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Mythological Models in Civilization Analysis

Vytautas Kavolis

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I need to begin by defining several key terms.

- By a symbolic design I refer to an objectified, or documented, arrangement of meanings, perceptions, and emotional nuances which constitutes an identifiable configuration that, at any given time, provides a relatively self-contained and understandable unit of empirical investigation.
- By the symbolic designs of a civilization I refer to configurations of meanings, perceptions, and emotional nuances which are so distinctive and so widely influential that, at any given time, they identify the major differences in what might be called the “qualities of mind” between the largest comprehensible units of sociocultural investigation at each level of societal evolution — these largest comprehensible units constituting “civilizations.”
- By civilizational analysis, finally, I refer to the study of any symbolic designs, when they are seen as components of one or another of the largest comprehensible units of sociocultural investigation and compared across the boundaries of such units.¹

Civilizational analysis may be conducted either in the traditional “humanistic” or the “sociological” manner. When conducted sociologically, it must meet the further requirement that linkages between symbolic designs and modes of social organization be investigated.

In my view, it is at least as advantageous, in the comparative study of the symbolic designs of civilizations, to begin with the significant detail as to attempt to comprehend the total structure within which this detail is located. As one proceeds in analyzing the significant detail, one’s analytical framework necessarily expands into the aspects of the total structure relevant to it.

¹ Benjamin Nelson and Vytautas Kavolis, “The Civilization-Analytical Approach to Comparative Studies,” Comparative Civilizations Bulletin, 5 (Spring, 1973), pp. 13-14.

But focusing on the significant details permits us to be more sensitive to changes over time in the symbolic designs and the underlying structures of consciousness and sensibility, a topic which civilizationists, in contrast to the intellectual historians, have tended rather to neglect (unless their own background has been in *Geistesgeschichte*).²

By the term “significant detail” I am not referring to a descriptive element such as a particular deity in the scheme of Georges Dumézil, but to a thematic component treated, in some way, in a mythological system (or in its equivalents) and either embodied in an anthropomorphic or animate figure or expressed more abstractly.³ Anthropomorphic constructs embodying a thematic component frequently provide the added bonus of a sociopsychological theory suggesting how this thematic component is perceived to have been motivated and how this kind of motivation is thought to have developed over time.

An anthropomorphic mythological construct may provide: (1) a universal model for conceptualizing a particular type of behavior, (2) a psychological theory revealing how, and of what materials, a particular civilization constructs psychological theories, and (3) a specification of the sociological framework within which either (a) the particular type of behavior tends to arise or (b) the particular psychological theory is generated.

These general considerations may be substantiated by comparing the myths of Prometheus and of Satan, both of which treat the general theme of rebellion by an individual against the supreme authority in the established order and against the rules by which this order operates.⁴ But Prometheus rebels, in stealing fire against the prohibition of Zeus, motivated by sympathy for the sufferings of others than himself — people deprived of fire; and he gives them practical assistance without imposing on them either his own values or his leadership. He permits them to incorporate his technical gifts into the structure of their own life, as they themselves see fit.

² In my usage of these terms, a “structure of consciousness” or a “structure of sensibility” refers to a state of mind or perceptual orientation widely shared by people in a particular sociohistorical setting but inferable only through the specific symbolic designs produced and employed for communication in such settings. Over-simplifying it somewhat, a symbolic design is immediately visible in a particular work of culture; the structure of consciousness — which might also be called the “depth structure of symbolic designs” — is a much more general construct which the analyst employs for explaining the characteristics shared by a variety of specific symbolic designs.

³ C. Scott Littleton, The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

⁴ On Prometheus, see Friedrich Solmsen, Hesiod and Aeschylus (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1949), and George Thomson, Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1966). On Satan Rivkah Scharf Kluger, Satan in the Old Testament (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), and Henry A. Murray, “The Personality and Career of Satan,” Journal of Social Issues, 18 (October 1962), pp. 36 – 54.

Surely, what might be called the “humane attachment — practical assistance mechanism” is a universal possibility, experienced and observed by people in all civilizations. But what is remarkable is that the Greeks — or some significant Greeks — have associated the humane attachment — practical assistance mechanism with what they themselves thought of as the crime of rebellion against established authority or, perhaps more precisely, against the existing normative order.

Rebellion is therefore a “noble crime”; and, in the long run, the substantive personal virtue of the individual overcomes the formal criminality of his act.

This is one model for conceptualizing the behavior of the rebel. The other is the Satanic model. As described in the literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition since the second century BCE, but especially in the Medieval Christian writings, Satan rebels out of resentment.

The causes of his resentment are variously interpreted by the theologians: he is the first of the angels who thinks he has been replaced in God’s affection by a younger sibling — Christ; he objects to having been created by someone else and wants to be his own maker. But he rebels not out of sympathy for others, but from resentment of what he perceives as deprivation of his interest. And he is wholly unconcerned with any practical needs. His concern, apparently, is to create a total alternative to the divine order, an “adversary culture,” and, within it, to assume God’s place.

But the results of his activities are wholly destructive. While Prometheus, who started by providing a useful service, ends up creating a new conception of justice which even Zeus, in the Aeschylean trilogy, eventually comes to accept, Satan proves unable to create any values and can mock the old only by inverting them. The would-be total innovator is enchained to the inverse of all of the old.

Satanic behavior can be conceptualized psychologically as governed by the resentment-destruction mechanism. Surely this mechanism, too, is a universal possibility, experienced and observed by people in all civilizations. But note that in the Judeo-Christian, and particularly the medieval Christian, tradition, it is the resentment-destruction mechanism that is firmly attached to the theme of rebellion against the established and the normative order represented by it. Within this tradition, there is no nobility in the crime of rebellion against the normative order. Personal virtue therefore cannot overcome the crime; it can be dealt with only the forces of “law and order.”

The connection between rebellion and the resentment-destruction mechanism is much more central to the Christian tradition than the linkage between rebellion and the sympathy-assistance mechanism in the Greek civilization. Prometheus was far less important in Greek mythology than Satan in the medieval Christian.

But, centrality aside, the linkage of the cultural theme of rebellion with the psychological mechanism of humane attachment resulting in practical assistance to others is, among the historic civilizations, a distinctively Greek theme.

The old Plato would not have treasured it, but in no other premodern civilization has this linkage of themes been given a mythological elaboration anywhere approaching that given to it by Hesiod and Aeschylus. And we are concerned not only with what is central to a civilization, but also with what is unique in it.

We have, so far, two interpretative models of rebellion, both potentially applicable to the behavior of actual rebels in any civilization. The first model suggests that rebellion motivated by humane sympathy for the suffering of others and expressed through particular acts of practical assistance, results in an enduringly valuable change in the structure of the moral universe. The other model contends that rebellion motivated by personal resentment and expressed in global attempts to create an alternative style of life and impose it on others, is destructive in its consequences.

We also have the historical fact that one of these potentially universal theories of rebellion has been created by important representatives of the Greek civilization, and the other has possessed immense influence in the medieval Christian civilization (and in some of its secular derivatives).

Is the selection of the theoretical model by which to interpret rebellion a consequence of the different behavior of rebels in the two civilizations or is it an expression of differences in the cognitive structure of the two civilizations at the time when these models acquired their hold over the imagination?

Before addressing myself to this question, however, I wish to compare the psychogenetic theories contained, or implied, in the Promethean and the Satanic legends, to account for the origins of the rebel. What is most distinctive of Satan at his earliest appearance in the Old Testament is that he is a function of God specializing in ferreting out potential transgressors and bringing them to God's attention to be punished. He is, on the one hand, an absolute servant, created by his master, who has no existence of his own, no civil rights, and no social ties except the bond of obedience against which he eventually rebels; and, on the other hand, he is the enforcer of morality. When the absolute servant rebels, he can only imagine himself replacing the despot at the peak of the power structure, without disturbing the structure itself; and he will be even more merciless than his former master. And he who begins as the enforcer of morality, ends as the great corrupter.

Prometheus, on the other hand, is an independent from the very beginning of his conscious existence. He has his own independent position, not delegated to him by a higher authority; he has his own relatives, wife, and children; and above all, he has his own knowledge — the ability to predict the future — which is in fact superior to the knowledge possessed by the ruler of the gods.⁵

It would have been inconceivable for Satan to have known more than God does. That is, the Satanic rebel acts out of ignorance, on the basis of an inferior, self-deceptive theory. Or so the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which knowledge tends to be thematically linked with power, interprets the intellectual condition of the rebel. In Greece, it was possible for highest power to be perceived as devoid of knowledge (as well as of virtue).

Prometheus, then, begins as the equivalent of a knowledgeable, high-status adolescent used to making his own decisions. The first significant decision he makes is, in fact, one to support Zeus in his battle against the Titans, who are members of Prometheus's own family. This decision — in some ways the equivalent of Crane Brinton's "desertion of the intellectuals" in the revolutionary process — proves to be a mistake, since Zeus in power becomes a ruthless tyrant.⁶

Moreover, rebellion, for Prometheus — if not necessarily in conscious intention, then in its objective effects — functions as an expiation for the unintended wrongs he had earlier helped to arise by having aligned himself with an emergent tyranny. While the expiation is not specifically mentioned in the Greek texts, the logic of Promethean behavior permits this interpretation, as Satanic behavior does not: Satan could feel no guilt for what he had done in serving his master, since, having been created entirely as a tool of that master, he had no choice in his initial actions. It is he who perceives himself as the blameless tool of a greater power, rather than he who has reason to know he has been foolish in his own judgments, that develops into the resentful destroyer.

⁵ The relationship of Prometheus to feminine figures is worth noting. By some accounts, it was Athena (whom Prometheus, by splitting the skull of Zeus, helped to be born; thus, a woman "of the younger generation") who taught him many of the practical skills he then transmitted to men. And it was his mother, Themis, who provided him with his ultimate resource — knowledge of the future. Prometheus not only does not misuse women to gratify his whims (as Greek gods habitually do), but he makes good use of the creative strengths women possess and willingly share with him. He is unafraid to be dependent on women at the same time that he helps them. In contrast, there are no significant women in Satan's early history, and in his later career he manipulates women to achieve his goal of seducing men to do the evil. In this respect, he is somewhat comparable to Zeus who sends Pandora, the first human woman, to punish men for receiving the Promethean gift of fire. But in the Greek scheme, it was the highest god — not an evil spirit — who both misused women to indulge himself and manipulated them to exercise his control over men.

⁶ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1938).

One further element in the background of Prometheus is his part as a trickster god who delights in substituting bones and fat for meat in the sacrifice to Zeus and thus deceiving the supreme authority without any motive apparent in this action other than the pure fun of it.⁷ Satan, on the other hand, does not appear capable of pure fun, unrelated to the single-mindedness of his service to God (in his earlier career) or to that of his rebellion against God (in his later identity).

Thus, the final psychogenetic summary of the evolution of Satanic and Promethean types of rebellion: abstract justice, combined with resentment, corrupts the absolute servant; playful trickery, to which sympathetic kindness is added, permits a moral evolution in an independent mind.

We now have not only two models of rebellious behavior, but also two psychological theories of how these respective types of behavior have come about. And the civilization-comparative question may be repeated on another level: why did the Greek and the Judeo-Christian civilizations develop different “psychological” theories of the origin of rebellion against authority?

Two possible approaches to this question may be suggested.

1. The first focuses on differences in the depth structure of moral thinking of the two civilizations.

The classical Judeo-Christian tendency, reinforced by Iranian influences, and surviving in a variety of secular ideologies of Western-European derivation, has been to adopt a “mobilizing,” or “reifying,” attitude toward moral issues.

The goal implicit in this attitude is to enhance the “good” and to exorcise the “evil” in one’s experience and personality by rigidly separating them, as object of total worship and absolute condemnation, in the mythological constructs used to comprehend experiences and subjective states of the personality.

The Greeks, in contrast, have tended to adopt a “developmental,” or “dialectical,” attitude toward moral issues, with the implicit goal of integrating the potential “evil” (e.g., the authority of the legal order) in such a way that the “evil” is gradually transformed into the “good,” or functions as an indispensable challenge to it, while the “good” must be exposed to a searching criticism of its claims, in the absence of which it stands in danger of revealing itself as (or degenerating into) another form of “evil.”

⁷ On the parallels between Prometheus and American Indian trickster gods, see Karl Kerényi, “The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology,” in Paul Radin, The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 180-182.

This attitude is evident not only in the Promethean myth, and in the conception of Zeus, in whom, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, “the problematics of the ‘wicked god,’ the undivided unity of the divine and the satanic, reaches its highest pitch,” but also in the treatment of Dionysus, in whom Christ-like and Satan-like elements are intertwined.^{8,9}

- In contrast to India, where dualistic categories (the purity-pollution distinction) are used to separate hierarchically arranged eternal entities;
- In contrast to historic China, where polarities (in the Yin-Yang paradigm) are designed to encourage peaceful cooperation with a minimal change of identity;
- In contrast to the medieval European tradition, in which polar opposites either battle energetically until the final solution, the outcome of which is predetermined (the God-Satan model) or are mutually interdependent in a static hierarchical relationship, which it is impermissible to challenge (as in the notion of the “marriage” of the soul with the body, in which the “masculine” soul is entitled to the obedience of the “feminine” body);¹⁰
- In contrast to all of these conceptions of the proper relationship between polar opposites, the Greeks have conceived of a dialectic in which the opposites evolve, changing their own characters and the structure of their setting, in the course of a battle in which the cards are not stacked in advance in favor of one participant, as they are in the God-Satan paradigm. The “Promethean” dialectic has subsequently re-emerged in the Romantic imagination, whereupon it was Christianized by the Marxists.¹¹

Hierarchy challenged and torn apart by a dualism is one of the relatively constant themes distinctive of Western civilization. But the content of the dualistic or dialectical “battle” changes over time. Three modalities of the Western dialectic seem particularly important:

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 218.

⁹ On Dionysus, see Walter F. Otto, Dionysus: Myth and Cult (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), and Philip E. Slater, The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968). The author adds “Freud and Goethe” in pen here.

¹⁰ Rosalie E. Osmond, “Body, Soul, and the Marriage Relationship: The History of an Analogy,” Journal of the History of Ideas, 34 (April–June 1973), pp. 283-290.

¹¹ M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. SW. Norton & Company, 1971).

- a) The “medieval”: The God-Satan struggle between good and evil;
- b) The “modern”: Irrational tradition in conflict with utilitarian calculability; and
- c) The “post-modern”: A Rousseauist tension between collectively binding social contracts and individual moral-aesthetic sensibilities.¹²

Each of these three modalities seems to be less necessarily committed to the imagery of “total war” for conceiving of the relationship between the opposites defining it.

- 2 The second approach to explaining the differences between the Greek and the Judeo-Christian models of rebellious behavior, and between their theories of the origin of such behavior, can be made on the social-structural level. Satan has originated within the general framework of a militaristic Mesopotamian “oriental despotism,” where the obligation of everyone, including the highest officials, has been to serve the ruler in the manner of disciplined soldiers, and in which, since the supreme authority was always right, rebellion necessarily appeared as the upheaval of primeval chaos against the righteousness of civilization.¹³

The Mesopotamian type of “oriental despotism” may be contrasted to the bureaucratic “oriental despotism” of historic China, where officials, and to some degree other classes, adhered to generalized moral standards of their own, by which they could define their own dignity and even judge their supreme authority, the emperor — thus retaining, at least in theory, a certain margin of group (though not individual) independence relative to him. In the Chinese framework, in which supreme power could legitimately be perceived as deficient in knowledge and in virtue, rebellion could not easily be interpreted in terms of a Satanic model and tended to be legitimated by the rebels themselves, until the nineteenth century, in the not particularly dualistic terms of the nature mysticism of popular Taoism and the reassertion of traditional peasant values.¹⁴

¹² Particular components of the “post-modern” psychocultural dialectic can be referred back to the distant past: the Promethean myth, Roman law, the Tristanic legend, the Lutheran conscience. What is “post-modern” is the dominance of this tension among the formulators of cultural imagery of the present age.

¹³ Karl A. Wittfogel, Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). Wittfogel does not recognize the importance of the “symbolic” distinction made here.

¹⁴ Etienne Balazs, Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 165.

The myth of Prometheus has been put together in a society which cultivated “individualistic heroism” in social action and in fact provided opportunities for a privileged elite, to seek this goal. When Prometheus first appears, the breaking down of clan controls was taking place in the absence of a dominant state organization. With the Chinese scholar-official, or a John Stuart Mill, Prometheus shares an aristocratic sense of obligation for the “lower orders.”

But he pursues the call of this obligation in his own “individually heroic” way, without waiting for legitimation by any traditional standard or generalized system of faith.

A society which permits individualistic action for at least some of its members is probably necessary for such trust in one’s own private moral sensitivities, not sanctioned by any agency or tradition external to the individual to be imagined. And when Prometheus attains his full development, in the tragedies of Aeschylus, there is at least a segmental democracy operating in Athens.

Another structural characteristic of the Greek society relevant to the Promethean theme is the lack of effective control by an organized priesthood over the interpretation of moral issues, whereas in the Mesopotamian framework such priesthoods tended to be organized, like the state, along the lines of a militaristic “oriental despotism.” (And even the Hebrew prophets spoke in the name of obedience to the supreme authority, daring to question only the power of the middle-level authorities, much as Russian peasant rebels did in relation to the Czar and his subordinates until the end of the nineteenth century.)

The militantly organized Church was presumably more important than the feudal state in regenerating the Satanic theory in Europe from the twelfth century on, and then briefly, on both the Catholic and the Protestant sides, during the height of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. In modern revolutionary regimes, we find a similar correlation between Satanic theories and control by the equivalent of an organized priesthood over the interpretation of moral issues.

The Satanic theory of rebellious behavior appears to require both a social structure built for the maximization of obedience and elimination of independence, and an intellectual tradition of rigorous (non-cooperative) dualism. A civilization, like the traditional Chinese, which eliminates individual independence in politically relevant action, but which does not favor rigorous dualism in thought, does not generate Satanic interpretations of rebellious behavior.

And in the post-medieval bourgeois societies of Western Europe, including those of the most rigorous Calvinistic shaping — which tended, however, to seek maximization of individual independence in social action — the hold of Satan did not last. Given an obedience-maximizing structure and a dualistic tradition, social strains and particularly threats to this structure and tradition increase the likelihood, and the virulence, of Satanic theories.¹⁵

It is conceivable that conditions under which Satanic theories arise also favor Satanic behavior, as twentieth-century totalitarianisms suggest. But a mythological model should probably be seen not as a reflection of observed, that is already existing behavior, but as an expression of the categories of imagination shaped by the conjunction of a social structure and a cognitive model. In imagination, however, designs for alternative modes of behavior are tried out (and sometimes, of course, found wanting).

Thus, the analysis of the interpretations of rebellious behavior underlines the impossibility of understanding the distinctive symbolic designs of civilizations either without reference to their social structures or as direct reflections of their social structures. Nor, in all likelihood, should differences in symbolic designs be read as registering corresponding differences in visible behavior, or the absence of a particular symbolic design be interpreted as indicating the absence of the behavior which other peoples conceptualize in such designs.

What symbolic designs express exists, outside of them, only in the imagination; and not everything which exists outside of the imagination is transformed into its basic categories.

I shall conclude by re-emphasizing two methodological points.

- (1) An effective approach to the comparative study of the symbolic designs of civilizations is to focus on a particular theme, found in several civilizations, and embodied in a cultural product that lends itself to both psychological and sociological analysis.
- (2) A productive method of analysis, within this approach, is to look for the linkages of key notions — socially strategic concepts which are treated, in particular civilizations, as necessarily associated with each other, or as mutually exclusive, or as having an indeterminate and variable relationship between themselves.

¹⁵ Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements, Rev. Ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).

Linkages between an ideological notion such as rebellion, and a psychological mechanism presumed to be underlying the behavior oriented to this notion are also worth noting.

Presumed interdependencies between the notions of power, knowledge, virtue, and law have been brought out as particularly important in the present case. But, for an adequate analysis of the symbolic designs of civilizations through linkages between key notions, an inventory of perhaps twenty to fifty such notions, for each civilization at distinguishable stages of its development, might be needed.

Summary Table: Two Modes of Rebellion

LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	THE SATANIC MODEL	THE PROMETHEAN MODEL
Described Behavior	Total rebellion against normative structure	Partial rebellion against a particular aspect of the normative structure
Inferred Motivation	Resentment – destructive mechanism	Humane sympathy – practical assistance mechanism
Social Role Antecedent to Rebellion	Absolute servant, enforcer of morality	Independent agent, knowledgeable trickster
Sociocultural Environment	Obedience-maximizing social structure, radically dualistic cognitive tradition	Obedience-minimizing social structure, “dialectical” conception of relationship between opposites in cognitive tradition