

Mythos and Logos

A short story by Graham Nicholson

Mythos and Logos were what you might call “archetypal figures” in ancient Greece, from the period now commonly dated by reference to the abbreviation “BCE”. They were not necessarily specific human figures, but for the purposes of this story they take on a life of their own and can be described in representative human terms.

Mythos was a venerable old man that lived in caves and other primitive dwelling places in the remote Greek hills and mountains. His customs and daily activities were the subject of speculation. Even his place of residence was unknown to most people, being as he was of a peripatetic nature. He was very old, nobody knew quite how old. But his stories were much better known, being told and retold by the Greeks in an ever-embellished manner. In fact, some of the embellishment was so great that there was often little connection between the original stories and the version current from time to time. The stories were intertwined with references to the pagan, amoral gods of ancient Greece and their motives and actions.

Logos, on the other hand, was a creature of the Greek city-states. He was the very model of the rational Greek citizen. He was intelligent, knowledgeable, eloquently loquacious, persuasive, rational and argumentative. He could hold his own in the city square in any debate. His powers of logical deduction were legendary, no need for any appeal to the gods as an argument of last resort. He was a figure in the Socratic tradition. The public demonstrations of his powers were frequent, attracting many witnesses. No need for mythical embellishment here.

Whereas Mythos was a secretive figure keeping largely to himself, with only his myths and legends making forays into the then civilized society, Logos was always in the forefront of that society. Indeed some have said that Logos was an invention of ancient Greek society. Mythos, on the other hand, seemed to have been around since time immemorial. But both were very well known by reputation, and both were well respected. Both were profoundly influential in Greek society. They were thought to represent the two essential sides to the Greek nature, the rational and the mystical.

Mythos might be said to be the originator of the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Greeks. Whether this is true, or whether these beliefs and practices can be rooted in much earlier, more primitive human societies, does not really matter for present purposes. His teachings were complex, prolonged and challenging, coming from the gods, and explained the origin and meaning of many things. The ancient Greeks were more than happy to identify with these myths and legends as an inseparable part of active Greek citizenship.

The acceptance of Logos had also come to lie at the root of Greek society. Through the application of rational thought and logical deduction as established by Logos, the processes of civilization could be enhanced, democratic governance improved, the sciences and the arts could be better brought to light, and natural phenomena could be better explained and understood. Logos gave a certain symmetry and predictability to the Greek world, perhaps more so than Mythos. The role of the Greek citizen was to rationally explore his place in that society and to give it logical sensibility and direction.

But how could the Greek citizen give allegiance simultaneously to both Mythos and Logos? Clearly there were significant differences between the two approaches. Among other things, Mythos was more traditional, looking back to the past, whereas Logos was more concerned with the present. Mythos was more spiritual, certain things just had to be accepted without question, whereas Logos was more rational, prepared to question the logic of almost any proposition that might be advanced. And yet the ancient Greeks looked to both of them in the conduct of their lives. The two were not generally seen as being in conflict. On the contrary, they tended to be seen as being complimentary to each other, interdependent if you like. They were both foundational pillars upon which the Greek city-states were built. It was simply assumed by many Greeks that the good, balanced Greek citizen needed adherence to both Mythos and Logos.

There was at least one other significant difference between Mythos and Logos that should be mentioned at this stage. Mythos was a lonely, isolated figure, virtually self-subsistent. His sole function was to promulgate the stories of the past, mixed as they were with reference to the Greek gods. He did not need any additional person working for him, as the Greek recipients of the stories were expert at ensuring their circulation and repetition. Logos, on the other hand, was of noble birth, and as such owned slaves in

accordance with the prevailing Greek practice of persons of that status. These slaves did the physical work, but not the thinking, thus leaving Logos free to pursue the noble calling of debate and discourse among the citizens. The slaves of course were not paid, but had to earn their keep by their labour. They were not citizens of the city-state, and were not expected to make any decisions of any consequence. They simply did what they were told. It all seemed very reasonable and logical. Virtually no-one thought to question this system of servitude or its logical correctness. The idea of the democratic right of equal participation of Greek citizens in the affairs of their city-state, in those cities where that idea had been adopted, was seen as being quite compatible with this system of servitude.

But there was at least one citizen of the city-state of Athens, whom for convenience we shall call Theognes, who thought fit to question the justification for slavery. He had received reports of the mistreatment of slaves. He was aware that an accident of birth or circumstance determined a person's status in this respect. He was particularly concerned to question why certain persons, such as slaves, were thought not to be capable of taking advantage of both Mythos and Logos in the manner of Greek citizens, and were left at the mercy of their Greek citizen owners.

Such a questioning, when publicly aired for the first time, was immediately labeled as nonsense. Of course, it was said in response, there were different classes in society, with the citizens at the top, and slaves at the bottom. This was the natural order, in a wider world that was often marked by the application of brute force. The citizens alone had the capacity to take the teachings of both Mythos and Logos and to apply them constructively towards the preservation of their own society. Other persons were only there to serve the citizens, but had no inherent capacity themselves to accept the responsibilities and to perform the functions of citizens, or they had forfeited that capacity. It was a waste of time to teach them otherwise, and it would in fact be dangerous for the city-state to try to do so.

But Theognes remained unconvinced by this response. He had noticed how the slaves with whom he was acquainted generally had their own more primitive versions of Mythos, their own gods if you like, on which they appeared to rely. He thought to himself, of course these myths and legends must be a lot of superstitious childishness, they could not be authentic like the stories of Mythos and the Greek gods. But they appeared to give the slaves some succour in their many hardships. And further, some of the

slaves appeared to be reasonably intelligent, even if having very limited opportunities to display this. He decided to discuss this issue with Socrates. Theognes knew that Socrates had been on a trip to the area of Syria, near the ancient Kingdom of Israel, and had had discussions with some of the learned men of the Judaic religion. From them Socrates had learnt of and spoken about the concept of one supreme, moral Deity, although he also spoke about the many gods of Greece.

Socrates was to be found in the City Square expounding on some issue in his usual questioning manner with some fellow citizens. He was reputed to be a particularly virtuous person who could be expected to deal logically with difficult issues, such as slavery, in a fairly objective manner. He was not afraid to say what he thought, using as his technique a process of questioning to arrive at conclusions interactively. Theognes asked Socrates whether there were in fact some classes in Greek society, such as slaves, who were inherently incapable of comprehending Mythos and Logos, and hence incapable of being citizens.

Socrates responded by telling him the story of an encounter with an uneducated slave-boy. Socrates said that he had taken the slave-boy to one side and had drawn a square in the earth with a stick, the sides of which were each 2 measures long. He had cut the square up into 4 equal areas of one square measure each. He had asked the slave-boy how long the sides would have to be if the area was to be increased from 4 to 8 square measures. The slave-boy had thought about the problem, and then reasoned that the sides would have to be twice as long; that is, 4 measures each long. Socrates then drew on the earth such a square, and thereby demonstrated that this would give an area of 16 square measures, not 8. This initially surprised the slave-boy, who suddenly realized that he did not know as much as he thought he did. Socrates carefully lead the slave-boy through the geometrical problem by further questions and answers. Eventually the slave-boy was able to himself come up with the answer that if he drew 4 abutting triangles with sides the same length as the diagonal drawn across the original square, he would come up with a square area twice the size of that original square, that is, 8 square measures.

Theognes was astounded at this exposition. He could see that the mathematical calculation was correct as a matter of logic. He could also see that there was no inherent reason why a slave, with the right knowledge and education, was incapable of knowing and appreciating Logos. There was

nothing inherently deficient in slaves generally, as compared to Greek citizens generally, in this respect. This did not necessarily defeat all arguments for having a system of slavery, but it did at least indicate that the differences between slaves and citizens were not as clear cut as might have been commonly thought.

But what of Mythos? Could a slave, Theognes asked, come to know and accept the stories of Mythos? He recalled his own experiences with slaves and their recognition of their own primitive gods through their particular myths and legends. But these were clearly false gods, he reasoned, the gods of a backward human imagination and invention. It was important to realise that such gods were creations of primitive man, and not vice versa. They were needed and invented to give meaning and purpose to the much greater puzzle that is life in the known world, to explain strange or irregular phenomena in nature, or haphazard events, and above all, irrational and merciless human conduct. Some Greek slave owners were noted for the latter. Those beliefs, it seemed to Theognes, were formed and existed to bear the burden of all things that could not be comprehended or rationalized except by conceiving of some supernatural intervention or design.

When these thoughts were put to Socrates, he responded by asking whether or not the same arguments could be advanced in respect of Mythos and the Greek gods. Why was it, Socrates asked, that the gods of these Greek stories were so capricious and unprincipled, so devoid of moral or ethical values. They seemed to have no compunction about maliciously deceiving mortals or causing them to violate oaths and commit other disloyal and disgraceful acts. And was it right that the Greeks should be able to attribute shameful and foolish acts to the influence of those Greek gods, when they themselves should take the responsibility for their own acts? Was this not just a device for transferring responsibility? Was there not an obligation on every Greek citizen to live the virtuous life as a free choice?

Theognes could see the force of this line of questioning. If the gods of the Greek pantheon had any credibility, they seemed to have a lot to answer for. He asked himself, was not Mythos also just a human invention? If so, how can Mythos command such loyalty among Greek citizens? Human beings need some form of belief in their lives, some element of spirituality, just as they need rationality in their lives. But if that belief is based on false premises, then it must be of questionable value. It was possible, he thought, that the stories of Mythos and their gods may have no more credibility than

the myths and legends of the slaves. Mythos may simply represent the notions of ordinary human beings in their quest for meaning and purpose in their lives, not something from a god of another dimension.

Socrates postulated to Theognes the need for a unity in the spiritual realm, the realm of the absolute, the unlimited. This stood in contradistinction to the many competing man-made gods, which were the subject of myth and legend, and for which no form of unity was essential. Those gods could afford to be capricious, war-like, unjust, etc., even if having super-human powers attributed to them. For how could that which is spiritually absolute at the same time be limited and deficient, Socrates asked? Was not the task of contingent human beings to strive, under the guidance of the absolute, for a life of right conduct? Were not these ideas of virtue absolute ideas, upon which one could safely base a life. Should not one encourage virtue as a matter of free choice both for the individual's benefit and for the promotion and development of civilization? Virtue was knowledge, and knowledge must be based on reality, not myth. Should not one speak up courageously when possessed of such knowledge, without fear of the consequences?

Theognes felt illumined by this interchange. He reasoned that Logos, as a common rational faculty, was within the potential of all human beings regardless of their status or class. Likewise spirituality was also within the potential of all humans, but was not represented by or derived from Mythos. The differences between slaves and citizens lay elsewhere. Conduct towards both these classes should be governed by virtuous principles. The point of virtue was the meeting place, the means of reconciliation, between logic and spirituality in this earthly life.

Socrates later stood firm in his advocacy of the virtuous life, was later accused of wrongdoing as a result by his fellow citizens before the Areopagus, was convicted and condemned to death by poison.

End.