

Does classical
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For the purposes of this essay the themes of religion and death will be explored in an attempt to understand whether the ancient Greek societies used myth to understand these concepts or if they used them in a desire to escape the realities of their daily lives. " Religion, it seems to me, is a set of theories or myths... In the case of religion the problem to be solved is big: the world. Most religions claim to explain the origins, ground plan, building materials, and working of the world; they often also prescribe conduct" (Jarvie 1969).

As the opening statement suggests, in the absence of science and scientists as it is understood today, the function of myth is to provide a framework with which the people of the time used to understand the world around them. It provides explanations for why the world is the way it is; how it was made and how it evolved and what was expected of the people who inhabited it. Myths provide a set of principles by which to live your life. They present and illustrate punishments that can be a deterrent to living a ' bad' life; they teach morality and the consequences of hubris.

They also enlighten their understanding of what happened to them after death. Greek religion is a vast and complex subject that developed over hundreds of years and was moulded by many diverse influences, especially those of their Indo-European descendants and of the Minoan-Mycenaeans. Myths were used alongside Religious Mystery rites and imagery to ' manifest their religious experiences' (Vernant 1989). For many Greeks the only requirement was to believe that the gods existed and to perform ritual and sacrifice, through which the gods received their due.

To deny the existence of a deity was to risk reprisals, from the deity or from the governing authorities. But if a Greek went through the motions of piety, he risked little. A parallel can be drawn today; how many people attend church for special occasions like weddings, christenings, Easter and Christmas? They are seen to be performing the rituals that are expected but do not necessarily believe. Hesiod was a Greek poet thought to be living around 750-650BC. Along with Homer, he is the earliest known Greek poet (Radice 1973).

Amongst Hesiod's work he wrote a poem, Theogony, where for the first time, there is an attempt to put into writing an account of the creation of the earth and the evolution of gods and humans. It is by no means the only ancient Greek account of the origins of the world as, like Homer, Hesiod's work was cultivated from a long line of traditional oral narratives. Before Theogony, there was no one fixed authoritative work, creed, ritual or rite that was observed by the ancient Greek people.

Together, Homer and Hesiod created a commonality for the people of Greece, they brought together a wealth of names, relationships and characteristics of both immortals and mortals, epic traditions, that the Greek people could draw upon, recognise and use to enhance their understanding of what it meant to be Greek (Morford et al 2011). What the work shows though is that although Hesiod's ideas about cosmogony seem irrational when compared to later theories and beliefs, it demonstrates that the Greeks had an awareness of the world around them and where they had evolved from.

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However, there is an argument that could be raised to say that the ancient Greeks no more believed absolutely in the existence of Gods and myths anymore than the average person today believes in one all-seeing, all-knowing God. But their understanding and acceptance of the myths and truth was based on other people's knowledge and if these people were perceived as being superior in their understanding of the world then, it stands to reason that in the absence of a better answer, Hesiod's ideas would be accepted as reasonable. Veyne (1988) argues that the Greek poets' use of myth for their subject matter validated the 'stories'.

Because the people named and the places discussed were known it gave credence to the artistic license they then used to put words, actions and meanings into their works, " Myth was information obtained from someone else. This was the primary attitude of the Greeks towards myth; in this modality of belief they were depending on someone else's word". The same could be said for historical works that are read today; it is known that Marie Antoinette lived a privileged and closeted life so it is 'believed' that she said the peasants could eat cake.

It could therefore be argued that Hesiod's Theogony was accepted because he was seen as a man who understood many things and was educated, that his 'teachings' were therefore to be respected and repeated. It was later through the works of educated men like Critias that these accepted works began to be challenged, though not always in an open way. The challenge the status quo was to challenge the ruling authorities which, undeniably lead

to trouble; Socrates was forced to commit suicide for his challenging behaviour.

Within the empire, different communities would often draw upon different gods and goddesses to be their main focus of worship. All this was done without neglecting the other gods as they would not want to risk the wrath of any god being offended by their hubris, but certain areas came to be associated with specific Religious Mysteries. The Eleusinian Mysteries are purported to be amongst the most important of these cults. It was a cult that was open to all; men, women, children and slaves.

They had to be initiated into the cult and forever after keep the secrets from being revealed. It is highly likely they evolved from an agrarian cult but by assimilating the myth of Demeter and Persephone it gave a reason and an explanation of why the seasons changed, why crops grew and why the land was barren during the winter months. No one will ever know for certain what went on during the celebrations but for those involved it provided a “philosophy of life that possessed substance and meaning and imparted a modicum of truth to the yearning human soul” (Mylonas 1961).

Death and the afterlife have been universal subjects that people have explored since time began. Heraclitus, Plato and Hume all said that the question of life after death is incomprehensible and that that particular mystery may be beyond the reach of rational knowledge (Moody 2007). Yet it is the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers that laid the foundations and set the agenda for all subsequent and rational thought, much of which is still

evident today. One of the most important aspects of being initiated into the mysteries was what happened to the initiates after their death.

Those who were initiated into the cult would receive as their reward immortality and redemption for their service. It was felt that for those within the cult, the afterlife would be filled with happiness and joy (Pindar cited in Garland 1985) Plato's Myth of Er explores the concepts of reincarnation and also the idea of souls continuing to exist in another world. Upon arrival in the realm of the dead the souls would be judged and would either go upwards towards the sky or down into the earth.

Both of these notions continue today with a Christian conviction of heaven or hell being reach by either ascension or decent. The picture that Plato paints of Tartarus and the Elysian Fields would sew the seed in the imaginations of the audience of what awaited them in the afterlife if they lived a life in a particular way. Death was an area that the ancient Greeks dealt with very differently then is done today. It was an everyday reality not just limited to the elderly and the infirm it affected the young, the fit and the healthy.

Since there were no hospitals in Greece, most people died either at home or on the battlefield. If death occurred at home, it was the duty of the relatives to prepare the body for burial. Following death the psuche was between two worlds, having not yet fully detached from this world and awaiting incorporation into the next. Admittance into Hades, the world of the dead, did not occur automatically but as a result of the actions of the living. This "in-between" status was viewed as being dangerous time. The unburied dead were believed to be at considerable risk.

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The most important task for the living was to perform a burial or cremation as promptly and efficiently as possible. To fail in this sacred duty was to condemn the dead to wander up and down the banks of the River Styx, which surrounded Hades, for thousands of years (Vergil 6. 72-79). For the ancient Greeks these were important rituals to follow, Homer writes about the dead bringing down their vengeance upon the living for failing in their duty “ remember me then and not to sail away and forsake me utterly nor leave me there unburied and unwept, in case I bring down the gods’ curse on you” (Homer 11. 2-73).

It is reasonable to assume that in an age where there is uncertainty about what the afterlife holds, as a friend or relative of the deceased, all efforts would be made to assure them a smooth transition into the world of Hades, for their own safety as well as that of the deceased. Similarly in today’s age rituals are ‘ performed’ to honour the dead. Funerals are performed within socially accepted boundaries; the main focus either being a church or a crematorium.

These are then followed by a wake or a joining together of those who knew the deceased in order to celebrate and remember their lives. Discussion is often to be heard about the departed having gone to a ‘ better life’ or a ‘ better place’. Although these ideas may not be based on a religious belief, they are used to provide comfort to the bereaved. To answer the question of whether classical mythology reflects a disposition to explore the realities of the world or a desire to escape from them it is reasonable to argue that it reflects both.

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For many people, the same as today, myths around religion and death were a matter of faith. They provided comfort and explanations for the big questions that were impossible to answer in any other way. When the masses were unable to read or write they looked to the educated classes to provide answers and if these ‘educated classes’ were writing about myths in a style that seemed logical and the answers they provided sound realistic, then they would be adopted and repeated.

It is only when other ‘educated’ men come along and started questioning the accepted answers that more rational and reasonable explanations were sort. When exploring death, it would be reasonable to say that myth was very much used to escape from the realities of the world around them. What happens after a person dies is unknown, even today! Myths provide theories and ideas that provide comfort to those left behind. They also show the consequences of living a good or a bad life – they provide deterrents by describing the punishments that await those who have behaved appallingly.