

HPPH7010 Knowledge, Reason and Reality

Assignment 2 Essay

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Question 1. What, if anything, is the difference between a mythological approach to cosmology and a philosophical approach? In answering this question, you should draw on the reading material on the reading lists and relate to at least the first two sessions of the module.

Introduction

In this essay, I will engage with one of the most intriguing shifts in ancient thought, by exploring the emergence of Western philosophy through the question: ‘what, if anything, is the difference between a mythological approach to cosmology and a philosophical approach?’ To answer this question, I will turn my attention back to ancient Greece, as not only were cosmological concerns were common during this epoch, but critical innovative changes were made to our understanding of cosmologies that still reverberate today, particularly in relation to philosophical, religious and scientific scholarship (Jones, 2014). In undertaking this essay, great care will be taken to address ancient cosmologies in relation to their own time, while also being mindful of the ongoing meditation and dialogues that have taken place over the past few millennia (Kirk, 1983).

Simply speaking, a cosmology is how we understand the nature and origin of the cosmos (Taylor, 1997), and just as importantly, our place within it (Orton & O’Grady, 2016). Key cosmological themes tend to include, where the universe came from, what it is made from, whether there is one universe or many, and just as importantly, how we exist in relation to the universe. According to Luminet (2011, p. 1): ‘Questions about the origins of the universe, of the sky, of the earth, of life, of man have given rise to many different myths and legends and continue to be the subject of intensive research by astrophysicists, biologists and anthropologists’. Such questions have also led to attempts to systematise a deeper understanding of reality, thus allowing fundamental phenomena to be elucidated, and predictions made, depending on the cosmological approach used. Irrespective of the truth of the cosmological answers we produce, Kahn (1960) argued that our well-being as humans is

built on the need for a concept of order in our lives, i.e., a cosmos within a cosmology. To this end, humans seek “‘order” and “‘reason” rather than chaos’ (Hallowell, 1960, p. 20). Ruminating on these aspects, Weick (1985, p. 51) suggested, that ‘[r]epresentations of events normally hang together sensibly within the set of assumptions that have given them life and constitute a “cosmos” rather than its opposite, a “chaos”’. How we make sense of a cosmology, and cognitively determine which cosmological approach to draw on is known as sensemaking (Dibitonto, 2014). Curiously, what sense we make, and which cosmological approach we prefer is based on a myriad of factors, including the time and culture we live within, as well as how rational we are (Gregory, 2013), and our proclivities for the supernatural (Berger, 1999). Reflecting on the potential to operationalise a cosmological approach, we must ask whether we seek to attribute our ontological, epistemological and metaphysical understanding of the universe to generalisable naturalistic causes? Or if supernatural actors are more suitable? How we answer these thorny questions is not surprisingly influenced by the fact that we do not exist within a historic socio-cultural vacuum and are consequently prone to being cognitively jostled by innovative ideas, and new ways of looking at ourselves within the universe (Rogers, 2003). As will become apparent in this essay, even when new sense is made, and a novel cosmological approach used, extant ideas and models of reality are rarely annihilated. This being the case, the human endeavour seems to be that we are left with an ongoing process of exploring and fine-tuning cosmological approaches to meet the perceived challenges of the time we live in.

Drawing this section to a close, and in order to answer the question driving this essay, the following section examines ‘a mythological approach to cosmology’, before I move on and explore ‘a philosophical approach to cosmology’. Finally, a ‘discussion and conclusions’ will be pulled together.

A mythological approach to cosmology

Within this section I examine the ancient view of mythological cosmology, which, and not surprisingly, also requires an in-depth explanation of what constitutes a mythology and a cosmology. As we will come to see, great care is needed in this endeavour, as the term mythology is now a common part of the modern English lexicon, and often used erroneously, while cosmology tends, albeit not exclusively, to refer to secular-materialist physics (Gregory, 2013). Further complicating this issue is that in many modern discourses, the term cosmogony

is conflated with cosmology, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. So, and to aid clarity, let us explore this definitional issue, not only as it pertains to current thinking, but also in relation to the ancient Greek world. Simply speaking, cosmogony is interested in the origin of the universe, while cosmology is a broader arena, incorporating cosmogony. As such, and in this essay, when I use the term cosmology, it is in a broad sense, also encompassing cosmogony, thus referring to all aspects of the universe, including the origin. Furthermore, and as we start to address the ancient Greek notion of cosmology, it is worth noting that mythological conceptualisations of the universe did not arise in a historic or social vacuum, with innovative ideas being part of an ongoing process of adoption, rejection and reworking (Kirk, Raven & Schofield, 2013).

Helping us understand mythological cosmologies, Taylor (1997, p. 7) stated that ‘...mythical cosmologies mix up the cosmic deities with fairy-tale figures such as giants, Titans and monsters without distinction, and have no explanatory resources beyond the sexual and other psychological motivations of these beings’. Within a mythological cosmology, it seems that any aspect of the universe can be attributed to a supernatural actor, with no particular requirement to systematise a coherent view of reality. Herein lies one of the greatest issues with mythological cosmologies, in that while it is clear that otherworldly actors can be used to account for any part of reality, we have to question how this aids us understand the universe in its own right, as something we inhabit, and as a cosmos. According to Gregory (2013), the point of a mythological cosmology is not to produce an overtly systematised account of reality, at least in line with modern conceptualisations, but rather to allow multiple depictions to flourish, building up a picture of the universe that is often incoherent, but broadly allowing a cosmos. Within mythological cosmologies we thus come to see an almost limitless potential to innovate about what the universe is, even where one notion of reality contradicts another. Generally sitting outside of a fundamental systematisation, contradiction and incoherence were not viewed as overly problematic by the ancient Greeks, and if anything, were just part of the rich tapestry of the universe, with individuals and groups being relatively free to foreground and background different stories as they saw fit (Wilson, 1969).

From a socio-cognitive perspective, it is possible to view ancient poets, playwrights and authors as mythological innovators, and the main means to orally communicate extant mythologies, with polyphonic notions of reality being used to meet the sensemaking demands of any particular time. We see this, for example, with the works of Homer and Hesiod, amongst others,

allowing common-sense understandings of the universe to be disseminated throughout groups, and passed down through generations, creating an ongoing repository of oral information to be replicated akin to memes. We must be careful though, as while fidelity within oral traditions can be surprisingly high, we must not assume that myths were disseminated verbatim, or accepted without scrutiny, as instead, they were discursive vehicles to engage cognitive sensemaking and to explore reality, albeit through a quasi-confined lens of mythology (Taylor, 1997). Having said this, much care must be taken not to overly isolate mythologies from the practical elements of ancient daily life, or indeed from other forms of thinking. It would be erroneous, for instance, to assert that mythological thinking was all there was, as this premise would surely undermine the ability for any human to competently engage in the world. Furthermore, I am not even sure how anyone could limit their cognition to operating purely within a mythological cosmology. Instead, perhaps, it is better to consider that while the ancient world was replete with mythological cosmologies, that there were still elements of rationalism, cause and effect, alongside rudimentary science and philosophy, even if at a pre-theorised level (Silito, 2009).

While criticisms are routinely made of cosmological mythologies lacking explanatory power, we must ruminate on this concern at length and consider whether this is a reasonable complaint. On the one hand, it seems fair to say that as far as materialist phenomena are concerned, that mythological cosmologies are perhaps limited with regards to their ontological and epistemological function, but on the other hand, they offer archetypal, symbolic and psychological ways of engaging with life (Taylor, 1997). Within itself, the anthropomorphisation of deities within mythological morphologies are a continuous reminder of the challenges that being in the world presents. For example, and while mythological cosmologies may well depict otherworldly actors engaged in largescale celestial activities, they also present a myriad of everyday experiences common to humanity. Consequently, it is possible to view mythological cosmologies creating as creating a broad psychological and moral understanding of our place in the universe, through the use of archetypal cultural resources, even if what is portrayed through a supernatural actor, is ultimately false from a modern materialist perspective. Critically, I suggest that we should consider the extent to which various cosmological approaches exist to provide different functions, with mythological cosmologies allowing highly imaginative cognition, while reducing the burden of complex processing, and even allowing individuals to select preferred views of the universe (Dean, 2018). This being said, we can view mythologies as existing as an easily accessible cultural

resource, typically outside of having to learn the intricacies of a more philosophically orientated system. More simply, and should I face a cosmological problem, I can rely on *x* mythological ‘solution’ without having to concern myself about whether I have undermined any other aspect of reality. In line with our increased understanding of this issue, cognitive sensemaking resources can thus be seen as no less meaningful for understanding our lives within the universe just because they are from mythology (Dean, 2018).

Finally, and having considered mythological cosmologies and the socio-cognitive propensity to favour supernatural accounts for how the universe works, we must briefly ask, what, if anything was wrong with the universe ‘just doing its own thing and getting on with being?’ Problematically, and in this ancient period of mythological cosmologies, matter itself was not well regarded for function, and typically viewed as incapable of existing/moving without the aid of a divine agent or force (Taylor, 1997). Of course, and while it is possible to say that our increased understanding of the material world undermined mythological cosmologies, this is not a reasonable claim to make. Rather, and as we shall see in the following section, the inception for philosophical cosmologies predated modern workings of the material world, making it an extraordinary innovation of mind. And just as importantly, even though mythological cosmologies have been repeatedly undermined, they were not removed in entirety.

A philosophical approach to cosmology

In this section, I will turn my attention to the notion of philosophical cosmology, while remaining mindful of the ongoing influence of mythology, and how both of these approaches have led to the further emergence of scientific cosmologies. As a starting point, it is worth saying that while mythological cosmologies were predominantly spread via oral traditions, that philosophical approaches were based more on prose, and disseminated not only through speech but through written media. Within itself, shifting towards written materials opened the door for philosophical cosmologies to spread more rapidly and widely, while presenting a more robust and examinable means for individuals to explore and critique philosophical arguments.

Problematically, though, and as we will come to see in this section, developing an understanding of a philosophical cosmology is no small task, raising acute issues about what a

philosophical approach is in its own right and how it relates to mythology. Helping us start to understand this change in approach, Kirk, Raven and Schofield (2013, p. 96), said: 'For the transition from myths to philosophy, from *muthos* to *logos* as it is sometimes put, is far more radical than that involved in a simple process of de-personifying or de-mythologizing, understood either as a rejection of allegory or as a kind of decoding; or even than what might be involved (if the idea is not complete nonsense) in an almost mystical mutation of ways of thinking, of intellectual process itself'. According to Gregory (2013, p. 14): 'the key issues which separate myths from philosophical accounts are parsimony, invariance, consistency and a rejection of the supernatural'. Critically, though, and while it may be fashionable to depict the shift from mythological to philosophical cosmologies as an attempt to background the supernatural, this issue is far more complex, as I will now explain. Examining the Pre-Socratics as philosophical innovators, it must be noted that they were hardly homogenous thinkers, and it would be wrong to suggest that there were not underlying aspects of the supernatural that continued to bleed into their philosophical cosmologies. Looking broadly at the Ionians for example, it is clear that there was a preference for accounting for the universe through the 'observable', i.e., air and water. But and while consideration was given to reason as a means to explicate fundamentals of the universe, these fundamentals were not always presented in an atheistic way, as instead, they were frequently linked to the immaterial and divine. Commenting on this, Taylor (1997, p. 2) said: 'While it is traditional to contrast the 'mythological' thought of the poets, who explained the nature of the world via activities of divinities, with the 'physical' or 'materialistic' thought of the Ionians, who appealed to observable stuffs such as water or air, that contrast is somewhat misleading, since on the one hand many of the divinities of the poets were themselves identified with components of the world, such as the sea or the earth, while on the other the Ionians appear to have regarded their basic components as alive, and to have given them some of the attributes of divinity, such as immortality'. Discussing this aspect further, Osborne (1990, p. 97) argued: 'these philosophers still sometimes speak of their own principles and causes as divine, and this indicates that their project is not an atheist drive to exclude the gods from the picture altogether. Indeed, atheism is effectively unknown in antiquity'. Yet, and having said this, it was apparent that there was an ongoing cognitive reorientation within the arena of philosophical cosmology to background the supernatural as the underlying aspect of the universe. Within the philosophical approach, cosmologists became less interested in understanding the mind of a supernatural agent and their motivations, depicting them as largely irrelevant. Perhaps the crux of the matter is that while the supernatural was still present, it was seen, if at all, as part of a fundamental part of universal

processes, rather than x god doing y act. While I am tempted to link this to modern materialist drivers to draw out fundamental forces related to matter, I am cautious of doing so with the ancient philosophical cosmologists, due to the risk of overly homogenising and skewing their conceptualisations of the universe.

Importantly, shifting towards philosophical cosmologies, allowed new questions to be asked, and for extant mythological cosmologies to be reinterpreted, as cognitive and sensemaking innovations were undertaken. While systematising a new cosmological approach certainly has some benefits such as the potential for generalisability through similar phenomena, it is also possible that it sets a higher burden on those willing to embrace philosophical philosophy, particularly with regards to explaining and justifying how something works through a universal process rather than a mythological tale. Of course, and as we might expect, such aspects no doubt depend on the complexity and intelligibility of a cosmological concept within any society. Commenting on this, Gregory (2013, p. 26) said: 'Philosophical views always require intellectual justification, and the nature of that justification also needs justifying'. At the heart of a philosophical cosmology is thus the need to justify the systematisation, where the justification of one account of reality may either support or undermine another. Simply said, mythological cosmologies have no such burden, and can exist within polyphonic views of the universe, irrespective of how incoherent and contradictory they might be. In so doing, philosophical cosmology became embedded within desires for a universal coherence, which again can be linked to social cognition and human motivation for notions of a plausible cosmos (Weick, 1993).

Drawing this section to a close, and even though we can regard the philosophical approach as backgrounding much of the overt supernatural nature of mythologies, it must be noted that the explanatory power of the philosophical approach is still limited, particularly when engaging with materialist phenomena. Lacking the ability to empirically examine the universe, philosophical cosmology is thus not a scientific cosmology, being limited to reasoning. Yet, and intriguingly, both philosophical and scientific cosmologies have not eradicated mythological concepts altogether, as myth appears to be a common part of cognition and mental innovation. Thus, and either due to the intent of the scholar, or limitations of cognitive processing and language, mythology still exists within philosophical and scientific cosmologies, with common questions arising about whether we can truly remove mythology

from the human experience and scholarly activity? While such notions clearly go beyond the remit of this essay, I will now move onto the discussion and conclusions in the next section.

Discussion and conclusions

This essay sought to address the question: ‘what, if anything, is the difference between a mythological approach to cosmology and a philosophical approach?’ According to Taylor (1999, p. 1): ‘In the space of two and a half centuries, philosophy developed from quasi-mythological speculation to a state in which many of the most fundamental questions about the universe, the mind and human conduct had been vigorously pursued and some of the most enduring masterworks of Western thought had been written’. Yet, and as we saw in this essay, cosmological paradigm shifts raise interesting questions based not only on the differences between mythological and philosophical cosmologies, but also about what happens to extant cosmological systems when a new approach emerges? Furthermore, the degree to which different cosmological approaches allow us to engage with the universe, alongside the cognitive implications.

Simply speaking, mythological cosmologies turn on the ability of supernatural actors to influence universal events, whereas, philosophical cosmologies, which may themselves be partially supernatural, background otherworldly actors, and seek reasoned generalisable natural factors. For example, and while a mythological cosmology may argue that a god is responsible for waves, the philosophical approach would remove the god, and look for a mundane cause, while potentially allowing for a minor supernatural presence. As such, the philosophical approach eradicates any need to understand the action or mind of any deity, and instead places the intellectual burden of making sense of the universe on humanity’s ability to reason. Having said this, there is little to suggest that mythological cosmologies completely fell out of favour during the shift towards philosophical cosmologies, as instead, extant mythological cosmologies became a fertile ground for reconceptualising cosmologies through a philosophical lens. Coupled with this, the mythological has remained an artefact within language, whereby otherworldly terminology is still embraced within philosophical cosmologies, even if the supernatural has no particular ontological status. Within itself, it seems that the human mind’s ability to reason in a completely atheistic sense is limited, as the supernatural is capable of acting as a rich cognitive source of innovation, even if imaginary.

This is something we see, even within the arena of scientific cosmologies, which ought to be atheistic and devoid of the supernatural (Gregory, 2013). At the heart of this challenge may well be our inability to think outside of mythology, and to background personification, symbols and cognitive sensemaking shortcuts while still being able to explain reality in a comprehensible format. Perhaps though, another part of the challenge of secularising cosmologies is the need to make a working cosmos, which tends to have a storied element, that tends to step beyond what can easily be known through reason or empiricism.

Overviewing this essay, it seems clear that while different cosmological approaches can facilitate myriad cognitive functions to understand ourselves and the universe we live in (Lumient, 2014), they also allow multiple aspects of reality to be engaged with (Lloyd, 1970). Finally, and while it is fair to say that the philosophical cosmological approach was not an intellectual ‘panacea’ allowing all universal aspects to become knowable, it did set the stage for an ongoing in-depth meditation, encouraging dialogue about the nature of the universe, to better understand where it came from, what will happen to it, and what it is to be human in this reality. Likewise, and for any shortcomings within mythological cosmologies, it is clear that they still have a key part to play in the generation of knowledge, stimulating much further thought, and sensemaking innovations to know reality.

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