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Facts and Meanings: From Word to Myth

David Rozema
University of Nebraska - Kerney

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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Facts and Meanings: From Word to Myth

David Rozema

University of Nebraska Kerney

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Let me begin by tickling your mind with a comparison of several quotes from two Cambridge men. Here are two from the first Cambridge man:

For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a ruler, a glue-pot, glue, nails, and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.) Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!

It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a

fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro. (Wittgenstein, 1958, remarks 43, 11, 12)

The author of these passages is reminding us, by means of the analogies with the tools and the handles, that words have many various uses. A hammer may be used to pound nails, but it may also be used to pull them out, or to straighten them. It may also be used to crush stones, to tap a die, or to find a beam behind a wall. It may even serve as a paper-weight. Similarly with the other tools mentioned. In addition, each tool is different from the others in its range of possible uses. With the handles, the reminder is similar: though they are all handles, their functions are various and quite different from each other.

This author reminds us of these things because, as he says, “the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script or print” can confuse us. Let’s take, for example, the word “have”—a word as common in most people’s vocabulary as a hammer is in most people’s tool-boxes. Compare the function of the word “have” in the following sentences: “I have a house and two cars”; “I have a wife and two children”; “I have a headache”; “I have an idea.” Is the word “have” used in the same way in all of these sentences? Is it used the same way in any two of them? Clearly not. Yet, the word itself is the same. If we

took one meaning of the word to be the only one, and then tried to understand the other sentences with that meaning the result would be confusion. But not necessarily an obvious confusion: it would be subtle, for we would be attempting to use the word in one of its legitimate senses, only it would not be a sensible use in that particular context.

Here is another example: the word “event.” Consider the following sentences: “Upcoming events at the Performing Arts Center include . . .”; “Coming to the Inklings conference has been one of the greatest events of my life”; “In the event of flooding, seek shelter in an upper storey”; “Astronomical events, such as supernovae and the formation of black holes, are rarely seen from earth”; “Research on the workings of the brain is shedding light on mental events, such as remembering, decision-making, and imagining.” Is the use of the word “event” the same in all of these cases? The last sentence is particularly puzzling, for it seems to cross the boundary of the sensible uses of the word “event”: that is, it doesn’t quite seem right to think of memories, decisions, and imaginings as “events.” But, perhaps, this unseemly feeling might itself be simply another “mental event”!

In any event, as the author also reminds us, what we need in order to avoid this sort of confusion is a clear presentation of the application of the word; we need the word’s “use in the language”; we need a particular context. This author has noticed that such confusion is especially prominent in doing philosophy, for it is common to find amongst philosophers a “craving for generality” or a “contemptuous attitude toward the particular case.” That is, rather than looking at the differences between particular uses of these words, the tendency is to want to know what these words mean “in general.”

Now, here are more ticklers from the second Cambridge man:

As everyone knows, words constantly take on new meanings. Since these do not necessarily, nor even usually, obliterate the old ones, we should picture this process not on the analogy of an insect undergoing metamorphoses but rather on that of a tree throwing out new branches, which themselves throw out subordinate branches; in fact, as ramification. The new branches sometimes overshadow and kill the old ones but by no means always. ... When we use one word in many different senses we avail ourselves of the results of semantic ramification. [But] we can do this successfully without being aware of them. ... Each new speaker learns his native language chiefly by imitation, partly by those hurried scraps of amateur lexicography which his elders produce in answer to the frequent question, ‘What does that mean?’ He does not at first—how should he?—distinguish between different senses of one word and different words. They all have to be learned in the same way. ... It is this most important principle that enables speakers to give half a dozen different meanings to a single word with very little danger of confusion. ... What seems to me certain is that in ordinary language the sense of a word is governed by the context and this sense normally excludes all others from the mind. ... It is of course the insulating power of the context which enables old senses to persist, uncontaminated by newer ones. Thus, *train* (of a dress) and *train* (on the railway), or *civil* (courteous) and *civil* (not military), or *magazine* (a store) and *magazine* (a periodical) do not interfere with one another because they are unlikely to occur in the same context. They live happily by

keeping out of each other's way.
(Lewis, 1960, 9-12)

Notice, first of all, the remarkable similarity of this author's comments with those of the first author. Perhaps you do not find it remarkable. After all, the main point is obvious. (Perhaps this is why it is so often overlooked.) But the similarity goes quite deep. Both authors recognize the *distinctively different* uses of the same word: there need be no drawn or conscious connection between one use and the other. This implies that there is no single "primary" or "literal" sense of a word: two different uses of the same word might be as distinctive as two different words. Thus, as both authors also recognize, danger lurks when a word is abstracted from its particular context—from its uses in ordinary language—and then investigated for its "meaning." To do so would be analogous to looking at the hammer, setting in the tool-box, and asking, "Well, what is the function of that hammer now, when it's not being used for anything? What is it doing when it's not doing anything?" The danger here is to suppose that this is a sensible question—or, in order to avoid confusion myself, perhaps I should say, to suppose it makes sense *as a question*. Such abstracting of well known words from their use in particular contexts and then looking for their "meaning" is the source of many so-called philosophical problems. And the danger involved in trying to give "solutions" to such "problems" is the same as what gives rise to them in the first place. For, as our second author says,

When a word has several meanings historical circumstances often make one of them dominant during a particular period. The dominant sense of any word lies uppermost in our minds. Wherever we meet the word, our natural impulse will be to give it that sense. When this operation results in nonsense, we see our mistake and try over again.

But if it makes tolerable sense our tendency is to go merrily on. We are often deceived. In an old author [or in another context] the word may mean something different. I call such senses dangerous senses, because they lure us into misreadings. (Lewis, 1960, 13)

And this reminds me, too, of what our first author says of such problems:

These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings; *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (Wittgenstein, 1958, remark 109)

And what, then, is the aim of each of these men in investigating the meanings of words? Our second author says that one of his aims is "to facilitate, as regards certain words, a more accurate reading of old books." (Lewis, 1960, 3) It is fair to suppose that this aim is part of a larger aim: to facilitate accurate reading of any or all books, of listening to any or all stories. Our first author has famously said that his aim is "to show the fly the way out of the flybottle." (Wittgenstein, 1958, remark 309) On the supposition that any reader of his books is at least competent enough to know a metaphor when he or she reads one, we can safely interpret this remark to mean that his aim, too, is to help his readers escape misunderstandings, misreading, "nonsense disguised as sense"—that is, to become good readers and listeners.

Thus, we find our authors aiming at the same end: not the end of knowing facts, but, rather, of understanding

meanings. Or, to put it another way, these men want to save us from the temptation to take our language to be only propositional or representational; to remind us of the multitude of uses we have for words, sentences, paragraphs, stories—even entire books—in order to then understand their use, their meaning, *in each particular case*. If there is danger in falling under the illusion that a word is being used meaningfully, sensibly, when, in fact, it is not being so used, then there is also danger in falling under the illusion that a sentence or a story is being meaningfully, sensibly used when the surroundings that would give it a clear sense are lacking. The danger is misunderstanding, missing the meaning.

I would now like to skip around this Wood between Words to that Pond called “Myth” and ask: “How, then, are we to know the meaning of a myth?” Of course, each myth will have its own particular meaning, but what can we say more generally about the way in which we are to read or hear—or even *believe*—myths and mythical stories? As with words and sentences, these myths can be rightly understood only in the context of their use—or, better yet, by looking at their affects, what they do to us when we hear them or read them. I think any sensible person would see straight away that such stories are not meant as reports or hypotheses or histories.

In his masterful monograph, *An Experiment in Criticism*, C.S. Lewis devotes an entire chapter to myth. Since his “experiment” is to distinguish between literary and unliterary readers rather than between good and bad literature, he does not attempt to provide literary or textual criteria for determining what kind of story is or isn’t a myth. Rather, he defines mythical stories (or the mythical aspects of stories) in terms of what characteristic effects these stories have on us. In the earlier chapters of the book, Lewis argues that a literary reader is one who opens himself up to whatever piece

of literature he reads so that its artistic powers might be fully realized. A good book will show itself to a good reader. But Lewis says that the power of a myth does not lie primarily in its artistic excellence or its literary presentation: “There is, then, a particular kind of story which has value in itself—a value independent of its embodiment in any literary work. The story of Orpheus strikes, and strikes deep, of itself; the fact that Virgil and others have told it in good poetry is irrelevant. To think about it and be moved by it is not necessarily to think about those poets or to be moved by them.” (Lewis, 1961, 41) Thus, when it comes to myths, the distinction between “the literary” and “the unliterary” is not made by reference to the literary quality of the writing: “The value of myth is not a specifically literary value, nor the appreciation of myth a specifically literary experience.” (Lewis, 1961, 46) Rather, Lewis makes the distinction between the myth-lover and the “unliterary” reader of myths in terms of the kind of response they each have to reading (or hearing) the myth. Whereas the latter—the unliterary reader—reacts to the mythical story as he would to any narrative, temporally and superficially; the former—the myth lover—will find the myth to be permanently, deeply moving. “He [the myth lover] will be moved by the myth as long as he lives; they [the unliterary readers of myths], when the momentary excitement is over and the momentary curiosity appeased, will forget the Event forever. And rightly, for the sort of event they value has no claims on the lasting allegiance of the imagination.” (Lewis, 1961, 47) The difference, in short, lies in the capacity to receive what the mythical story has to offer, regardless of the literary merits of how it is presented; a certain sensibility to—and an appreciation for—beings, places, happenings, ideas and choices whose importance and worth lies beyond ourselves and our experience.

Besides the extra-literary nature of myth, Lewis adds other characteristics of our response to the mythical: “The pleasure of myth depends hardly at all on such usual narrative attractions as suspense or surprise. Even on first hearing it is felt to be inevitable”; “Human sympathy is at a minimum. We do not project ourselves at all strongly into the characters. They are like shapes moving in another world. We feel indeed that the pattern of their movements has a profound relevance to our own life, but we do not imaginatively transport ourselves into theirs”; “Myth is always, in one sense of the word, ‘fantastic’. It deals with impossibles and preternaturals”; “The experience may be sad or joyful but it is always grave”; “The experience is not only grave but awe-inspiring. We feel it to be numinous. It is as if something of great importance has been communicated to us.” (Lewis, 1961, 43-44)

Here, again, Wittgenstein offers us some very helpful reminders, complementing what Lewis has to say about myth. In his *Remarks on Frazer’s ‘Golden Bough’*, Wittgenstein investigates the source of Frazer’s—and, in general, modern anthropology’s—misunderstanding of religious stories and practices, including those elements we would call mythical. Frazer takes these myths, and the rituals and ceremonies that are often tied up with them, as *false accounts* of what “really” happens (or happened) in time and space—historically or scientifically. In other words, he takes them as *incorrect explanations*, which are also very often simplistic, primitive and even barbaric. But, as Wittgenstein writes,

Frazer’s account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*.

Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the *Confessions*?

Well—one might say—if he was not mistaken, then the Buddhist holy-man, or some other, whose religion expresses quite different notions, surely was. But *none* of them was making a mistake except where he was putting forward a theory.

Even the idea of trying to explain the practice—say the killing of the priest-king—seems to me wrongheaded. All that Frazer does is to make this practice plausible to people who think as he does. It is very queer that all these practices are finally presented, so to speak, as stupid actions.

But it never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity. (Wittgenstein, 1979, 1e)

The mistake actually lies with those who suppose that the telling of the myth is like putting forth an hypothesis, or making a report. Looking at a myth in this way—which is part of the broader mistake of supposing that all language is used simply to make propositions—leads to a complete misunderstanding of the myth. The meaning is thereby lost. Wittgenstein goes on:

I think one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we *know*, without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself.

And here the explanation is not what satisfied us anyway. When Frazer begins by telling the story of the King of the Wood at Nemi, he does this in a tone which shows that something strange and terrible is happening here. And that is the answer to the question, “why is this happening?”: because it is terrible. In other words, what strikes us in

this course of events as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, etc. (or, in the case of a different story, as glorious, sublime, beatific, etc.)—anything but trivial and insignificant—that is what gave birth to them.

Put that account of the King of the Wood at Nemi together with the phrase “the majesty of death”, and you see they are one. The life of the priest-king shows what is meant by that phrase.

One would like to say [to Frazer]: This is what took place here; laugh if you can. (Wittgenstein, 1979, 2e, 3e)

The point is that mythology is inextricably entwined with our conviction that our experiences in and of the universe are significant, meaningful and transcendent. This is *shown* by the fact that, as Wittgenstein says, “A whole mythology is deposited in our language.” (Wittgenstein, 1979, 10e)

Lewis gives examples, both older and newer, of stories that are among the “great myths”—Orpheus, Demeter and Persephone, the Hesperides, Balder, Ragnarok, and Ilmarinen’s forging of the Sampo—or are mythical in character—Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Wells’s *The Door in the Wall*, Kafka’s *The Castle*, the castle of Gormenghast in Mervyn Peake’s *Titus Groan*, and the Ents and Lothlorien in *The Lord of the Rings*. I think we could add to the list many of Plato’s stories—for example, the tale of Atlantis, the creation myth in Timeaus; James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*; nearly the whole of Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* (think especially of the *Ainulindale*, the making of the Silmarils and Feanor’s great pride and the oath of doom, the lay of Beren and Luthien, the tragic tale of Turin Tarambar, the calling of Tuor, the voyage of Earendil, the rise and fall of Numenor); and, of course, many elements in Lewis’s own

fiction: *Till We Have Faces*; the stories of Ramandu, the Ruined City, the Wood between the Worlds, and the dead world of Charn from *The Chronicles of Narnia*; the Caves of Perelandra, and the descent of the gods in *That Hideous Strength*.

But what is the intrinsic value of the mythical? In what does its value consist, and how is it (or ought it to be) manifest in our lives? What is the worth of having and developing such a sensibility? To answer this, I’d like to cite a mythical element from the first book of Lewis’s Space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*: Ransom’s realization that space is full of life, filled with living creatures. Lewis describes it in two places in the novel, first during Ransom’s journey to Malacandra:

But Ransom, as time wore on, became aware of another and more spiritual cause for his progressive lightening and exultation of heart. A nightmare, long engendered in the mind by the mythology that follows in the wake of science, was falling off him. He had read of ‘Space’: at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it had affected him till now—now that the very name ‘Space’ seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it ‘dead’; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. How indeed should it be otherwise, since out of this ocean the worlds and all life had come? He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of worlds, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly even upon the earth with so many eyes—and here with how many more! No: space was the

wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens—the heavens which declared the glory—” (Lewis, 1938, 34)

And then again upon his return to earth:

He could not feel that they were an island of life journeying through an abyss of death. He felt almost the opposite—that life was waiting outside the little iron egg-shell in which they rode, ready at any moment to break in, and that, if it killed them, it would kill them by excess of its vitality. And if he had felt some such lift of the heart when first he passed through the heaven on their outward journey, he felt it now tenfold, for now he was convinced that the abyss was full of life in the most literal sense, full of living creatures. (Lewis, 1938, 145)

What does this story do to you? What is its effect? If we could say that it was “used” for anything or by anyone at all, what would you say that use is? Clearly it is not meant to inform, or to persuade, or merely to entertain. Neither is it some call to action nor a cry of passion. It is not presented as an opinion or a theory. But it does have the power to humble us, to inspire awe, to shape our attitude towards what transcends us, and to cause our spirits to long for our consummation in what is inexpressibly greater than us. That is the meaning of the myth. And it is a great good, a good in itself—something we are meant for. This is why, in the last chapter of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransom writes to Lewis, “[W]hat we need now is not so much a body of belief as a body of people familiarized with certain ideas. If we could even effect in one percent of our readers a change-over from the conception of Space to the conception of Heaven, we should have made a beginning.” (Lewis, 1938, 152)

That is the power of the mythical, even among—no, *especially* among—the most reasonable people. In this lies its intrinsic value. And, in one sense, its *truth*—for it evokes a right and deep appreciation for what transcends us.

How much more powerful, then, if we believe the myth to be also true in the metaphysical sense—if it is our *Credo*?

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