

The Metaphor of Consciousness in Creation Myths

by Rick Doble

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<http://deconstructingtime.blogspot.com>

Recently I came across the book *creation myths* by David Maclagan. He emphasized that words and language were frequently key elements in creation stories around the world. Often words spoken by God or gods were what created the universe.

For example a [Christian website](#) said the following:
God spoke the universe into existence by a word.
Genesis 1:20-21, 24 "And God said... and it was so."

It is well established that many 'primitive' (for lack of a better word) rituals and myths were/are based on metaphors derived from human existence and that these were/are used to explain or to tell stories about the world in general. For example, a number of creation stories involve an egg, a womb, a pregnancy, a birth, a mother and a father. These clearly are metaphors taken from the human condition.

The "attribution of human traits, emotions, and intentions to non-human entities and is considered to be an innate tendency of human psychology" according to Wikipedia and is known as anthropomorphism and also personification.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropomorphism>



(Left) A personification of winter in the form of "Old Man Winter."
 (Right) A personification of the North Wind blowing in a storm.

What struck me was that 'words' are uniquely human. Further I believe that the invention of language and the development of language was a key element in the development of human consciousness. This led me to the idea of consciousness itself and how it came about -- a major question in science today.

For more about the development of consciousness see my blog:
The Human Revolution: Symbolic Culture

<http://deconstructingtime.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-human-revolution-symbolic-culture.html>

David Maclagan makes the following point in his book *creation myths* about the unique power of language:

Because of its unique correspondence to the structure of the world -- because in effect, by articulating it, it creates that structure -- language has a power that is more than notative or descriptive.

I would also say this about the power of language: Separate tribes, separate groups of people each developed their own language. Their words were interconnected within their language and interconnected in relation to their culture and in relation to the world at large. So each language created a complicated virtual world that had a reality all its own and that was shared by those who spoke it.

The journey from preconsciousness to consciousness must have been quite remarkable. But it was conscious verbal humans who invented stories of how the world came to exist. Since language had in a sense helped in the birth of their consciousness, it was also the perfect metaphor for how God or the gods created the Universe.

So it occurred to me that some of these creation myths could also be stories of humans becoming conscious. To say it another way, the story of human beings building a complete and complex symbolic world through language -- in a sense creating a conscious world that had not existed before and which clearly separated them from all the other animals -- might have been the metaphorical basis for a number of creation myths. Humans creating a virtual world with words became a metaphor for God or gods using words to create the world.



(Left) Athena was, among other things, the goddess and personification of wisdom.
(Right) A figure who is the personification of geometry.

But there is another aspect to this use of language. The word 'word' is derived from the Latin *verbum* in which 'word' often indicates an action.

...the nature of the world as we know it is marked, not only by man's material techniques, but by his use of language. The very word 'poetry' comes from a root which means 'to make'.

David MacLagan, *creation myths*

'Word' is used in the sense of 'making' in the very first sentences in the *Gospel of John* in the *New Testament* of the *Bible*.

The Gospel of John (King James Version)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

As I have pointed out in my essay on language, actions in all languages are given a kind of time stamp, such as actions in the past, present or future. So not only does the 'word' create the world through actions, it also adds the element of time and places the world in time.



The old man who is a personification of the year just past (right) hands over the symbols of time, the scythe and the hour glass, to the young baby (left) who is the personification of the New Year.

See my blog:

How Our Concept of Time Is Embedded & Derived from Our Language

<http://deconstructingtime.blogspot.com/2017/02/concept-of-time-embedded-in-language.html>

A comprehensive study of creation stories and myths concluded that all of them included an understanding of time -- and this understanding was conveyed in the language of the culture in the telling of the creation myth.

*In addition to reveling or expressing essential elements of particular cultures, creation myths, when compared, reveal certain universal or semi-universal patterns or motifs. The first and most important of these is the fact that the creation myth always expresses the given culture's, and, by extension, the **overall human place and role in time and space**; in the world and the cosmos. [ED: bolding is my emphasis]*
David A. Leeming, *Creation Myths of the World - An Encyclopedia*

A MODERN JOURNEY FROM PRECONSCIOUSNESS TO CONSCIOUSNESS

There is a modern account of a person who went from a preconscious state to a conscious one, the story of Helen Keller. Her account shows remarkable similarities with some creation myths.

See more about Helen Keller and her journey into consciousness in my blog:

Time & Consciousness

<http://deconstructingtime.blogspot.com/2014/12/time-consciousness.html>

Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness [ED: my emphasis]...and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!

Helen Keller

Helen also said the following -- which is an edited composite of some things she wrote:
Once I knew only darkness and stillness.

My inner life, then, [ED: before consciousness] was...without past, present, or future.

It was not night—it was not day. . .

But vacancy absorbing space,

And fixedness, without a place;

There were no stars—no earth—no time—

EXCERPTS FROM VARIOUS CREATION STORIES

India

This story is from the second and fourth Brahmanas of the Brhad-arayaka Upanishad, which was written in India in the 700s or 600s B.C. The principal actor in this story can be taken to be Praja-pati, the Lord of Creation, or Brahma the Creator. (Quoted from the website listed next.)

In the beginning there was absolutely nothing, and what existed was covered by death and hunger. He thought, "Let me have a self", and he created the mind.

<http://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/CS/CSSelf.html>

India

Rigveda X 129

The Rigveda is part of the sacred texts of Hinduism known as the Vedas.
Veda means knowledge, i.e., awareness, consciousness.

*Was neither Being nor Non-Being then...
No sign to mark day from night...*

*Poets, seeking by reflection in their selves
Made out, within Non-Being, Being's thread.*

(David Maclagan, *creation myths*)

Australian Aborigine

From an Australian Aborigine creation story:

*There was a time when everything was still. All the spirits of the earth were asleep - or almost all. The great Father of All Spirits was the only one awake. Gently he awoke the Sun Mother. As she opened her eyes a warm ray of light spread out towards the sleeping earth. The Father of All Spirits said to the Sun Mother,
"Mother, I have work for you. Go down to the Earth and awake the sleeping spirits. Give them forms."*

Quoted from this website: <http://www.cs.williams.edu/~lindsey/myths/myths.html>

Mayan

The *Popol Vuh* is the creation story of the Quiche Maya of Guatemala.

In this story, *"the first real men are given life by the sole power of the word: 'It is said they only were made and not formed; they had no father, they had no mother...Only by a miracle, by means of incantation, were they created and made by the Creator.'"*

(David Maclagan, *creation myths*)

Judeo-Christian

In *Genesis* from the *Old Testament* of the *Bible* God creates the world with words:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

After that He creates the rest of the world by speaking His commands.

Further He creates the stars so that humans can tell time

And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years..."

Then He gives humans the power to invent their own words:

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field;
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1>

It could be argued that when Adam and Eve ate from the 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' and because of that told God that they were naked and felt ashamed, that they had reached full consciousness. The innocence of preconsciousness, in which nakedness was be natural, was now lost to them.

NOTE: When the 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' was mentioned, the word 'knowledge' in Hebrew can also mean awareness. This also ties in with the notion of consciousness, since consciousness from the Latin means 'with knowledge' and after all what is knowledge but awareness. With this interpretation, then, eating the fruit from the 'tree of awareness' caused a separation from the original state of oneness with nature -- and also indicated a separation since good and evil are particularly human and not animal concerns. For more about this please see:

http://www.creationtips.com/tree_of_knowledge.html

As I wrote in my blog (see link next) The cost of becoming conscious was quite high. Before consciousness humans had been part of nature. When they developed full consciousness, they were removed and separated from nature.

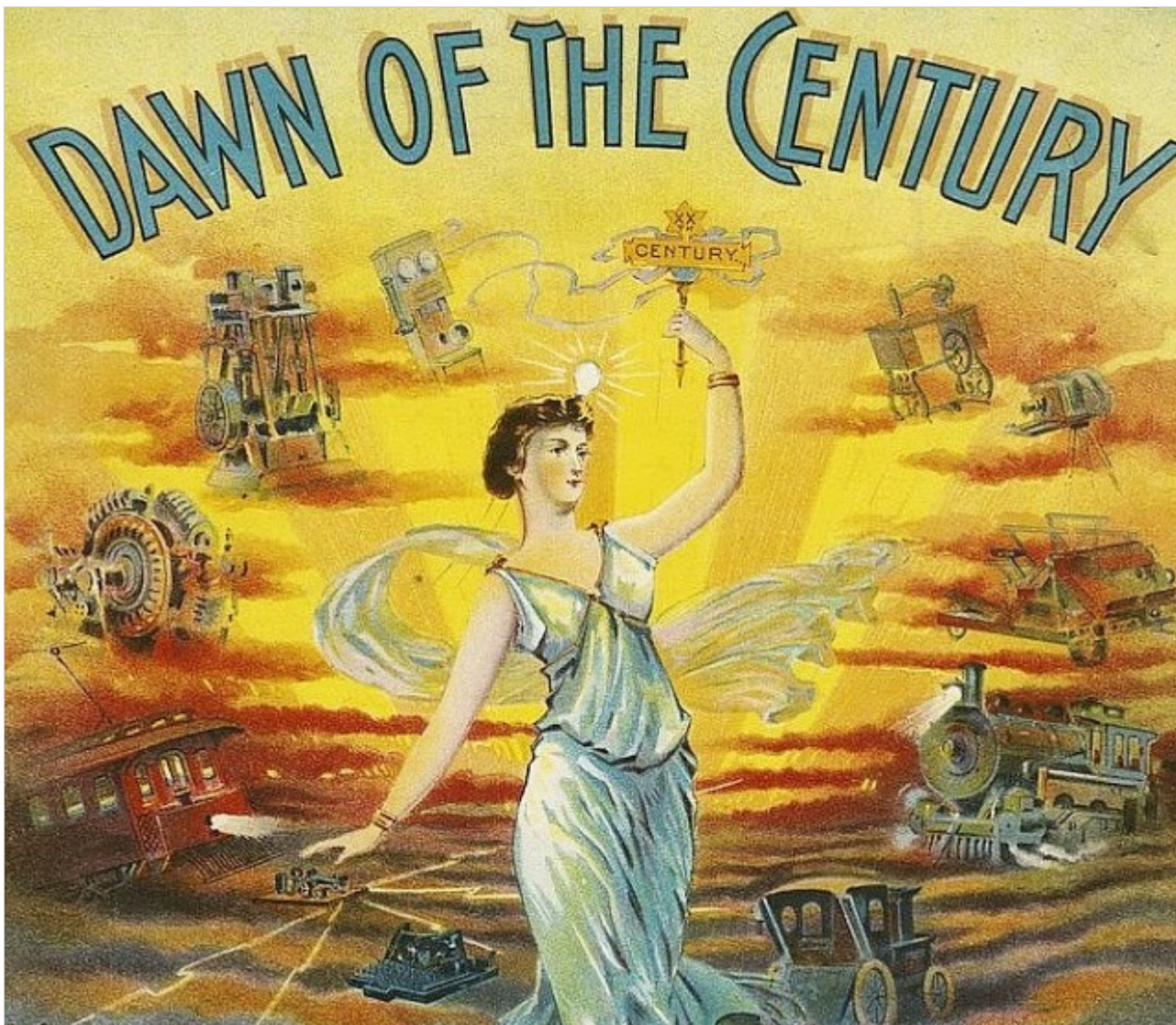
"Man is distinguished above all animals by his self-consciousness, by which he is a 'rational animal'."

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

See my blog:

The Development of Consciousness & the Origins of Religion

<http://deconstructingtime.blogspot.com/2015/04/the-development-of-consciousness.html>



In 1900 an allegorical woman representing the dawn and hope of the 20th Century holds "a standard identifying her as "XXth Century". She has an electric light bulb atop her head and stands on a winged wheel, representing Progress."

Quoted from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DawnOfTheCenturyMarchTwoStepPaull.jpg>

CONCLUSION

The central idea of this blog-essay is pure speculation on my part. Yet I do believe there is a good chance that some creation myths contain information about how human consciousness occurred. In the quest to understand the beginnings of human consciousness, these myths might be a good place to start and could yield valuable clues about how consciousness developed.

Book Cited:

Maclagan, David. *creation myths*. New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 1977.