
Chiara Bottici’s *A Philosophy of Political Myth* is a useful contribution to the study of “myth” for two reasons. First, it surveys a wide variety of literature on myth, from ancient Greece to early modern Europe to the present—the breadth of her research is astonishing, and the bibliography alone is an incredibly valuable resource for those interested in exploring this topic. Second, and more importantly, Bottici’s central purpose is to weed out less useful ways of thinking about political myth from more sophisticated uses. In sum, she provides readers with a heuristic that renders “political myth” a rather sophisticated category, distinguishable from terms such as “religion,” “history,” and “ideology,” and capable of being wielded in critical social theory for the production of new, interesting, and valuable things to say about societies and social identities. In this review, rather than provide a chapter-by-chapter summary (which would be difficult, given the length of the book), I’ll attempt to summarize her overall argument.

The first thing Bottici wants to accomplish is to unravel the chains of associations that oppose “myth” to “reason” and “truth.” She establishes, genealogically, that the word myth has not always been associated with unreality and falsehood. She suggests that the rhetorical opposition of myth to reality became dominant only with the spread of Christian monotheism. Whereas before that time there were many myths (“words”) that could be true, after the rise of monotheism there was only one logos (“word”) that could be true, therefore rendering all other words or myths necessarily false (this is reminiscent of David Hume’s argument about the intrinsically violent and intolerant nature of monotheism in *The Natural History of Religion*).

This lamentable association of “myth” with “false” continued throughout early modern and modern Europe and was exacerbated by the further association of “myth” with “heteronomy.” Bottici specifically discusses Kant’s ethical theory, according to which one is “autonomous” only if one acts according to one’s reason. On this view, all appeals to tradition, authority, myths, etc., are considered unethical. For Kant, acting on the authority of one’s priest or religious “revelation” is wrong—the use of reason is fundamentally opposed to the submission to tradition or authority (indeed, many enlightenment treatises could well be summarized with the sentence “Think for yourself!”). In addition to the fact that Bottici is not persuaded by these modern philosophical dualisms and believes that modern philosophers miss the potential value of myth, she also attempts to hoist these philosophers on their own petard: “In its search for self-legitimacy, the Enlightenment tends to exacerbate its contrast with myth and thus hides the fact that myth is already a form of enlightenment; however, in this way, the Enlightenment itself risks falling into a mythology, that is, the mythology of an absolute pure reason” (69-70, emphasis mine).
Bottici insists that we need not throw out the baby with the bathwater. “Not all that is not ‘pure reason’ is heteronomy. Myth, in particular, does not always coincide with religious revelation in general. . . . [W]e must recognise that myth is itself a possible means for the project of autonomy” (79). The remainder of the book is just such an attempt to rehabilitate an alternate way of thinking about “myth.”

What would a useful concept of “political myth” look like, if we were not going to oppose it to truth and autonomy? Bottici begins with Wittgenstein’s critique of Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. She shows why Wittgenstein was right to criticize Frazer for arguing that religious myths are tantamount to bad science, as if mythical stories were failed attempts to describe the nature of the world. Frazer’s approach wrongly assumes that myths are, at bottom, propositions. Wittgenstein, by contrast, argues that myths do something in the world, rather than say something about the world. For Bottici, following Wittgenstein, myths are more like J. L. Austin’s speech acts than descriptions of the world: “[T]he essential business of language is not to describe facts, but instead that we do a number of things with language, and these things cannot be judged according to their truth or falsehood” (88).

If we approach myth as something that does something rather than describes something, we will no longer be able to define myths according to their content. Myths are neither false or legendary stories, nor are they stories about unreal supernatural beings like dragons and gods. Rather, myths can be identified instead as narratives that have the function of creating significance for particular human communities, imaginatively inciting their passions, and directing them to act. Let me elaborate on this definition of myth with the following qualifications.

First, for Bottici the function of creating “significance” is analogous to the function of the “sacred canopy” for Peter Berger. Humans are born with few, if any, bodily instincts into a “booming, buzzing confusion”; as a result, humans need a system of concepts and narratives (which they usually inherit) that situates them in a social order and alleviates the chaos of the world. This feature of Bottici’s definition allows her to focus on the function of myths rather than their truth.

Second, the qualification “particular” in “myths can be identified instead as narratives that have the function of creating significance for particular human communities” is very important. For Bottici, a specific narrative may provide significance for a particular human community but not for others, in which case the narrative would not be a “myth” for those other communities. For this reason, a narrative is a myth only when it is received as creating significance for a particular community. Stories about Jesus’ death and resurrection, for instance, might be mythical for Christian communities, but not for non-Christian communities. This feature of Bottici’s definition of myth allows her to avoid the sort of ahistorical tendencies we see in scholars, like Joseph Campbell, who largely ignore the fact that myths do different work in different contexts.

Third, myths are never created ex nihilo. Instead, they are always appropriated and reworked for use in particular contexts. This is why myths have so many variants: “each variant of a myth, as well as each different mythologem, works on the ruins of pre-existing edifices. The pre-existing material is then directed towards new exigencies and transformed in order to give significance to new circumstances through a process that [Hans] Blumenberg called . . . ‘reoccupation’” (127). Like the previous qualification, the feature also allows Bottici to avoid ahistorical readings of myth.