

Science as myth

In what ways is science mythological?

1. *Underlying theory construction*

Just as mythology, science attempts to create a coherent underlying worldview, which is clearly not possible at almost any state of knowledge. Therefore this task, which clearly cannot be completed, is mythological (we need it for some reason, which is not apparent in science itself).

What is mythological: constructing a mythological-type narrative; the underlying general models are “non-scientific” in nature.

Examples: looking for coherence and symmetry in all physical theories, which leads to the following unreflected and mythological pictures: the “membrane” universe; “dark energy” and “dark matter” accounting for lack of mass and energy; the concept of “mental force” in neuroscience.

2. *Faithfulness to tradition*

Just as mythology, science holds on to its “belief” traditions, is emotionally involved with them, and holds its core assumptions as authoritative and true, while this cannot always be demonstrated.

What is mythological/examples: a non-scientific adherence to “materialism” (or “scientism”) to the exclusion of “spiritualism” or “mysticism.” Given what we know about “matter” it is not clear if there is any real difference between “spiritual” and “material”; nor is there a real reason why we cannot pursue “spiritual” models.

3. *Ritualistic nature*

The perceived value of science and faithfulness to traditions results in self-propagating patterns of “research” and “technology,” which is reminiscent of creating ritualistic behavior models in mythology. A perceived need is created to follow a pattern.

What is mythological: it is not always clear why we need to follow this pattern: the benefits often cannot be demonstrated; science may or may not be beneficial, and we are doing this often *not* because the reasons are perfectly clear. Science and research is simply assumed to be intrinsically valuable in itself, whether it really is or not.

Examples: spending a lot of money on research of all aspects of reality, before knowing why it is beneficial; spending money on research in order to achieve specific imagined results (how can we do this? why not do this?), without knowing clear benefits or if it is even possible. Research and technology generates more research and technology and instead of providing us with what we need starts to *suggest* to us what we need (various gadgets, etc.), while no real reason always exists.

4. Practical goals and purposes

Science shares its main goals and practical purposes with mythology, magic and religion: the “salvific” nature of science which allows us to control reality, achieve the complete well-being of humanity (satisfying our inner cravings and wishes for immortality, eternal youth, omnipotence, i.e., being like gods);

What is mythological: does science really accomplish these goals any more than magic, and are these goals even valid or good for us?

Examples: wonder-drugs for everything; rejuvenation treatments; bionic humans; downloading brain contents into computers; space travel and expansion.

Mythological and religious themes in science

- realizing our divine likeness: omnipotence, omniscience, etc.
- a promise of perfection: genetic engineering, wonder-drugs
- a vision of paradise prophesied for the future
- a threat of armageddon prophesied for the future (nuclear weapons)
- space exploration: the ascent of saintly beings into heaven
- immortality: artificial intelligence (downloading one’s brain to a computer), promise of universal cures, genetic engineering etc.
- the general goal: salvation of the humankind

How does science really work on us?

Most scientific endeavors were started by theologians, religious people, or people with existing mythologies. Science follows—mostly unconsciously, scientists are unaware of this—standard mythological patterns and mytho-logics:

Social charter (Malinowski): just like an aboriginal society uses myth to charter its institutions, so does science charter institutions and practices in the Western society

Oppositions and mediation (Levi-Strauss): just like myths create an illusion of joining insurmountable oppositions by mediation, science seems to mediate between all problems and offer solutions to them.

Incorporative mytho-logic (D. Turner): just like myths of incorporative societies offer an illusory mediation or solution, science holds out a promise of solutions that cannot really work or cannot be achieved.

“*Second-order*” *sign* (Barthes): just like other kinds of contemporary mythology, such as advertising, wrestling, and pop-culture (such as some popular mass-production films and video games), science parasitizes on “first-order” images of good-looking, extremely fit, happy and healthy humans, happy couples and families, as well as images of human aspiration, such as paradisiacal existence, ideal society, free society, happy future, and even divine omnipotence, immortality and salvation, and so forth. It distorts those images by adding the extra meaning: this is what can be achieved through science.

Why does scientific mythology need to be debunked?

Unlike traditional mythologies, which help societies survive and merely establish social patterns and mental attitudes, scientific mythology is entangled with powerful socio-economic forces: the capitalist system of production and the powerful industrial complex. Thus the danger of the distortions of meaning generated by scientific mythology is that when it is used by the capitalist system and has such unlimited access to material resources, it puts us on the wrong path of self-destruction, being lured by false mythological promises. Scientific mythology is thus not innocent and needs to be debunked and dismantled, just like false advertising and pop-culture that fools us with illusory images of happiness (Barthes).

1. The immediate beneficiaries of scientific mythology

Based on the illusory incorporative mytho-logic and the mythological-religious mediation schemes, science lures us by promises of salvation, immortality, perfection, etc. Yet the groups that immediately benefit from science are not humanity as a whole but mostly the corporations and the rich (the 1%). They divert the efforts of scientists (naturally talented individuals who are excited about any sort of intellectual exploration of natural phenomena) to study areas that humans do not really need.

Space exploration

Promise: salvation, ascent into heaven, eternal life.

Immediate beneficiaries: the military industrial complex and telecommunications companies; new materials developed as a byproduct also benefit the military, construction and manufacturing companies.

Medical research

Promise: immortality, eternal youth, divine beauty, divine perfection.

Immediate beneficiaries: pharmaceutical companies and medical industries.

Chemistry

Promise: salvation, divine perfection.

Immediate beneficiaries: big manufacturing companies (pharmaceutical, plastics, household chemicals, etc.).

Artificial intelligence and computers

Promise: immortality, divine perfection.

Immediate beneficiaries: consumer electronics and telecommunications companies.

2. Drawbacks and problems of scientific mythology

The lofty goals of scientific mythology (such as happiness, immortality, salvation, god-like nature), of course, are never achieved: in fact, humans in highly industrialized societies become less happy, less healthy, and less mentally stable but reliant on stimulants. At the same time, the constant striving for “superhuman” goals and beyond our limited earthly realm overtaxes our resources that are diverted into wrong directions that are not immediately beneficial to the human race and are thus without return. Especially affected are third world countries and underprivileged minorities, making science into a mechanism of exploitation of the rest of humanity by the rich. Thus such basic problems as poverty, hunger, disease, child mortality and so forth have not been eliminated. Instruments of science, such as advanced weaponry, are often used directly to kill people in underdeveloped countries for political and economic gains. At the same time, overtaxing the resources of the planet led to an almost complete destruction of our environment. Yet, skewing people’s goals by false promises and illusory solutions actually leads humans further and further away from the truly “salvific” goals, in material, social, or spiritual sense.

Select bibliography

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