The First Book

Schelling's Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology

Translated and Reduced

Being Volume VI, Pages 1-254
of the Münchner Jubiläumsdruck of *Schellings Werke*
Edited by Manfred Schröter (1959)

Objectively considered, mythology is what it claims to be: "a real theogony, a real history of the gods. But since only those gods are real who have God as their ground, it follows that the final content of the history of the gods is that of the generation (the birth, the bringing forth) of *God*, a real becoming of God in consciousness." *The gods* are related to God simply as individual moments are related to the whole which they are producing.

- Schelling (VI:200)

Martin Deutinger was captivated by Schelling's thought, becoming so excited he ripped the buttons off his coat.

- in O'Meara (1982:162)

Introduction

A. Can there be a *Philosophy* of Mythology?

> Gentlemen (sic), let me say, first of all, that it would be entirely understandable were you to be expecting from me some explanation of the title under which these lectures have been advertised. (VI:5).

With these words Schelling begins his Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology. He confronts the question of the very possibility of such a science. He concedes that at first glance nothing seems more incongruous than the coupling together of these two terms, philosophy and mythology. Philosophy is involvement in the rational search for truth. But mythology seems nothing but a hodgepodge of arbitrary and fanciful fables, so opposed to all ordinary rational and scientific notions as to be an unworthy object for any kind of serious study, least of all a philosophical examination (VI:222f).

This very opposition, however, is precisely what excites Schelling's interest. He feels challenged "to discover reason in what appears irrational, a meaning in what appears meaningless" (VI:222). The very disparity between philosophy and mythology becomes the reason for attempting their reconciliation. The fact that Schelling sees it this way may be due, in part, to the spirit of the times in which he lived, for he

describes his age as one in which "science does not hesitate to reconcile the most remote things," and hails the appearance in his day of an unprecedented and widespread feeling for "the inner unity and affinity of all the sciences" (VI:6, 7).

In fact, the new mood in the academic circles of his time made it unnecessary for Schelling to apologise for the novelty of his undertaking. There is, he says, a "commendable freedom" which reigns in German universities. It encourages inquiry into new areas, welcomes new subject matter, espouses new methods of inquiry and instruction, and thus "permits the development of the scientific spirit not only in breadth and richness but also in depth". This new method of inquiry and instruction repudiates subjectivity and indoctrination and refuses "to initiate students into results already obtained without showing them *how* the results have been reached" (VI:5). It insists on making the subject matter "uncover and reveal itself". The ten lectures of Schelling's Historical-Critical Introduction to the philosophy of Mythology are, in fact, a good example of the new method and Schelling's words apply to his own case: "in the teaching of a new science, the student is made a witness of its very birth. He is shown how the mind gets hold of and masters this new subject, and is then invited, rather than required, to place himself in a position to receive the new knowledge" (VI:5f).

Preliminary objections to a philosophy of mythology are thus easily turned aside by Schelling. The novelty, practical difficulty and seemingly incongruous nature of the undertaking obviously do not count against its legitimacy. But perhaps the whole proposal is too pretentious! Cannot the adequate explanation of Mythology be found in something far simpler than a "Philosophy" of Mythology? The very title, by bringing to mind analogous ones, like "Philosophy of Language" and "Philosophy of Nature", seems to assign Mythology a place "which hitherto has not seemed justified" (VI:6f). There is a light-hearted comment on this difficulty in a later lecture:

> No sooner was the idea of a 'Philosophy of Mythology' formulated than we were obliged to recognize its problematic character, in other words, to recognize that it was itself in need of justification. To be sure, everyone is free to bring the word 'philosophy' into association with any subject whatever simply by having the word followed by an appropriate genetive. There are, perhaps, many countries in which one could speak of the 'Philosophy of the Art of Cooking' without causing

> astonishment to a single soul. And we ourselves in Germany, in years gone by, received from some magnificently athletic official a 'Philosophy of Postal Affairs' in which postal matters were treated on the basis of the Kantian categories! A work by the well-known Fourcroy, quite meritorious for its time, bore the title 'Philosophy of Chemistry', but there was nothing characteristically philosophical about it unless one wishes to assume that elegance of development and logical exposition are peculiarly philosophical.
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> But thanks to the concepts 'Philosophy of Nature', 'Philosophy of History', 'Philosophy of Art', we Germans find ourselves in possession of a criterion which enables us to judge the significance of these associations of the word 'philosophy' with some genetive or other. We are careful not to resort to such a practice if its purpose is simply to express the fact that clarity and method characterize the investigation, or if there has been a desire to put forward merely general philosophical thoughts about a given subject. We avoid using the word 'philosophy' in such cases, firstly, because clarity and systematic method are qualities that can be required of all research and, secondly, because there is surely not an object in all the world which is incapable of suggesting philosophical ideas (VI:219f).

An affirmative answer to our question, however, cannot be dogmatically presupposed. Whether a Philosophy of Mythology represents a scientific possibility or mere improper association of words can be known only at the end of the proposed inquiry. Schelling does not yet spell out his definition of philosophy. He does, however, attempt to define the term "mythology".

B. What is meant by "Mythology"?

For the Greeks, as Schelling reminds us, the word "mythology" served to designate the entire assemblage of "their legends and stories which go back in general beyond historical times", plus the poetic inventions which constitute later elaborations (VI:8). But behind the poetic elaborations and prior to the earliest mythological tales, there is what Schelling calls "the world of gods" (*die Götterwelt*) which constitutes the original material of mythology, the kernel around which all else is crystallized. This *Götterwelt* is filled with events which belong to an order of things quite different from the historical and human orders. It is

> a realm where heroes are gods, that is to say, a seemingly indeterminate multitude of piously venerated personalities who form a world of their own. This world is connected in numerous ways with the common order of things and of human existence, and yet is essentially separate and possessed of an independent existence.

Granted the multiplicity of these religiously revered beings, Mythology may be called Polytheism, and mythological science reduced to investigations bearing on the nature of the gods (*Götterlehre*) (VI:9).

Mythology, however, is concerned not only with the theory or *nature* of the gods (*Götterlehre*) but with the *history* of the Gods (*Göttergeschichte*) as well, for these mythological beings have, from the very beginning, certain natural and historical relations with one another. "When Cronos is called a son of Ouranos, this is a natural relation; and when he castrates his father and ousts him from his position as ruler of the world, this is a historical relation." And "since natural relations are also, in the widest sense, historical ones", Schelling will use the latter term to include the former. It is not the case that the gods have some prior abstract existence outside of these historical relations. They are "by nature" historical. Hence, "the full and complete concept of Mythology is not merely theory of the gods, but history of the gods or, as the Greeks say, *Theogony* (though this term emphasizes only the natural relations)" (VI:9).

Schelling distinguishes his inquiry from that "science of myths" in which there is concern only with myths "which arise when a historical fact is associated with a divinity" but in which no reference is made to the primary fact, which is the history of the gods. He illustrates the point in his comment (VI:201-204 cf. 225) on K. Ottfried Müller's book, *Prolegomena to a Scientific Mythology* (1825). Attention is drawn to Müller's discussion of the pestilence mentioned in the first book of the *Iliad*.

> Agamemnon, as you know, inflicted an outrage upon the priest of Apollo, and when this priest besought the god to avenge him, Apollo immediately responded by letting loose this plague on the Greeks. The facts in the story are simple: the daughter of a priest of Apollo was demanded back - in vain - by her father. The father was contemptuously rebuffed by Agamemnon. And at this point the pestilence broke out. But, declares Müller, as soon as these facts had

> been accepted as correct, 'all those who were convinced of Apollo's avenging and punitive power' immediately, spontaneously and with complete accord, assumed a relationship of cause and effect between the insult and the pestilence. They believed, in other words, that Apollo had sent the pestilence at the request of his priest (who had been outraged by the refusal to return his daughter), and they each affirmed this connection with conviction, speaking of it as if it were a fact they had witnessed with their own eyes (VI:203).

The Philosophy of Mythology, says Schelling, is "not at all concerned with the question of how such stories, derived from mythology, came to be formed". Müller does *not* address himself to the enigmatic aspect of mythology, that is, he does not explain how men came in the first place to believe in the existence of an Apollo with his avenging and punitive power. Hence he is not discussing the *proper* content of mythology at all; for that tale in the first book of the Iliad belongs to Mythology itself as little as the tale of the *Legio fulminatrix* or similar stories belong to Christian doctrine.

> Where the question of the essential meaning of Christianity is under discussion, should we speak only of the legends and merely try to explain how *they* originated? Naturally, 'from the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks', so it is understandable that once men were filled with ideas about the gods, they projected these ideas into every circumstance and into all their stories. It was in this way that myths, as O. Müller understands them, came to be formed without prior agreement and without deliberate intent, but by virtue of a kind of necessity (VI:203f).

Schelling later confesses that possible misunderstanding could have been avoided if he had spoken of "a philosophy of the mythic world or something of the kind" (VI:225). We must bear in mind, then, that Schelling is using the word "mythology" in the objective sense to designate the mythological representations as a whole viewed dynamically as a *history* of the gods (or theogony). The Philosophy of Mythology then becomes an inquiry into the true nature of this "singular ensemble of human representations", the world's great polytheisms, and the world of the gods which constitutes its original material (VI:9).

C. How should the inquiry proceed?

Schelling intends to review, one by one, every actual or possible explanation of the origin and nature of mythology. If he can successively demonstrate the untenability or inadequacy of every other view, his own approach - expressed in the title 'Philosophy of Mythology' - will be revealed as "the only possible one," and this, he believes, will imply its necessity and truth (VI:7, 10).[1] His procedure, then, will be a negative one, as far as this Historical-Critical Introduction is concerned. (The positive demonstration will be presented in the Philosophy of Mythology itself). It will set out from "the first possible viewpoint" and "ascend" through ever more adequate explanations until "all further ascension is impossible" and the necessarily true interpretation is established.

This procedure will also mean "going through every phase of a philosophical investigation of mythology," for a philosophical investigation goes beyond the *existence* of mythology and inquires into its nature and *essence*. A purely learned, empirical, historical inquiry can seek to establish the *facts* of mythology and do so by examining every kind of historical evidence (temples, works of art, writings, historically attested social customs, and the mythologies themselves). The Philosophy of Mythology, however, must presuppose and go beyond this factual knowledge of the world's mythologies, and look always for general agreement, a common element, some insight into the nature of the whole. By reviewing all possible interpretations of mythology, every aspect of the subject is presented until *at the end* we shall really know *what mythology is* (VI:7, 8).

Views of mythology's meaning are necessarily related to explanations of its origin. For example, Schelling invites us to imagine someone listening for the first time in his life to mythological tales. Doubtless the poor fellow would be thoroughly bewildered. "How am I to understand this?" he would ask. "What does it mean? How did such ideas arise?" But his questions pass over into one another and are really one. "The first question reveals our hearer's anxiety to find a point of view for himself," and leads imperceptibly through the second question (What does it mean? i.e., What did it mean to those among whom it arose?) to the third question (How did mythology arise?) (VI:10).

Investigations into the *origins* of mythology admittedly take us "back to an age that has left no historical evidence". And yet, from the

historical evidences we do have, we can draw inferences with respect to pre-historic times, and our theories must be consistent with these inferences as well as with mythology itself (VI:7, 11). Schelling believes the critique which he now offers is quite independent of any philosophical point of view. As theories of the origin and significance of mythology are examined, "some will reveal themselves as unthinkable; others as conceivable but not credible; and still others as credible, perhaps, but inconsistent with our historical knowledge" (VI:11).