorically so*. It is the transcendent truth uniquely portrayed by these myths that our culture so desperately needs in order to understand the real. This transcendent truth, for not being amenable to words or equations, cannot be communicated through any other means—scientific or philosophical—but religious mythology. To make sense of all this, Part I attempts to articulate the nature of mythical truth in a manner that honors both religion and our skeptical rationality.

Part II pursues the next turn of the spiral by first taking a step back: while we all seek truth—be it through religion, science or philosophy—we very seldom inquire into the meaning of truth. What does it mean to say that something is true or false? What hidden assumptions do we make about the underlying nature of reality when we talk of truth? Tackling these questions is the journey of Part II. In its search for answers it leverages our direct experience of world and self to inquire into the nature of time and space, the framework where truth is supposedly to be found. It then concludes that

*our own inner storytelling plays a surprising role in creating the seeming concreteness of things and the tangibility of history.* Finally, it points to clear echoes of its conclusions in many of the world's religious myths.

Part III, as the final turn of spiral, is the pinnacle of this work. It brings all of the book's core ideas together in the form of a modern, plausible religious myth. In laying out a complete cosmology for making sense of reality and restoring its transcendence, Part III highlights the critical role of belief in everything we take for granted. Indeed, it explains how *deeply ingrained belief systems create the world we live in.* Its narrative is based on the story of a modern explorer of consciousness who, during his participation in a secret scientific project, has a series of transcendent encounters. The metaphysics he brings back from these encounters integrates the themes of the book in one coherent framework. It also opens whole new horizons for the restoration of meaning and purpose to our daily lives.

Naturally, the optimal sequence to read this book is that in which it is presented: from Part I to Part III. Indeed, the ideas discussed in Parts I and II are meant to enrich the reading of Part III. That said, if one prefers to go straight to the heart of the matter and enjoy a gripping story without analytical preludes, it is entirely possible to jump directly to Part III and then return to Parts I and II afterwards.

In whichever order you choose to read it, you will notice that the three themes of this book—myth, truth and belief—flow into and interpenetrate each other at multiple levels and meta-levels throughout the text. Part I, for instance, examines mythology with a mindset characteristic of a quest for factual truth. Part II explores the nature of truth by appealing to our own felt intuitions, as we do when we pursue our beliefs. Finally, Part III elaborates upon the role of beliefs in the format of a myth. The goal is to illustrate, both explicitly and implicitly, through concepts and style, the intimate relationship that exists between myth, truth and belief.

The three parts of this book are meant to echo and reinforce each other content-wise as well. Its central ideas return in all three, being explored from a different angle each

time. This allows me to convey—often indirectly and implicitly—many more nuances than otherwise possible. For instance, the nature and role of myth is explored in Part I, but the *contents* of certain myths come back in Parts II and III, where they echo what is discussed there about truth and belief.

The ebb and flow of the book’s trinity of themes ultimately circles around one of them: *truth*, the central motif of this work. All three parts revolve around it: Part I by exploring how myths can deliver truth, Part II by unveiling the nature of truth through dispelling unexamined beliefs, and Part III by appealing to belief in a myth in order to hint at truth.

You will notice that what I mean by the words ‘myth,’ ‘truth’ and ‘belief’ is richer and more nuanced than the flattened denotations of everyday language. This may, and probably will, surprise you at first. Nonetheless, the attempt to push the boundaries of words and reveal a much bigger, deeper reality behind them is an essential aspect of this work. My intent is to help you see beyond the dull, superficial cultural dialogue reigning in society today.

I hope you find many new vistas and avenues of inquiry in this book. I’ve poured much of myself into it; more than I think most authors would consider prudent. Whatever else it may or may not be, this work is most certainly a sincere, openhearted account of my own way to relate to life, the universe, truth and transcendence.



## PART I: Myth

*The religious myth is one of man's greatest and most significant achievements, giving him the security and inner strength not to be crushed by the monstrosity of the universe.*

Carl Jung

## Chapter 1

# The role and importance of myth

A myth is a story in terms of which one can relate to oneself and the world. The myth of the Holy Trinity, for instance, provides *context* to the lives of millions of Christians: God, as the Father, explains and justifies the creation of the world. As the Holy Spirit, He maintains the world's significance on an ongoing basis by infusing it with an invisible divine essence. The myth also provides *perspective*: God, this time as the Son, offers a concrete example of how to live life in accordance with His grand plan and achieve salvation. The divinity's entrance into its own creation in forms both ethereal (the Holy Spirit) and concrete (the Son) provides a bridge between ordinary life and a transcendent order (the Father). This brings meaning into the world of many Christians, preventing ordinary life from being experienced as aimless and futile.

Myth has historically provided context and perspective to our presence in the world and has enriched the lives of human beings since the dawn of our species. In a culture obsessed with literal truth and pragmatism, such as our own, the impoverishment of myth is increasingly—if only instinctively—felt. Never before in history has a civilization been so desperately devoid of context and perspective. Who are we? Where do we come from? Where should we go? What's the point of it all? We feel lost because we are unable to take seriously the maps that could give us directions. We can no longer take myths seriously because, after all, they are *only* myths.

Historically speaking, the contemporary attitude toward myth is an aberration. The skewed assumptions that sustain this aberration and the reasons why they are mistaken will be addressed in the next chapters. For now, though, let us briefly

review the role and importance of myth.

### Myth and consensus reality

We can roughly divide the chain of subjective experiences we call life into two realms: an outer realm of perceptions and an inner realm of emotions and thoughts. Indeed, while identifying with our emotions and thoughts, we usually don't identify with experiences mediated by our five senses. In other words, we tend to think that our perceptions—despite still being subjective experiences—are outside us, while our emotions and thoughts are part of us. For reasons that will become apparent later, I will refer to the contents of perception—that is, everything we see, hear, smell, taste and feel through the skin—as *images and interactions*. For instance, a lion and a wildebeest are images, while a lion eating a wildebeest is an interaction between images. A rock and a hill are images, while a rock rolling down a hill is an interaction between images. And so on.

The sole *facts* of the outer realm are images and their respective interactions in space and time.<sup>1</sup> Everything else arises in the inner realm through an act of interpretation. After all, in and by themselves the images and interactions express no meaning or emotion. They are simply the movement of pixels in the canvas of a world outside the ego—outside the control of our personal volition—which *evokes* thoughts and feelings within us.

Let us belabor this a bit. What I am saying is that the potentials for emotion and meaning remain unexpressed in the outer realm, which our culture has come to call *consensus reality*. It is a domain of pure form. It's not sad or happy, pointless or purposeful, boring or exciting. In and by itself, consensus reality doesn't express any conclusion, emotional or intellectual. All we can consider to be its *facts* are the images and interactions themselves, not our interpretations of them. The horror or the natural beauty one sees in a wildebeest being devoured alive by a lion are evoked, *by interpretation*, entirely within one's inner realm. Then they are projected outward onto the world. 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live. ...

We interpret what we see ... We live entirely ... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience,’<sup>2</sup> observed Joan Didion.

The outer realm is shared across individuals. After all, we all seem to live in the same world. We all know what lions, wildebeests, rocks and hills are. We go to theaters, museums and parks to share perceptual experiences with others. But the meaning and emotion evoked by these perceptual experiences aren’t necessarily shared: they arise in our private inner realm alone. Two people observing the exact same outer events may conclude different things from, and react emotionally in different ways to, the images. As such, meaning and emotion aren’t part of the *consensus*. To convey meaning or emotion to another individual, we even have to first translate them into consensus images—such as gestures, facial expressions, spoken or written words, etc.—in the hope that these images will then evoke the same meaning and emotion in the inner realm of another. Meaning and emotion cannot be *directly* shared the way the images of consensus reality are.

In summary: *none of what we call consensus reality, or the ‘real world out there,’ expresses meaning or emotion directly.* Only in our inner realm do meaning and emotion arise. This may sound like a nod to existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, who considered the world senseless, as all meaning is admittedly projected onto it by us. But it is not what I mean to imply. The world is only senseless if one sees the outer realm as *fundamentally separate* from the inner realm, which is by no means an established fact. Indeed, insofar as we can know, *outer and inner realms are simply different modalities of subjective experience.* As discussed in my earlier books *Why Materialism Is Baloney* and *Brief Peeks Beyond*, they are two facets of the same coin. Whether meaning is anchored in the outer or inner realm is thus irrelevant: the world is meaningful in both cases for these realms are, at bottom, expressions of one and the same reality.

All this said, my argument holds whether one adopts

Sartre's view or my own: the images and interactions of consensus reality evoke meaning and emotion in our inner realm. *As such, these outer images work as keys to unlock our affective and intellectual potentials.* Without them, our capacity for feeling and thinking wouldn't actualize. Just try to imagine how you could possibly feel romantic love or ponder about the nature of existence without consensus images, such as other sentient beings and the universe they occupy. You will quickly realize that you can't.

And here is the key point: *our mind needs a code to translate consensus images into thoughts and feelings.* Without it, there would be no bridge or commerce between outer and inner realms. The inputs of this translation code are the images and interactions of consensus reality, as perceived by our five senses. Its outputs are the corresponding thoughts and feelings evoked within. Now, because our self-reflective mind operates according to linguistic patterns (an assertion I will substantiate in Chapter 3), the translation code takes the form of a mental narrative we tell ourselves; a story that implies particular correspondences between outer images and inner feelings and ideas. *The translation code is thus a myth.*

Indeed, the English word 'myth' derives from the Ancient Greek μῦθος (*muthos*): something said in words, like a story, speech or report. That we think of reality according to myths is even suggested by the Common Slavic derivative of the original Greek: мысль (*mysl'*), which means 'thought' or 'idea.' Therefore, the word 'myth' originally meant a story that evokes thought; not necessarily an *untrue* story, as it is often understood today. Throughout this book, I use the word 'myth' in this broader, original sense: *myth is a story that implies a certain way of interpreting consensus reality so to derive meaning and affective charge from its images and interactions.* As such, it can take many forms: fables, religions and folklore, but also formal philosophical systems and scientific theories. Clearly, a myth can be true or false without ceasing to be a myth.

Myth is the code that each one of us constantly uses, whether we are aware of it or not, to interpret life in the world. For instance, the ancient myth of astrology links daily

events to celestial rhythms and cycles meant to explain the ups and downs of life.<sup>3</sup> Myth is the very thing that allows the events of consensus reality to mean anything to us. A hard-earned promotion at work only means a life well lived if one has adopted the myth that status, power and wealth accumulation are the purpose of life. If none of these things were assumed to be important, what could a promotion mean? Myth is also the very thing that allows the events of life to impact us emotionally. The death of a loved one is only a permanent loss under the myth of materialism. Our disgust toward acts of wickedness is entirely dependent on our respective myths of morality. And so on. Notice that I am not passing judgment on these myths. I am simply stating that they are a necessary condition for the images of the world to convey any meaning to us, intellectual or emotional. Without these myths, consensus images and their respective interactions would be just dancing pixels.

Without a code for *interpreting* the consensus images all around us, life in the world would evoke no thought, no emotion, no conclusion. It would consist of pure and neutral *observation*, without commentary.

Consensus reality is a realm of pure form. It triggers our myth-making capacity so to evoke thought and emotion within. Our role is to interpret the pure forms by projecting a myth onto consensus reality. The myth implies a way to translate pure form into meaning.

### **A vacuum of myth?**

It is nearly impossible to live life without a myth. A continuous and relentless effort at interpreting consensus reality is part-and-parcel of the human condition. And this on-going interpretation, as we've seen above, entails the code we call myth. It is already a huge challenge for most people to become lucid of the myth underlying the somewhat instinctive way in which they relate to the world. So to deliberately do away with

all interpretations, and all codes, is at best a very tough call indeed.

Myth is disguised in subtle forms. Take, for instance, the notion that consensus reality exists outside mind: it's an inference, an *interpretation* of perceptions, since the perceptions themselves are always in mind. Or take today's materialist neo-Darwinian cosmology: its story suggests that the whole universe is a kind of machine and that its entire dynamics, including life, are driven by a combination of blind chance and some mechanical laws. One might think that such a cosmology dispenses with myth altogether, but nothing is farther from the truth. To say that nature is a mechanical apparatus without purpose or intentionality is itself an interpretation; a myth. The absence of myth would require a complete lack of interpretation or judgment of consensus reality. In the absence of myth, no analogies would be made between the cosmos and machines, and no judgments would be passed regarding whether existence has a purpose or not. One would simply witness images and notice the patterns and regularities of their interactions without commentary or conclusions.

*A deprived myth is not the same as an absence of myth.* A deprived myth is one that favors narrow and lame interpretations of consensus reality, interpretations that do not resonate with one's deepest intuitions. A deprived myth makes life in the world seem futile and claustrophobic. But it is a myth nonetheless, because it entails an interpretation. Today, we don't live in a mythless society. Our condition is much more tragic: we live in a society dominated by increasingly deprived myths.

The dominance of deprived myths is insidious and has severe consequences as far as one's psychic health and relationship with truth is concerned. Yet, these consequences are usually overlooked in the first half of life, because deprived myths have a strong *distractive* power in that period.<sup>4</sup> Young adults, in a natural attempt to self-affirm, are often distracted by the deprived myths of consumption, power and status. Many manage to continue distracting themselves almost all their lives and, in that sense, we live in an adolescent society.

But once these deprived myths are seen for what they are, one needs a *richer* myth that does justice to the scope of life and imbues it with timeless meaning. Let us elaborate on these ideas a bit more.

One always lives according to a myth, for a continuous interpretation of consensus reality is inherent to the human condition. The question is whether one's chosen myth resonates with one's deepest intuitions or runs counter to them.

### **The impetus of human life**

Renowned psychologist James Hillman, in his 'acorn theory,' suggested that each person has a *call*: an often-obfuscated but passionate idea of what her life is meant to be, just like an acorn holds within itself a blueprint of the oak it's meant to become. A life lived so as to bring that idea into reality—thus turning the acorn into the oak—is a life of purpose and timeless meaning.<sup>5</sup> As such, 'the call offers *transcendence*, becoming as necessary to a person's life on Earth as performance to [Judy] Garland, battle to [George] Patton, painting to [Pablo] Picasso.'<sup>6</sup> It is this *transcendence* that imbues life with the eternal significance of destiny fulfillment, as opposed to the evanescence of a mere chain of chance events. 'To live on a day-to-day basis is insufficient for human beings; we need to transcend ... we need meaning ... we need to see over-all patterns in our lives. ... And we need freedom ... to get beyond ourselves ... to rise above our immediate surroundings,'<sup>7</sup> observed Oliver Sacks.

The whole impetus of life is to transcend: to get beyond the separateness, insignificance and transience of the ordinary human condition through association with something timeless and boundless.

Notice that true transcendence should not be confused with mere fame and influence: while it's true that Garland's



performances enchanted millions, Patton's victories changed the course of history and Picasso's influence on the arts cannot be overestimated, are their fame and influence truly timeless and boundless? Our planet is like a spec of dust floating in the vastness of space. Are Garland, Patton and Picasso of any significance anywhere beyond this tiny spec? The Earth is about 4.5 billion years old. Will Earthlings even remember them a mere million years from now? How could mere fame and influence possibly embody the eternal significance of destiny fulfillment? Garland, Patton and Picasso transcended not because of their celebrity—transcendence is far subtler than that—but because, by 'following their bliss,'<sup>8</sup> they embodied 'a flowering of existence in a very creative and new way.'<sup>9</sup> I am going to elaborate more on this subtle notion of transcendence later.

Our innate drive to transcend is a natural and legitimate response to the existential despair that characterizes the ordinary human condition, as powerfully described by the existentialist philosophers. Deep inside, we feel small and powerless before the immensity and impersonal character of a seemingly absurd world. We know that 'everything changes and nothing remains still,'<sup>10</sup> so none of what we find important can last. Investing our identity in a fragile body confined in both space and time, we—uniquely among animals—also know that our own death is inevitable. Every thought, feeling, choice and action of our lives will—or so we fear—eventually be reduced to irrelevance. Aren't they all then, at bottom, *already* irrelevant? Aren't our lives meaningless, our suffering pointless and our dreams frivolous? These questions are the source of our existential despair. 'If you have lived in despair, then, regardless of whatever else you won or lost, everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you,'<sup>11</sup> wrote Kierkegaard. Our despair propels our soul—our deepest drives and intuitions—toward some form of transcendence. We long for a more-than-merely-human condition; a form of immortality and boundlessness that would allow us to observe the drama of our ephemeral lives from 'above,' as opposed to being engulfed and drowned by it.

But can we, in subtle and indirect ways as the case may be, somehow achieve a form of immortality or boundlessness? Is the drive to transcend grounded in valid intuitions or is it mere wish fulfillment? The predominant intellectual answer in our culture today is that transcendence is fundamentally impossible, for there is nothing to a human being but his biological body. *This, in itself, is a myth; an interpretation of images.* And although this myth is disputed on very solid logical and empirical grounds,<sup>12</sup> the main counterforce to it seems to be the *experiential* one: throughout history, countless people have had transcendent—spiritual, mystical—experiences.<sup>13</sup> They have felt and cognized directly that our true identities extend far beyond our bodies and that our lives in this world are pregnant with meaning.<sup>14</sup> One can make a very strong case for the validity of these transcendent experiences. The question of validity, however, isn't the problem.

The problem is this: although the personal and direct experience of a transcendent order leaves an indelible mark in the human mind, *the experience itself is almost never abiding.* Once it ends, one quickly falls victim again to the irresistible pull of ordinary life and its claustrophobic ethos. The issue is compounded by the impossibility to properly translate the experience into words and concepts, which makes recall very difficult. This way, the transcendent order quickly becomes a rather abstract and distant idea, as opposed to a present and felt reality. One is left with 'the agony of absence of the eternally further-beyond,'<sup>15</sup> in the words of Henry Corbin. At best, life becomes divided into the baseline dullness of ordinary existence and fleeting, occasional excursions into transcendence. *Either way, transcendence does not penetrate ordinary life.* A clear boundary persists between the two, like a dam that prevents the riches amassed on the other side from flowing down into the river of our everyday existence. The two worlds don't seem to overlap. Ordinary life remains, to a large extent, devoid of meaning.

The impetus of human life is to transcend the limitations of the ordinary human condition and realize a form of eternal significance. Although transcendence can be experienced in mystical or spiritual states, the experience is almost never abiding and does not permeate one's daily life.

## Religious myths and transcendence

Are we then condemned to a life wherein our deepest yearnings can never be realized? Not really, for *a special type of myth—a religious myth—can bring transcendence into everyday life, thereby saving the human animal from existential despair.* Indeed, we can even define a religious myth as a myth that imbues life with purposefulness, timelessness and boundlessness. In other words, a religious myth is a story capable of lifting the experience of being from the confines of time, space, randomness and blind automatism.

A religious myth infuses ordinary aspects of life with enchantment and significance: accidents and coincidences become invested with hidden purposes; our actions in the world acquire the importance of a cosmic mission; our suffering becomes the carrier of critical insights; even objects and people around us acquire a numinous aura. In the Talmudic myth of conception, *Lailah*—an angel of the night—touches the fetus on the upper lip immediately prior to birth, causing him to forget everything about the transcendent order of reality whence he originates. This angelic action is supposedly what creates the philtrum, that little groove between the nose and the upper lip that we all have. Every time a Rabbinic Jew looks at someone's face on the streets, he potentially sees the footprints of transcendence, the touch of *Lailah*. Through the religious myth, the 'otherworld' enters *this* world. The dam is broken and the river flows.

In a life informed by a religious myth, nothing is 'just so.' Everything has a reason for being and a purpose to fulfill. Everything belongs in a bigger and timeless context; the 'over-

all pattern' mentioned by Sacks. Religious myths turn ordinary life into an abiding transcendent experience; a small but crucial segment of an epic cosmic drama. The boundaries between this world and a bigger world dissolve. There is no more 'here and there.' Instead, transcendence abides in the *here and now*. Religious myths provide the ground where the acorn can grow into the oak.

A religious myth can bring transcendence into daily life in an abiding manner. It can infuse ordinary aspects of life with enchantment and timeless significance, thereby saving the human animal from existential despair.

### **The lamentable state of religious myths today**

Religious myths are much disregarded and belittled today. Not that myth itself has disappeared: moral and ethical codes, ideologies of every kind and ontological interpretations of science—such as the metaphysics of materialism—are, quite literally, myths. They are stories that provide context and direction to our lives, be they lives of scientific pursuit or social activism. Undeniably, however, *religious* myths have been steadily losing their power. The hyping of religious fundamentalism by the mainstream media simply masks the faster-advancing loss of authentic religious vibrancy: a noisy minority makes the headlines while a majority falls into apathy and cynicism. The richness and variety of religious folklore is quickly being swallowed up by globalized, packaged, market-driven worldviews that impart no meaning to one's local community, geography, history or traditions. Perhaps as a desperate, instinctive effort to compensate for this unnatural state of affairs, scientific myth-making is on the rise, as the latest multiverse cosmologies illustrate.<sup>16</sup> But that's a lame form of mythologizing: science's blind devotion to the gods of chance and automatism condemns its myths to hollowness. 'Random events, nothing truly necessary. Science's cosmologies say nothing about the soul, and so they say nothing to the soul,

about its reason for existence,'<sup>17</sup> said Hillman. The transcendence that only religious myths can bestow upon our lives is dissipating fast in a globalized, pragmatic, cynical and market-driven society.

This process unfolds along two apparently opposite avenues that, ultimately, lead to the same destination. On the one hand, the crucial usefulness of *skepticism* is degenerating into the narrow-mindedness of *cynicism*. The allegedly skeptical scientific myth that dominates contemporary culture is, in fact, based on a peculiarly biased value-system: an emotional and irrational need to deny all meaning and purpose in nature.<sup>18</sup> Alan Watts saw this as a reflection of the nineteenth century ethos under which the values of contemporary science congealed. He wrote:

The world-conquering West of the nineteenth century needed a philosophy of life in which *realpolitik*—victory for the tough people who face the bleak facts—was the guiding principle. Thus the bleaker the facts you face, the tougher you seem to be. So we vied with each other to make the Fully Automatic Model of the universe as bleak as possible.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, science, as the exclusive domain of men in the nineteenth century, incorporated in its very fabric the adolescent male's need to look tough. When listening to the spokespeople of science and neo-atheism today, one in fact wonders whether much has changed since then. Be it as it may, the result is that contemporary science cannot acknowledge even the possibility of meaning and purpose—let alone transcendence—for real men and tough chicks face bleak facts. This isn't skepticism but cynicism: an arbitrary commitment to the impossibility of something. It reflects an attitude as beset by blind belief as any religious dogma. Consequently, authentic religious myths are now allowed no role in the mainstream, academically-endorsed worldview of our culture. The natural and legitimate psychic impulse towards transcendence has become artificially associated with ignorance, stupidity and

weakness. Such marginalization of religion has robbed us of context and perspective. We now find our gods not on the altar, but in the bottle of alcohol, the football match on television, the new pair of shoes and the arms of the casual lover.

On the other hand, the crucial usefulness of *faith*—a word whose meaning I am going to elaborate upon later—is degenerating into the narrow-mindedness of *fundamentalism*. So petrified are we at the specter of a meaningless life that we now cling rather desperately to a particular, narrow interpretation of our chosen religious myth. Like the fear that blinds a cornered animal, our insecurities cloud our view of subtlety and nuance. We squash the many facets of the myth—the multiple *entendres*, perspectives and contradictions necessary for conveying the deeper, intellect-transcending intuitions underlying the myth<sup>20</sup>—into a single facet. We see a square for the cube, a triangle for the diamond. We make the religious myth *small*, a flattened shadow of what it is truly meant to represent, so we can hold on to it more easily. As a result, we've succumbed to lives of uptightness, intolerance and even hatred.

Both cynicism and fundamentalism blind us to the full breadth and depth of religious myths. Consequently, we've lost our ability to experience the comprehensive way in which transcendence can envelop our entire existence. We now desperately lack context, perspective and purpose. Our lives have become uprooted, our journey lonely and scary, and our suffering pointless and nearly unbearable.

Because of the contemporary tendency toward cynicism and fundamentalism, we've marginalized our religious myths and made them small and flattened. Consequently, we've lost our connection with transcendence.

## Chapter 2

# The rich colors of mythical life

It hasn't always been like this. In fact, during the vast majority of history and pre-history things have been very different. But to reencounter the lush colors that religious myths could once bring into human life, we have to turn to those dwindling cultures that still manage to keep them partly alive, precariously as the case may be. We have to turn, for instance, to the *Arandan*, an aboriginal Australian people with an extraordinarily evocative account of the origins of their world.

### The Arandan religious myth

The Arandan believe that *Karora*, the creator, dreamed the world up in his sleep.<sup>21</sup> As he lay in darkness on the ground, a kind of tree grew from his head all the way to the heavens, its roots planted on Karora's head. The thoughts, wishes and desires in his head then became real as Karora dreamed them: animals and men sprung from his navel and armpits.

Eventually, when the sun rose, Karora awoke. As he stood up, he left a hole on the ground in the place where he had lain asleep. This hole then became the Ilbalintja Soak, a sacred place for the Arandan, which connects their daily life with the transcendence of their deity. Now awake, Karora lost his magical powers and, to his own surprise, met the animals and men that he had dreamed into existence the previous night. He even cooked and ate some of the animals for, without his magical powers, he felt hungry. Over a series of subsequent nights, Karora again fell asleep and dreamed more creatures into existence, coming in contact with them upon awakening the next morning.

All of this supposedly took place around the Ilbalintja Soak,

a location integral to Arandan life. The animals that sprouted from Karora's dreaming body are animals the Arandan see every day. The myth thus endows their very environment and its inhabitants with transcendence. Their whole existence is colored by the myth. It gives their lives meaning.<sup>22</sup>

One way to look upon the Arandan myth is to take it literally and then proceed to dismiss it as absurd. Another way is to try and look *beyond* the words, taking the images of the myth as evocative *symbols* that point to deeper and ineffable intuitions. An extensive analysis of the Arandan myth is beyond the scope or purposes of this book, but it is useful to highlight a few salient aspects.

Clearly, the myth evokes the notion that the world is a *mental creation* of a deity who dreams it into existence while *lacking lucidity*. In the stupor of the dream, this deity has the magical power of bringing things forth into existence; the freedom unique to the *imagination* to concoct images without being bound by logic, resource constraints, ordinary causality or consistency. In other words, *during his dream the deity doesn't know what is supposed to be impossible and, therefore, nothing is impossible*. However, he can also *enter the dream*, as it were, by waking up in it. When this happens, the deity gains the ability to self-reflect but loses his magical powers, for he is now a participant in his own dream, subject to its constraints and internal logic like the rest of his creation. In other words, by waking up he becomes aware of, and subject to, what is supposedly impossible. Yet, it is this act of waking up *inside* the dream that gives his creation concreteness and solidity, for only now creation is experienced in the state of lucid self-reflection that fixes it in place, as opposed to the ever-flowing slumber of sleep.

The idea built into this religious myth is sophisticated and striking. Karora can find himself in two different mental states: one lacking lucidity, which is linked to the unconstrained freedom to imagine things into existence; and a self-reflective state linked to becoming subject to self-imposed constraints. Upon waking up inside his own dream, Karora even has to find food, cook and eat! There seems to be a trade-off between



lucidity and unconstrained creative freedom; they don't come together.

I will leave it to you to consult your own intuition and determine what—if any—ring of truth and significance this myth might have. Be it as it may, the Arandan are not alone in their sophisticated intuitions ...

### **The Uitoto religious myth**

On the other side of the planet, in the Amazon jungle, the *Uitoto* tribe has a mind-bending myth of their own.<sup>23</sup> According to it, a creator deity, *Nainema*, also created the world by imagining it while in a state of slumber. Initially, his imaginings were a tenuous and evanescent illusion, which could easily be lost and forgotten. However, *Nainema* held on to the illusion by the thread of a dream, not allowing it to escape him. He tied the thread with magical glue and then proceeded to stamp on the illusion until he could, as it were, *break into it*, so to sit down on the earth he was imagining. Now *inside* his own dream, he spat on the earth, thereby sprouting the jungle from his saliva. At last his original, tenuous illusion had become the actual, concrete world of the *Uitoto*.

### **The Hindu religious myth**

There are many other examples of similar myths. The Hindu tradition in India, for instance, is particularly rich.

According to a foundational Hindu myth, the primary formative principle behind everything is called *Brahman*. *Brahman* *thought* primordial 'waters' into existence, forming the basic scaffolding of the world to come. *Brahman*'s seed in the primordial waters then became a *cosmic egg*—a universal motif across the world's religious myths<sup>24</sup>—from which *Brahman* Itself was born. Having achieved *self-generation* by being born inside the basic scaffolding of Its own creation, *Brahman* gave it content: through further acts of thought, It created Heaven, Earth and all the concrete elements of the world.<sup>25</sup> In some versions of the myth, the utterance of a

sound, or 'the Word,' is what fills the world in with content.<sup>26</sup>

What richness of color and transcendence the Arandan, Uitoto and Hindu myths must bestow on the lives of the people who live by them.

Traditional religious myths flood a community's very environment and its inhabitants with transcendence. The temporal and eternal worlds become linked. Mere trees, animals and holes on the ground take on the significance of divine footprints.

### **The common motifs behind the world's religious myths**

Alert readers will have noticed conspicuous and even striking similarities across the myths discussed. In all cases, the world is seen as the *mental creation* of a deity; that is, a kind of *thought* in the mind of God. The universe begins as insubstantial imaginings—'illusions' in the Uitoto case; 'dreams' in the Arandan case; thought-up primordial 'waters' in the Hindu case—which then gain concreteness and solidity once the deity itself *enters the dream*—by waking up in it, in the case of the Arandan; by stamping on it, in the case of the Uitoto; or by birthing itself into it, in the Hindu case. The deity always undergoes a significant change in its state of consciousness—from dream or illusion to a lucid, self-reflective, deliberate state—once it enters its creation.

These motifs recur across time and cultures, the West being no exception. For instance, according to the Christian myth, God also enters His creation by being born into it as the Christ. The broader notion of a cosmic mind holding the world within itself as a thought is also present in Western mythology. Consider the following words of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, basis of the Hermetic myth that underlies Western esotericism:

That Light, He said, am I, thy God, *Mind*, prior to Moist Nature ... *Mind is Father-God*. Not separate are they the one

from other; ... He [God] *thinketh* all things manifest ... [and] manifests through all things and in all.<sup>27</sup>

Changes in the state of consciousness of such cosmic mind—dreamless sleep, dream and wakefulness—are integral to the cycle of creation according to many of the world's myths, as revealed in Joseph Campbell's monumental work on comparative mythology. Indeed, Campbell recognized a consistent message in many myths regarding the nature of reality and the process of creation. He called it the *cosmogonic cycle*, describing it 'as the passage of *universal consciousness* from the deep *sleep* zone of the unmanifest, through *dream*, to the full day of *waking*.'<sup>28</sup> In the waking state, creation is experienced as 'the hard, gross facts of an outer universe.' In the dream state, it is experienced as the 'fluid, subtle forms of a private inner world.'<sup>29</sup> In the dreamless sleep state, there is no experience as such and, therefore, only the *potential* for creation exists. The different phases of the cosmogonic cycle thus entail different states of cognition of the universal consciousness.

This is not to say that *all*—or even *most*—religious myths reflect the cosmogonic cycle, the notion that the universe is a kind of dream in a universal consciousness. Modern scholarly work has shown that religious mythology is varied and largely inconsistent.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, such inconsistency should come as no surprise: the briefest review of history and contemporary society already shows that the human mind is perfectly capable of generating baseless ideas, often dangerous ones. Mythology, as a human activity, couldn't be an exception to that. Not all religious myths—at least in their developed forms—fully resonate with the deepest intuitions of humankind, even when their original psychic seeds are genuine. Various mundane motivations play a role in the further development of myths, including human greed and drive to power.<sup>31</sup> But this isn't the point ...

The point is that *some*—dare I say *many*—religious myths, originating in cultures separated by abysses of space, time and language, somehow reflect surprisingly similar themes and

ideas. And although comparing myths can inadvertently imbue them with generic meanings they didn't have in their local historical contexts,<sup>32</sup> the similarities here aren't generic or simple. They are highly specific and sophisticated. The world as the mental activity of a deity that becomes lucid within its own imagination certainly isn't a view you would expect to arise by mere coincidence all over the world. Neither is it a vague generality created artificially by comparison. Somehow, peoples separated by half the circumference of the globe and thousands of years have, through their religious myths, arrived at specific, refined, surprisingly similar cosmologies. This, in itself, already raises interesting questions regarding the origin of the commonalities (more in the next chapter). The most urgent and important of all questions, however, is whether this largely shared cosmology is true. *Are these religious myths in some way true?* This is what we must now address.

A common motif across many traditional religious myths is the notion that the world is the imagination of a divinity. The divinity then enters its own imaginings, taking on a lucid, self-reflective state of awareness within it. It is this that brings concreteness to an essentially dreamed-up universe.

### **Religious myths: either true or irrelevant**

When we were children, before we conceptualized the notion of 'truth,' we were able to derive great excitement and meaning from fantasy and imagination. How many a rainy afternoon have we not spent daydreaming amazing stories? Can you still remember how that felt? Our imagined stories were no less significant and evocative than any real event, simply because we hadn't yet learned to differentiate between these two categories. Both real events and fantasies were, for our younger selves, simply *experiences*. But things changed later in life. Once we began to conceptualize a boundary separating truth from untruth, we became unable to derive any

excitement or significance from what we saw as mere fantasy. If you are a culturally-acclimated human being, this will still be the case for you today.

And that's the challenge we have to face before we are able to allow religious myths to enrich our lives again: *we can't take seriously that which we don't consider true*. How can an inconsequential fantasy influence our emotional and intellectual lives? We aren't children anymore. If a religious myth is just a fable it can't possibly count, can it?

The Arandan and Uitoto face the exact same challenge: their religious myths would also die out if they weren't believed. However, unlike traditional cultures, the intellect has become the dominant psychic function in our society. That's the difference between them and us. We don't just take our intuitions at face value anymore—as the Arandan and Uitoto do—but subject them to the tyrannical scrutiny of reason. Therefore, *it has become indispensable for us to rationally understand how and why a religious myth can carry truth*. Without this understanding, the myth is dismissed by the intellect—bouncer of the heart—thereby losing its colors and becoming irrelevant to us.

Religious myths are powerless if they aren't seen as true. But unlike traditional cultures, we subject our mythical intuitions to the scrutiny of reason. Therefore, if our lives are to be colored by religious myths again, it is imperative that we rationally understand how and why they can be true.

### **Mere allegories?**

Because traditional religious myths admittedly can't carry *literal* truth, our instinctive explanation for their sophistication and mutual consistency is to think of them as *allegories* for some kind of advanced cosmology. After all, it's pretty safe to say that Karora didn't literally rise from the soil and that Nainema didn't literally spit the jungle into existence. But to

say that these myths are *just* allegories wouldn't do justice to the power they hold in their respective societies. To the Uitoto, the trees of the forest *really* grew from the saliva of Nainema. To the Arandan, the Ilbalintja Soak was *really* formed when Karora arose from the ground. If their myths were seen as mere allegories, they wouldn't have the power to flood the entire world of the Arandan and Uitoto with transcendence, as they do. The Ilbalintja Soak wouldn't be sacred. The trees of the Amazon jungle wouldn't have the significance of divine secretion. *Something glaringly essential is lost when we reduce religious myths to just allegories.*

Corbin pointed out that 'allegory is a more or less artificial representation of generalities and abstractions *which can be perfectly well grasped and expressed in other ways.*'<sup>33</sup> As such, allegories are quickly categorized by our intellects as marginally useful little stories that aren't *really* true after all. They just indirectly point to a truth that—we assume—can ultimately be described in some direct, explicit, accurate and precise way; that is, in a *literal* way. Immediately, we start investing the whole of our intellectual and emotional energy in searching for this direct representation of the truth, dismissing the allegory as a superfluous intermediary step. We say to ourselves: 'Nice allegory, but what is it that is *really* going on?' As such, allegories cannot carry the power that we now reserve for literal truth. Religious myths seen as mere allegories cannot provide us with the context, perspective and meaning we crave in modern life. They cannot restore the transcendence and mystery of the world. They become merely 'a mode of thought that eventually needs to be abandoned for the clean lines and straight thinking of pure reason,'<sup>34</sup> in the words of Jeffrey Kripal.

Yet, despite lacking literal truth, religious myths have been the engine of human psychic life for almost the entire length of our history and pre-history combined. Whence do they derive their undeniable force? Here is a conundrum that isn't easy to solve. Patrick Harpur has probably made the best recent attempt at tackling this in his excellent books.<sup>35</sup> But his overarching conclusion—as much as it may be correct—is

ultimately unsatisfying: he argues that there is a *subtle, roundabout way of seeing reality* according to which the distinction between literal and allegorical truth disappears, and that religious myths should be interpreted in that ambiguous way. Harpur brilliantly uses poetry, psychology, philosophy and a whole arsenal of scholarship to try and coax the reader toward his elusive but intriguing viewpoint. I, however, believe that the conundrum can be unpacked and made sense of in a fully explicit and declarative manner. Instead of elusive and ambiguous ways of seeing, I believe we can positively state, logically and coherently, in what precise manner religious myths can hold actual truth.

The key to solving this riddle lies in realizing that truth is not restricted to only two categories—literal and allegorical—as implicitly assumed above, but that there is a third and essential category: *transcendent truth*. We will explore this in the next chapter.

The truth carried by religious myths is much more than merely allegorical, yet not literal.

## Chapter 3

# The truth of religious myths

For thousands of years, traditional cultures the world over have taken religious myths seriously, not only as an integral part of their lives but as the very basis and guiding principle of their existence. As David Leeming put it, religious ‘myths have had significant power to move people. Societies have defined themselves by, committed themselves to, and even been willing to kill and be killed in support of their myths.’<sup>36</sup> Clearly, our ancestors believed in the truth of their religious myths unreservedly. Were they merely naïve and unenlightened or did they benefit from a subtle perspective that we have lost? What is the nature of mythical truth and why have we become so blind to it in our culture?

### Language and thought

Underlying our contemporary attitude toward religious myths is the hidden but far-reaching assumption that *all relevant truths about reality can be directly captured by the intellect in the form of language constructs*. In other words, we take it for granted that, if something is *true*, then it can be *said*.

By ‘language’ I don’t mean merely English or Chinese, but a system of *signs* for the representation and manipulation of information about the world. Language represents the *images* of consensus reality—lions, wildebeests, rocks, hills, etc.—with signs like written words, sounds and other labels.<sup>37</sup> It then combines these signs through a set of rules, called a *grammar*, so to represent the *interactions* found in consensus reality.<sup>38</sup> This way, language allows us to create an *internal model* of the world within our intellects. Examples of language in this general sense include not only English and Chinese, but also



mathematical notations, computer codes, sign language, etc. As the basis of our internal models of reality, *language underlies the way we reason and delineates the boundaries of what we consider possible*. The Greeks were on to this, for their word for ‘word’—*λόγος* (‘logos’)—also means ‘reasoning.’

Indeed, Noam Chomsky argued that our ability to use language is not just learned, but enabled and conditioned by preexisting, hardwired structures in the human brain. Language isn’t arbitrary: it is what it is because we are what we are. Before being a tool for communication, *language mirrors the very way our intellects process information about reality*.<sup>39</sup> This is not so surprising if you consider that the vast majority of our use of language is internal: we talk to ourselves much more than we talk to others. *We reason in language*. As Ian Tattersall put it, ‘it is virtually impossible to imagine our thought processes in [the absence of language], for without the mediation of language those thought processes would be entirely intuitive.’<sup>40</sup> Our ancestors could only begin to communicate in our unique human way after biological hardware that enabled *a linguistic style of thought* had evolved in their brains, an idea confirmed by paleoanthropological data.<sup>41</sup> Our reasoning and our language overlap and co-define each other. ‘Language is generated by the intellect, and generates the intellect,’<sup>42</sup> said Abelard, expressing a fundamental *circularity* whose profound implications we will explore in Parts II and III of this book.

For this reason, we have now become so accustomed to judging reality linguistically that we assume all relevant truths to be amenable to direct representation in language. In other words, we assume that if something cannot be unambiguously *said* then it cannot be *true*. We often judge people to be wrong simply because they cannot articulate their position coherently in words. How open are we, really, to the idea that there are essential aspects of reality that cannot be unambiguously represented in any language?

Yet, there is no reason to believe that language is sufficient to capture all relevant truths. As Alan Watts put it, it’s a mistake to think ‘that one can make an informative, factual,

and positive *statement* about the ultimate reality.<sup>43</sup> After all, how plausible is it that the information processing apparatus of a mere primate would have evolved to articulate *all* reality? Indeed, the operations of the human intellect are based on what Chomsky has called a ‘universal grammar,’ a structured template for manipulating information. Chomsky went as far as to assert that ‘the study of universal grammar ... is a study of the nature of human intellectual capacities.’<sup>44</sup> It is preposterous to think that such a template would mirror within itself all the dynamics of nature. Why would it? ‘Things are not as graspable and sayable as on the whole we are led to believe; most events are unsayable, occur in a space that no word has ever penetrated,’<sup>45</sup> concluded Rilke.

Truth doesn’t care about the limits of human language. It is what it is. Therefore, there almost certainly is much about reality that we cannot make sense of in words or other notations; many *truths* that cannot be unambiguously *said* and hence *reasoned*. These are *transcendent truths*, for they escape the boundaries of logic, time and space enforced by our universal grammar. And it is in regard to transcendent truths, as we soon shall see, that religious myths play an irreplaceable role. Indeed, while discussing the ‘incommunicability of the Truth which is beyond names and forms,’ Joseph Campbell wrote: ‘whereas the truths of science are communicable, ... *mythology* and metaphysics are but guides to the brink of a *transcendent* illumination.’<sup>46</sup>

Because our self-reflective reasoning is constructed in language, we assume that if something cannot be unambiguously said then it cannot be true. But truth does not care about the limits of human language. There are many natural truths that cannot be said and, hence, reasoned. These are transcendent truths.

## The obfuscated mind

The boundaries of language and of the intellect, as we've seen in the previous section, are co-extensive: the intellect cannot go where language cannot take it. And most of us know how limited language is—despite the magnificent attempts of poets—in expressing the subtleties of human feelings, let alone the broader truths of reality. 'The categories of human thought ... so confine the mind that it is normally impossible not only to see, but even to conceive, beyond the ... phenomenal spectacle,'<sup>47</sup> continued Campbell.

Still, the human mind is not limited to the intellect. Where the intellect stops *intuition* picks up. We can *sense* truth even if we cannot *articulate* it in words or *derive* it from logical schemes. Unreliable as this sense may be, it is our only link to a broader reality.

The intellect resides in what depth-psychology calls the 'ego,' that part of our thoughts, feelings and perceptions that we are self-reflectively aware of. But underneath our self-reflective selves there is an unfathomably broader mental space that depth-psychology has come to call the 'unconscious,' the wellspring of intuition. As explained in an earlier work,<sup>48</sup> the term is actually a misnomer: the 'unconscious' mind is merely an *obfuscated* part of consciousness. Terminology aside, however, what matters here is the existence of a broader, intuitive part of mind underlying the ego. From this point on, I will call it the 'obfuscated mind.'

Today's neuroscience has produced strong empirical evidence that, like the ego, the obfuscated mind can also acquire, process, store and retrieve information, exhibiting a surprisingly broad range of cognitive functions.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the presence of an obfuscated mind much broader and more powerful than the ego is an empirical fact that confronts every depth-psychologist, every day, in the therapy room. So the questions of real relevance here are not about whether the obfuscated mind exists, but: How does it operate? What can it know about nature that the intellect cannot? And how can we establish communication between the intellect and the obfuscated mind?

As a cognitive domain that transcends the intellect, *the*

*obfuscated mind does not operate according to linguistic constructs.* In other words, it does not process information according to a logical, algorithm-like universal grammar. Instead, evidence from depth-psychology shows that the obfuscated mind operates *symbolically*.<sup>50</sup> Unlike a *sign*—such as a word, acronym or label—which merely *denotes* something well defined and circumscribed, a *symbol connotes* a deeper, subtler, broader idea or intuition. In the words of Corbin, ‘a symbol is a primary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*), unconditional and irreducible, the appearance of something that cannot manifest itself otherwise to the world where we are.’<sup>51</sup> As such, the symbolic obfuscated mind is less constrained in the way it organizes its cognitive processes than the linguistic intellect.

We can experience the amazing latitude of symbolic cognition when we dream: as expressions of the obfuscated mind, dreams unfold in a much broader space than that delineated by rationality and physics. They don’t ‘make sense’ in the way our rational thoughts do because they refuse to be bound by the constraints of logic, time and space normally enforced by grammatical rules. Scenes change suddenly and discontinuously; events don’t obey ordinary cause-and-effect relationships; contradictions and cognitive dissonance abound; etc. Yet, dreams have great power to reveal *truth* about our inner states, conveying their meaning through indirect, seemingly absurd but strongly evocative symbols. This, in fact, is the whole basis of dream analysis in depth-psychology.<sup>52</sup>

As argued carefully in an earlier work, I believe that the logical constraints of the human intellect are very useful but ultimately arbitrary.<sup>53</sup> After all, one cannot logically argue for the absolute validity of logic without begging the question. The obfuscated mind, for not being restricted to such arbitrary constraints, can embody a much greater range of cognition than the intellect. Its symbolic character should be regarded, according to Carl Jung, as an ancient mode of thought that has been superseded—or rather, obfuscated—by the relatively recent acquisition of linguistic thinking.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, our intellect—insofar as it enables deliberation, premeditation, evaluation

humans—from anxiety to depression—are often fed, if not caused, by a confined, claustrophobic and ultimately unsubstantiated interpretation of consensus reality; that is, by a deprived myth derived from grammatical rules. The depressed person sees no meaning in life largely because the small box of her linguistic thinking limits her view of what life is. The anxious person fears self-destruction largely because her linguistic understanding of her own identity is confining.

But the *translinguistic*, transcendent truths of nature hold the promise to liberate us from these artificial confinements, for they surpass the boundaries of logic, time and space enforced by grammatical rules. They inoculate against existential despair. That the intellect can't access these transcendent truths does *not* mean that our broader obfuscated mind can't either. As a matter of fact, both the long history of religious epiphany<sup>56</sup> and over a century of depth-psychology<sup>57</sup> suggest strongly that it *can*; that the obfuscated mind *can* intuitively recognize transcendence, offering us our best chance of deliverance from the clutches of deprived myths.

Indeed, the evocative power and remarkable sophistication of so many traditional religious myths can only be attributed to their origin in the obfuscated mind, which intuits aspects of reality unreachable by the intellect. These myths weren't thought through deliberately, but *sensed*. Their intricacies weren't composed through steps of reasoning, but arose spontaneously from attempts to *describe* the underlying structure of reality, which their originators could *intuitively apprehend*. This explains how cultures with limited intellectual development could produce such astoundingly refined cosmologies. It also explains how these various cosmologies ended up being so mutually consistent: after all, we all *share* the same reality that the myths attempt to describe. In a nutshell, despite the radically different geographical, historical and cultural contexts of different traditional peoples, they were intuitively 'looking at,' and trying to describe, the same phenomenon. In arguing this, I am largely echoing Jung's views, which were extensively substantiated in his own work and those of others after him.<sup>58</sup>

Many religious myths reflect a culture's intuitive apprehension of transcendent aspects of reality. They aren't merely roundabout ways to refer to something literal, but the most direct and accurate utterance of transcendent truths. A religious myth is symbolic—never literal—because it emerges from the obfuscated mind.

### A daring proposal

All this said, there is a fact we must face. We may intellectually understand and accept the nuances of the three categories of truth discussed above—literal, allegorical and transcendent—but *emotionally* things are pretty binary: we either believe a religious myth or we don't. And if we don't, the myth loses all of its power. I thus propose that, *if a religious myth resonates deeply with your inner intuitions and survives a reasonably critical assessment of its depth, then you should emotionally—though not intellectually—take it onboard as if it were literally true.* The religious myth that resonates the strongest with your obfuscated mind should inform your *emotional* life—again, not your intellectual life—as if it were the literal truth, even though you'll know rationally that it isn't. I am thus advocating a deliberate, lucid split or dissociation between your emotional and intellectual attitudes. The way to achieve it is to remind yourself constantly that *there is no better description of transcendent truths than the religious myth that resonates with your heart.* Therefore, the logical way to go about life is, ironically, to buy into your heart-chosen myth with reasonable but not excessive intellectual oversight. The intellect is a valuable adviser but a lousy king.<sup>63</sup>

I make this proposal because I believe it to be more in accord with reality than the alternative. Since religious myths are the best representations of transcendent truths, dismissing them as mere fictions actually takes us farther away from what is really going on than taking them onboard as if they were literally true. This was Nietzsche's mistake when he declared God to be dead.<sup>64</sup> Overwhelmed by late nineteenth century

rationalism, he rejected the religious myth of an anthropomorphic God, omniscient overseer of human life. But, with this reasonable rejection of the literal interpretation of a symbol, he denied *all* transcendent aspects of reality.<sup>65</sup> Is this denial less false—or even less naïve—than the divine symbol taken literally?

Another example should make my point clearer. The Pueblo—a native people of North America—believe they are the offspring of Father Sun. According to their religious myth, the Pueblo's rituals are essential to help their father cross the sky every day. Were they to stop performing their sacred rituals, the Pueblo believe the sun would stop rising in ten years and darkness would befall the world.<sup>66</sup> Notice that, if we allow this myth to penetrate our minds deeply enough, it is possible to intuitively *sense* surprising wisdom in it. Indeed, traditionally the sun has symbolized the lucid, self-reflective human intellect. 'How naturally we imagine our own capacity to know and to create, as the bright sun of consciousness,'<sup>67</sup> says *The Book of Symbols*. Depth-psychologists also consider the sun to be a symbol of the ego or intelligence, as opposed to instinct.<sup>68</sup> As such, a life lived with the attention and deliberateness with which one performs a sacred ritual ensures that the sun of self-reflective awareness continues to rise and illuminate the world every day. This is, in a very limited sense, what the Pueblo's religious myth seems to hint at. And isn't it a fact that only through the human capacity for self-reflection can nature become aware of itself? Isn't it a fact that, without the light of our lucidity, nature would remain shrouded in the darkness of instinct? The religious myth brings the transcendent aspects of these facts forcefully into the daily world of the Pueblo, making it alive and relevant in a way that our detached, conceptual explanations could never do. Indeed, at the very moment that I attempted to *explain* the Pueblo's myth conceptually, by rationally interpreting its symbolism, I killed something crucial about it; I killed its immediacy and aliveness. 'Oh, that's what this myth means! It's *just* an allegory of self-reflection after all.' And kaboom! In one fell swoop, the transcendent truth suggested by the myth is lost from sight.

Can you sense what I mean? Only when emotionally taken in as though it were the literal truth, *and therefore dispensing with further elucidations and conceptual interpretations*, does the religious myth allow the Pueblo to *feel* their true role in the natural order of things. Wouldn't they find themselves farther removed from the truth if they dismissed their myth and believed instead that their lives served no purpose?

Because an intellectual inaccuracy is unavoidable whether we *emotionally* take the symbolism of religious myths literally or dismiss them, the lesser inaccuracy is the logical way to go. Transcendent truths cannot be grasped directly and explicitly, so rejecting religious myths for the sake of a non-existing literal alternative is simply *irrational*. The dilemma here isn't comfortable, but we must bite this bullet. If we don't, we will be condemning ourselves to being forever insulated from a deeper reality and, therefore, effectively living out our emotional lives according to falsehoods and artificial constraints. How smart is that?

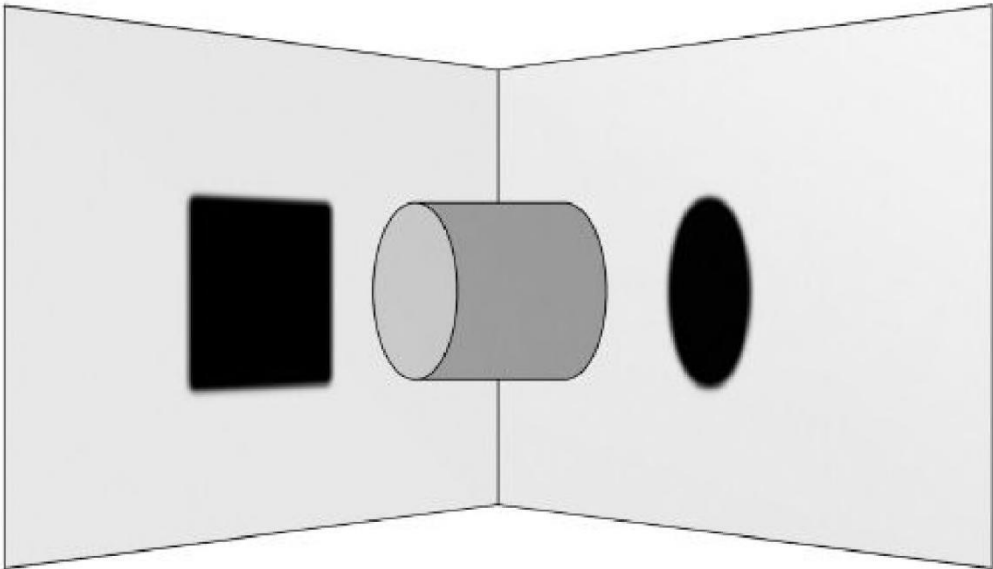
For you to be able to embrace my proposal, you will need your intellect to grant itself rational permission to *step out of the way and make space* for your wiser obfuscated mind to co-direct your relationship with reality. My attempt so far in this book has been to help you grant yourself this permission, allowing religious myths to color your emotional life without excessive intellectual judgment. I want to help you *emotionally* believe your chosen religious myth as fully as you believe any literal truth; and as fully as the Pueblo believe that they help the sun rise every day. This, in fact, is what it means to have faith. *Faith is the sincere emotional openness to the transcendent truths connoted by a story, beyond the superficial, literal appearances of the story's denotations*. And, as argued above, it is the absence of faith that is irrational.

Yet, I know that the symbolic images used in traditional religious myths defy our rationality too drastically, making it impossible for us to take them in as if they were the literal truth. How could any person in contemporary Western civilization take seriously the idea that animals and human beings sprouted *literally* from the navel and armpits of Karora?



transcendence altogether, since it implicitly assumes that the corresponding truths can be accurately, unambiguously and completely captured in a language-based narrative. Moreover, taking a religious myth to be the literal truth at an intellectual level plants the seed of fundamentalism. This has been the source of unimaginable suffering and destruction throughout history. Let us elaborate on it with an analogy.

If you illuminate a solid cylinder from its top, it will project a shadow in the shape of a circle. If you illuminate the exact same cylinder from its side, its shadow will look like a rectangle. See Figure 1. Both the circle and the rectangle are equally valid projections of the cylinder, conveying *true* information about it. The fact that the rectangle is completely different from the circle—an apparent contradiction in the flat world of shadows—implies no conflict in the world of the solid cylinder. In 3D, the differences between 2D shadows are easily reconciled.



**Figure 1. A solid cylinder and its shadows.**

A transcendent truth is to our intellect like a solid cylinder is to its shadows. The same transcendent truth can, in principle, ‘appear’ to the intellect in different and apparently

*image*

*not*

*available*

from the depths of the obfuscated mind—from shallow self-deception, like wish fulfillment and gullibility. Many fall victim to self-deception and, I'm afraid, there are no surefire recipes to avoid it. Ultimately, we are each responsible for the sincerity, attention and discernment with which we listen to the whispers of our obfuscated mind.

In addition, it is conceivable that the comparative study of religion, as professionally done in academia, could *help* us recognize true religious myths by identifying the symbolic patterns typical of genuine intuitive insight.<sup>69</sup> Through complementing our personal intuition with collective validation, this could ease the individual burden we now carry in navigating our religious life. However, as long as academia—plagued as it is by the deprived myth of materialism—insists on rejecting even the possibility of transcendence, the burden will remain on each of us individually.

Allowing one's chosen religious myth to inform one's emotional life as though it were literally true does not mean that one should take the myth, intellectually, to be the literal truth. Doing so plants the seed of fundamentalism.

### **Religious myth and language**

Let us try to summarize and put in perspective some of what has been discussed so far. See Figure 2. The figure is divided vertically into outer (above) and inner (below) realms. Two concentric circles are shown. The inner circle represents our self-reflective intellect—operating according to language constructs—paired with the world of ordinary images and interactions, like lions, wildebeests, lions eating wildebeests, etc. The outer circle represents the obfuscated mind—operating according to symbols—paired with a world of transcendent meta-images. Unlike the images of consensus reality, these transcendent meta-images have no form: they are ineffable idea gestalts, not perceptual representations.

In the same way that only some of the conceivable interactions among ordinary images are empirically verifiable consensus facts, only a subset of all conceivable meta-images is actually true. These transcendent truths are recognized by the human mind as outer realities, as though captured by a sixth sense utterly incommensurable with the other five.

There are five different chains of dots in Figure 2, illustrating the basic categories of language constructs:

Chain 1-2: *lies, ordinary fictions and factual errors*. Here, an ordinary statement of language (1) denotes an ordinary image interaction (2) that is not a consensus fact. An example would be to say that ‘the Earth is flat,’ a simple factual error.

Chain 3-4-5: *allegories*. Here, an ordinary statement of language (3) denotes an ordinary image interaction (4) that is not, but does connote, a consensus fact (5). A famous example can be found in Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It*: ‘All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players.’ Clearly, the world isn’t literally a stage and not everybody is an actor. But the world is indeed the space wherein we all express ourselves as living beings and fulfill our roles in life. Chain 6-7: *literal truths*. Here, an ordinary statement of language (6) denotes an ordinary image interaction that is a consensus fact (7). An example would be to say that ‘the Earth is a spheroid.’

Chain 8-9-10: *transcendent fallacies or false religious myths*. Here, a mythical statement of language (8) denotes an ordinary image interaction (9) that is not a consensus fact, but does connote a transcendent meta-image (10). This transcendent meta-image, however, is not a transcendent truth.

Chain 11-12-13-14: *true religious myths*. Here, an intuition emerging from the obfuscated mind (11) inspires the intellect to produce a mythical statement of language (12) denoting an ordinary image interaction (13). This ordinary image interaction is not a consensus fact but does connote a transcendent truth (14). Clearly, true religious myths aren’t allegories (chain 3-4-5).