

ANCHOR A52

In Canada \$1.45 \$1.25

The Myth of the State

by *Ernst Cassirer*

author of *AN ESSAY ON MAN*



A Doubleday Anchor Book

The Myth of the State

THE MYTH OF THE STATE

Ernst Cassirer was born in Breslau on July 28, 1874, and studied at the University of Berlin and the University of Marburg. He spent his early years at the University of Marburg and then Hamburg until his departure from Germany in 1933 to accept an appointment at Oxford. In 1941, Cassirer came to America to teach at Yale, where he remained until 1944. The last year of his life was spent as a visiting professor at Columbia University. He died in New York on April 13, 1945.

The English translations of Cassirer's work include *Houssier, Kant, Goethe; two essays* (1942), *Language and Myth* (1946), *The Problem of Knowledge* (1950), *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume I* (1953), *Substance and Function* (1953), *The Platonic Renaissance in England* (1954), *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1954).

An *Essay on Man*, which originally appeared in 1944, was published by Anchor Books in 1953. *The Myth of the State* was written in English and first published in 1946.

Contents

Foreword by Charles W. Hendel v

PART I. WHAT IS MYTH?

- I. The Structure of Mythical Thought 1
- II. Myth and Language 18
- III. Myth and the Psychology of Emotions 27
- IV. The Function of Myth in Man's Social Life 44

PART II. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST MYTH IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THEORY

- V. "Logos" and "Mythos" in Early Greek Philosophy 61
- VI. Plato's *Republic* 71
- VII. The Religious and Metaphysical Background of the Medieval Theory of the State 94
- VIII. The Theory of the Legal State in Medieval Philosophy 119
- IX. Nature and Grace in Medieval Philosophy 131
- X. Machiavelli's New Science of Politics 144
- XI. The Triumph of Machiavellism and Its Consequences 161
- XII. Implications of the New Theory of the State 174
- XIII. The Renaissance of Stoicism and "Natural Right" Theories of the State 204

- XIV. The Philosophy of the Enlightenment
and Its Romantic Critics 220

PART III. THE MYTH OF THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY

- XV. The Preparation: Carlyle 235
 XVI. From Hero Worship to Race Worship 280
 XVII. Hegel 311
 XVIII. The Technique of the Modern Political
Myths 348
Conclusion 374
Index 377

other part. A great many positive and negative demands, of prescriptions and taboos, are nothing but the expression and application of this general rule. The rule holds not only for the two sexes, but for all the members of the tribes. When a Dayak village has turned out to hunt in the jungle, those who stay at home may not touch either oil or water with their hands; for if they did so the hunters would all be "butter-fingered" and the prey would slip through their hands.³ This is not a causal but an emotional bond. What matters here are not the empirical relations between causes and effects, but the intensity and depth with which human relations are felt.

The same feature appears, therefore, in all the other forms of human kinship. In primitive thought blood relationship is not interpreted in a merely physiological way. The birth of man is a mythical not a physical act. The laws of sexual procreation are unknown. Birth is, therefore, always regarded as a sort of reincarnation. The Arunta in Central Australia assume that the spirits of the dead who belonged to their totem wait for their rebirth in definite localities and penetrate into the bodies of the women who pass such a spot.⁴ Even the relation between the child and his father is not regarded as a purely physical relation. Here too causality is replaced by real identity. In totemic systems the present generation not only descends from the animal ancestors; it is the embodiment of these ancestors. When the Arunta are celebrating their most important religious festival, when they perform their "Intichiuma" ceremonies, they not only represent or imitate the life, the deeds, and adventures of their forefathers. The forefathers reappear in these ceremonies; their presence,

3. *The Golden Bough*, Pt. I: *The Magic Art* (see above p. 8, n. 3), I, 120.

4. See Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, IV, 59 ff., and Spencer and Gillen, *op. cit.*, chap. xv.

"And thus began," he says in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, speaking of his youth,

that tendency from which I could not deviate my whole life through: namely, the tendency to turn into an image, into a poem, everything that delighted or troubled me, or otherwise occupied me, and to come to some certain understanding with myself upon it, that I might both rectify my conceptions of external things, and set my mind at rest about them. The faculty of doing this was necessary to no one more than to me, for my natural disposition whirled me constantly from one extreme to the other. All my works therefore that have become known are only fragments of one great confession.²⁰

In mythical thought and imagination we do not meet with *individual* confessions. Myth is an objectification of man's social experience, not of his individual experience. It is true that in later times we find myths made by individuals, as, for instance, the famous Platonic myths. But here one of the most essential features of the genuine myths is missing. Plato created them in an entirely free spirit; he was not under their power, he directed them according to his own purposes: the purposes of dialectical and ethical thought. Genuine myth does not possess this philosophical freedom; for the images in which it lives are not *known* as images. They are not regarded as symbols but as realities. This reality cannot be rejected or criticized; it has to be accepted in a passive way. But the first preliminary step on the new road that finally will lead to a new goal has been made. For even here emotions are not simply felt. They are "intuited"; they are "turned into images." These images are crude, grotesque, fantastic. But it is just for this reason that they are understandable to uncivilized man because they can give him an interpreta-

20. Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Bk. VII. English trans. by John Oxenford (London, G. Bell & Sons, 1897), I, 240.

the root of all the beliefs connected with the human soul," asks Malinowski,

with survival after death, with the spiritual elements in the Universe? I think that all the phenomena generally described by such terms as animism, ancestor-worship, or belief in spirits and ghosts, have their root in man's integral attitude towards death. Death . . . is a fact which will always baffle human understanding and fundamentally upset the emotional constitution of man. . . . And here religious revelation steps in and affirms life after death, the immortality of the spirit, the possibilities of communion between living and dead. This revelation gives sense to life, and solves the contradictions and conflicts connected with the transience of human existence on earth.²³

Plato has given in his *Phaedo* a definition of the philosopher, according to which he is a man who has learned the greatest and most difficult art; who knows how to die. Modern thinkers have borrowed this thought from Plato. They declared that the only way to freedom that is left to man is to banish from his mind the fear of death. "He who has learnt to die has forgot what it is to be a slave. To know how to die delivers us from all subjection and constraint."²⁴ Myth could not give a rational answer to the problem of death. Yet it was myth which, long before philosophy, became the first teacher of mankind, the pedagogue who, in the childhood of a human race, was alone able to raise and solve the problem of death in a language that was understandable to the primitive mind. "Do not try and

23. B. Malinowski, *The Foundations of Faith and Morals*, Riddell Memorial Lecture (London, Oxford University Press, 1936; pub. for the University of Durham), pp. 27 f.

24. Montaigne, *Essays*, I, 19, in "Works," trans. by W. Hazlitt, revised ed. by O. W. Wight (New York, H. W. Derby, 1861), I, 130. Montaigne, *Essais*, texte établi et présenté par Jean Plattard, Liv. I, chap. 20 (Paris, Fernand Roches, 1931), 117: "Qui a appris à mourir, il a desappris à servir. Le sçavoir mourir nous afranchit de toute subjection et contrainte."

explain death to me," says Achilles to Odysseus in Hades.²⁵ But it was just this difficult task that myth had to perform in the history of mankind. Primitive man could not be reconciled with the fact of death; he could not be persuaded to accept the destruction of his personal existence as an inevitable natural phenomenon. But it was the very fact that was denied and "explained away" by myth. Death, it taught, means no extinction of man's life; it means only a change in the form of life. One form of existence is simply exchanged for another. There is no definite and clear-cut boundary between life and death; the border line that separates them is vague and indistinct. Even the two terms may be exchanged one for another. "Who knows," asks Euripides, "if life here be not really death, and death in turn be life?" In mythical thought the mystery of death is "turned into an image"—and by this transformation, death ceases being a hard unbearable physical fact; it becomes understandable and supportable.

25. Homer, *Odyssey*, Bk. XI, v. 488.