Chapter VIII
Cosmogonic myths and order
(1995)

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You deep thinkers
ask yourself in your own hearts,
what base did he stand on when he set up the worlds?

*Rig Veda* 10.4

Cosmology and cosmogony

“Order,” as Nicola Abbagnano (1993: 638) says, is “any relationship between two or more objects that may be expressed by a rule.” But as a phenomenon of consciousness, order cannot be reduced to this definition. The fact that our sense of order turns on relations that—at least in theory—can be described with rules does not mean that the formulation of these rules is necessary to order. We feel ourselves in the presence of order whenever we are able to anticipate future experience to some degree based on past experience. This capacity for anticipation exists in practice, that is, it is embodied in certain activities and cannot be easily separated from these. Indeed, at its most extreme it is inseparable from them, as shown, for example, by the ultimate irreducibility of aesthetic knowledge to discursive knowledge, or of the sense of order that derives from listening to a piece of music to that which derives from its translation into rules of composition.

Whether or not they exist in the form of rules, two types of relations are fundamental to the experience (and idea) of order: serial relations (the relation between before and after) and relations between parts of a whole (and therefore also between the whole and its parts). The first type is obviously preponderant, given the intrinsically temporal nature of our experience, in which one thing follows another, one thing produces another, and given that our actions and our own personal identity exist in a form of succession. This preponderance, this immediate evidence of the relations between before and after as the source of intelligibility, explains why in pre-scientific cultures cosmology, that is, the description of the order of the world in its widest expanse, for the most part takes the form of “cosmogony.” In other words, in contrast with scientific cosmologies, which explain the order of the world legislatively (invoking the constant operation of eternally valid laws), mythical cosmologies explain it narratively—as the result of a process. While for science order is necessary because it is eternal, for myth it is contingent because it has not always been there, and therefore will not always be there. Rather than the atemporal intelligibility of the law, myth prefers the temporal intelligibility of experience. But it should be added that this contrast is only relative. “Myth” and “science” are ideal notions that are often difficult to discover as such in reality. Many cosmogonies have surprisingly “scientific” aspects to them, and science is not immune to myth, particularly when it makes itself cosmogonic (cf. Feyerabend 1975: 295–309). It should also be

2. A third type of relations of order—rank—seems to me to be fundamentally reducible to the second type.

3. We see ourselves as identical to that which we were only inasmuch as we are its closest approximation (cf. Nozick, 1981: 36–37). In other words, among the various temporal chains that constitute our experience, we recognize one which we identify with the “I.”

4. I do not intend to discuss here what myth is—if indeed a class or family of phenomena that might all be brought back to a useful definition of “myth” even exists. Suffice it to say that myth is understood here as a traditional narration with explanatory and legitimating values. Myth is authoritative and therefore only those who are authorized can give voice to it: its use is rarely free. In other ways, myth is not differentiated from other forms of traditional and even nontraditional narration (given that traditional elements exist even in the most apparently revolutionary narrations). Its fundamental intelligibility and its authoritative nature connect it instead—horribile dictu—to history or at least to the “monumental history” of which Friedrich Nietzsche spoke.
said from the outset that if mythical cosmologies are narrative because they are dominated by order as series, no narrative is reducible purely and simply to this order. Its own dominance requires that it subsumes other principles of order, and form complex interweavings with them.

**Mythical images of origins**

The majority of cosmogonies situate two contrasting but complementary principles at the origins of the cosmos. These can be found excessively close to one another—and must then be distanced—or excessively distant, in which case they must be brought closer together. The final result is identical: an optimal combination of conjunction and separation, which is precisely the fundamental principle of the order of the world.

The two principles are often either the sky and the earth, or the sky and the ocean, or salt and fresh water. These couples almost always have a sexual connotation. That is, they exemplify the opposition of male and female, which is a principle of order and at the same time is generative in an extremely generalized way. In this sense, the origin is not only the cosmos’ initial state but also its most general principle: the relation of the parts to the whole is temporalized. Or, more precisely, it is temporalized if the process that follows the original state manifests, at least in part, the sexual principle. Otherwise, sexual duality is positioned at the beginning as the premise of a negation. For example, the castration of Uranus in the Hesiodic cosmogony (*Theogony*, vv. 177–182) constitutes, among other things, a negation of the purely sexual principle of creation and so announces the kingdom of Zeus, the sovereign who creates and maintains the order of the cosmos with more varied means than mere sexuality. In short, it is already evident that myth temporalizes relations of inclusion and logical negation and that it is not merely reducible to the relation between before and after, as it exists in experience. We will return to this point.


6. See Eliade (1959: 479, 487–9); Williamson (1933, I: 33, 48, 78 [Samoa], 55 [Tonga], 18 [Fakaofo]).

7. A very important motif in Mesopotamia, for obvious reasons (Bottéro and Kramer: 1989: 656).
These originary couples differ from one another by virtue of the degree of heterogeneity or homogeneity of the terms that constitute them. The greatest degree of heterogeneity is found in the couple sky/earth, a lesser degree in the couple sky/ocean (which seem to be the mirror images of one another), and the least in the couple salt water/fresh water (two forms of the same substance rather than two different substances). Aside from the representation of the initial state as an irreducible sexual duality, what emerges is the idea of a monism founded on a more abstract principle—represented by water, an element without a form of its own but for this very reason capable of assuming every possible form and at the same time the fertile element \textit{par excellence}.^{8}

Because of the sky’s apparent curvature, and because of the horizon’s circularity, sky and earth, water above and water below are often conceived as the two halves of a spherical cosmos.\textsuperscript{9} From here to conceiving of the cosmos explicitly as an egg, and thus as a generative “sphere,” is a short step, and one which has been made in almost every region of the world (See Eliade 1959: 479–82; Williamson 1933, I: 19). The cosmic egg constitutes the point of greatest unity of the two sexual halves of the cosmos—a unity that implies, ultimately, their dissolution. A less extreme solution is the representation of the beginning as an androgyne (Eliade 1959: 481), one that does not abolish the sexual distinction, but renders it a priori impossible to turn coitus into the representation of unity. Correlatively, the process of generation is desexualized: the androgyn procreates through extrac-
tion of the non-sexual parts of its own body—namely, through dismemberment. But the gigantic body from whose dismemberment the cosmos derives is not necessarily characterized by androgyny, as the Scandinavian myth of Ymir (ibid.) or the Indian myth of Puruṣa (the Man) demonstrate (Doniger O’Flaherty 1981: 29–31).

At this point, it should be clear that the various representations of origins form not separate types, but rather a family of phenomena with unstable boundaries, and thus often coexist (and not just as possibilities) within the same culture. Since these types all have com-

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8. Note the similarity between this idea of originary water—well represented in Mesopotamia—and the cosmology of Thales, according to which the ultimate reality is water (Diogenes Laertius, \textit{Lives and opinions of eminent philosophers}, 1: 27).

mon dimensions, it is sufficient to accentuate one of them to the detriment of the others to transform one representation into another. For example, if I accentuate unity a little with respect to duality, the opposed terms are transformed—from sky and earth they become two forms of water. A further accentuation of unity leads to the desexualization of the opposites, or of the form of their union (from coitus to androgyne). Ultimately, duality and sexuality disappear altogether—as in various versions of the cosmic egg theory. These transformations are not just theoretical stratagems: they contribute to making the coexistence of different images in the same culture or the passage from one image to another recognizable over the course of time. The accentuation of unity to the detriment of duality—and accentuation of dismemberment (and, more generally, of creation) to the detriment of procreation—is historically documented in Mesopotamia and its sphere of cultural influence, as well as in Vedic and Brahmanic India.

The representations that I have so far considered are all concrete—extensions to the entire cosmos of phenomena that are sufficiently general to assume a certain explanatory weight at the global level. But mythic cosmogonies are capable of abstraction. For example, in Polynesia the origin of the cosmos is often situated in a generic “Darkness” or “Silence” (denoting the absence of activity) or even in “Nothing” (Williamson 1933, I: 3, 19–22; Best 1967, I: 58–60). Elsewhere, the initial state is characterized by the symmetry and reversibility of the relations of cause and effect—symptoms of the intrinsic unthinkability of an ultimate cause.

Particularly vivid examples are found in the hymns of the Rig Veda. “From Aditi (the female creative principle) was born Dakṣa (the male creative principle) and from Dakṣa Aditi was born” (Rig Veda 10.72.3–4). The Creator creates water and water creates the Creator (Doniger O’Flaherty 1981: 26). Puruṣa (the Man), the primordial man, is dismembered in order to create everything, including those who sacrifice him. “From him (man) Virāj was born, and from Virāj came the Man” (ibid.: 30). The gods, who receive the sacrifice, make sacrifices to the gods—and to the sacrifice itself. “In the late Veda, the father is expressly identified with the son” (ibid.: 27). The world of beginnings is characterized by the most total logical circularity: Man presupposes Man; the gods presuppose the gods; the sky and the earth presuppose the sky and the earth; heat presupposes heat; every origin is a derivative and every derivative an origin. Perhaps Russell read the Rig Veda, or perhaps his path crossed that of
the wise Indians in the dark wood where all paths of thought inevitably end up. At that point some fall silent, others recount myths. Still others ask themselves, like Putouarey: “And what if the myth were the truth? Ah! My reason tells me no, and no again, a thousand times no . . . of course, I don’t believe. But I doubt, and my doubt is in favor of the myth” (Larbaud [1924] 1991: 207).

Cosmogonic processes
Representations of beginnings are ultimately inseparable from representations of the cosmogonic processes that follow them. As I have indicated, if the point of departure is a state of separation, a mediation is necessary. This takes a variety of forms. For example, if the sky and the earth are originally separated, the sky will have to unite with the earth to make it fertile, and then to be separated from it so that their offspring may grow (Williamson 1993, I: 41–45). Or, if the initial state is the separation of sky and ocean, they will need to be mediated by fishing the earth from the bottom of the ocean, or by throwing stones or sand from the sky. Or else the celestial gods will stir up the ocean with a stick, and islands will develop from the brackish foam that remains attached to the stick.

But the most common cosmogonic process is one of differentiation by separation and division. We are speaking here of the obvious correlate of every representation of the beginning of the cosmos as a unity of that which is normally and presently divided: the sexes, the sky and the earth, the earth and the water, fresh water and salt water and, later on, gods and men, the king and his subjects, social classes, “us” and “them.” In such a case, cosmogony is nothing more than the manifest inversion of its latent conceptual presupposition: the diminution or obliteration of differences necessary for thinking about origin.

10. The original Italian is a play on words on the first lines of Dante’s *Inferno*:
“Forse Russell lesse il *Rig Veda* o forse il suo cammino si è incrociato con quello dei saggi indiani nella selva oscura dove tutti i cammini del pensiero inevitabilmente finiscono.” —Ed.

11. By a divine fisherman, like Maui and others in Polynesia (Williamson 1993, I: 32–41), or by a bird that descends from the sky and dives into the sea, bringing back sand from its depths (Eliade 1959: 488).

12. Which is often conceived, it should be remembered, as a stone vault (cf. Williamson 1933, I: 77).

13. Cf., for example, the Japanese Nihongi (Aston 1972: 10–12).
The world is unmade mentally in order to be remade through narrative. Only in this way can it acquire meaning within a way of thinking where the deed is the paradigm of meaning.

The originary cosmos can divide itself spontaneously (thus demonstrating the immanence of a certain generative principle, for example procreation), but, more often, it resists all attempts to break its unity. This resistance thereby provides proof of the superiority of the force that finally trumps it—hence guaranteeing the existence of the differentiated world. For example, in a famous Maori myth, Tane (the personification of the tree) manages to separate Rangi (Sky) and Papa (Earth) by pushing with his feet against the former and with his head against the latter (Schrempp 1992: 58). Or, in the even more famous Hesiodic myth, Cronus castrates Uranus (Sky) to detach him from Gaia (Earth). The stronger the originary unity, the stronger the motif of dismemberment—especially when unity is represented by a single body rather than two united bodies. Thus, in the Babylonian Enûma Elîsh, Marduk produces the fundamental divisions of the cosmos by cutting his female ancestor Tiamat, personification of the primordial Ocean, into pieces (Bottéro and Kramer 1989: 662–63). In Scandinavian cosmogony, the world was produced by cutting up the malformed body of the giant Ymir—imperfectly divided, like a premature fetus; in Vedic cosmogony it is Puruṣa, the originary Man, who is mutilated in order to produce not only the natural world, but also the social one. A final example: in the cosmogony of Mangaia the originary being (who lives at the bottom of the cosmic coconut) differentiates himself through self-mutilation. From the six pieces of flesh that he tears from himself are born, one by one, six sons, corresponding to an equal number of provinces of the cosmos (Gill 1876: 1011).14 In all these myths the idea of division is combined with that of sacrifice, that is with the idea that order has a price that must be paid with what is most precious: life.

If in Mangaia the motif of the primordial egg (or more precisely, the coconut) is combined with those of mutilation and generation, in a myth collected in Porapora and Mo’orea (Society Islands) it is associated with a cosmogonic process modeled on the birth of a bird. The

14. The theme of self-mutilation is combined with that of fishing for islands in a myth from Tongareva. The god Vatea tries in vain to fish for them until, tearing a piece of flesh from himself and using it as bait, he succeeds (Williamson 1933, I: 38).
myth narrates that the god Ta’aroa was formed inside an egg of multiple shells laid one over the other and that he remained closed in it for countless ages until, tired of his solitude, he broke the shells. One shell became the sky, the other the foundations of the earth, whose plants were born from the yellow and red feathers that Ta’aroa shook away from his body (Henry 1928: 336–68).

The cosmogonic process is sometimes modeled on verbal magic. An example universally noted is offered by the first chapter of the *Genesis*: “God said: ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light” (*Genesis* 1, 3). But here the magic word is also (and perhaps above all) a political word: the world obeys God as subjects obey their sovereign—and indeed the story of creation justifies His sovereignty (or rather that of His representatives, the priests of the second temple who drew up the myth) over the Israelites (cf. Burke 1970: 174–83, 186). The implicitly political character of the creation of order by means of the word is clear in the Babylonian poem *Enûma Elish*, where Marduk creates the order of the world not only by commanding the elements directly, but also and above all by commanding his subordinate gods to work for him. Cosmogenesis, therefore, takes the same form of political action (Bottéro and Kramer 1989: 488, 496, 655). Like a human sovereign, the divine sovereign acts on the world through the word—the word through which he elaborates a plan and through which he orders his divine and human subjects to realize it (ibid.: 638). Or rather, according to this particular cosmogonic story, men are created to substitute for the lesser gods in the work of supporting the superior gods, and, through these, of the cosmos that depends on them.

But the idea of a creation explicitly or implicitly modeled on sovereignty—where the sovereign’s job is essentially that of command—exists only where there exists the experience of the State. Much more widespread is an idea of creation modeled on artisanal, agricultural, and even predatory activities. An example can be found in *Genesis* itself, and in particular in its second chapter (*Genesis* 2, 5 ff.), which contains an account of creation very different from (and older than) the one of the first chapter. Here God, who is called Yahweh instead of Elohim as in the first chapter, creates the world not like a sovereign, with the word, but with his hands like an artisan (he molds

15. This idea is in turn derived from Babylonian cosmogony (Bottéro and Kramer 1969: 661) and from the so-called theology of Menfi (Knight 1985: 142).
Adam from the earth), a farmer (he plants the garden of Eden), and perhaps even a bonesetter (he creates Eve from Adam’s rib). Elsewhere, creation is modeled on fishing, as we have seen, but also on hunting and, above all, on war. Indeed, war, and more generally conflict, is one of the great cosmogonic motors. It is found again, for example, in Mesopotamian cosmogonies, in the Hesiodic cosmogony, in Indo-European and Polynesian cosmogonies, and even in the so-called naturalistic cosmogonies of the Presocratics.

Another fairly widespread cosmogonic procedure is procreation. In almost all cosmogonies there is a procreative aspect or stage. Cosmogony is then reduced to genealogy. The reason for this elective affinity between cosmogony and genealogy appears obvious. Procreation is the most elemental, intrinsic, and, at the same time, generalized form of creativity. If doing is the fundamental source of meaning, then that doing which is realized through sexuality has a quality that is immediately obvious. The entire cosmos is made, elementally, in the act of reproduction—which is not just replication, but creation, since the offspring is never identical to its parents. From here, the possibility of extending the genealogical-reproductive model to relations between species emerges. Genealogy thus acquires an evolutionary character: the simple generates the complex. But there is more. Genealogy resolves the opposition between the two principal forms of order. Since it is productive, the most elementary form of the relation between the parts of a whole (the sexualized couple) is realized in a series of replicas that are infinitely different from the couple itself. In sum, reducing the entire cosmos to genealogy is the most elementary and persuasive way to represent the unity of the world as the expression of a single order. Multiplicity is reduced to a unity that is resolved in the most fundamental form of intelligibility: succession. Cosmology is wholly translated into cosmogony, order as the synchronic relation of parts into order as temporal succession.

The total reduction of the cosmos to the genealogical principle is, however, a rare phenomenon, as cosmogonic thought tends to combine different principles. For the most part, genealogical cosmogonies have been neglected by scholars because they are seen as less interesting than those that contain the feats of gods and heroes.\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps the

\textsuperscript{16} Such is the case with the Sumerian texts which, unlike later texts in Akkadian (such as the \textit{Athrasis} and the \textit{Enûma Elish}) privilege procreation (and therefore
most complex and totalizing genealogical cosmogonies are found in Polynesia, the most grandiose example being the Hawaiian song conventionally entitled *Kumulipo* or “beginning in the dark.” This song situates humanity, and more precisely the royal Hawaiian lineage, at the final stage of a long series generated by the successive coupling of the principal species and other forms of being in an increasing order of complexity—so much so that one can speak of an evolutionist cosmogony.

Evolutionist cosmogonies do not, however, necessarily have a sexualized form (cf. Frazer 1967). In reality, we are talking about conceptual genealogies which move from the abstract and general to the concrete and particular, combining in a complex form ontological, epistemological, and orectic categories. Here, once again, Polynesia provides abundant and extraordinarily complex examples. One of the simplest examples, a text collected in Samoa, describes a process that begins with Nothing (Leai), from which emanates Fragrance (odor is something and nothing at the same time and as such appears frequently as an element of transition between nothing and being); from Fragrance is born Dust (more concrete than Fragrance, but equally undifferentiated), and from this is born the Perceivable (we now move on to an elementary cognitive category); then the Obtainable (the presupposition of every practice or action); then Earth, then High Rocks (contrast of the horizontal and the vertical); then Small Stones (mediation of the preceding contrast); then Mountains. At this point, the first “sexual” union takes place—between Mountains and Changeable Meeting-Place (that is, the antithesis between stability and instability). The result is a “daughter,” Piece of Dust, who marries her vegetal counterpart: Down of the Sugar Cane’s Flower. From their marriage three sons and a daughter, who appear to be the first human beings, are born (Turner 1884: 3).

The motifs and processes that I have taken into consideration are enough to suggest that mythic cosmogonies extend the fundamental experiences of the order of daily life to the entire world: the exper-

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18. Cf. Williamson (1933, I). This is a kind of example of the great chain of being idea (Lovejoy 1936), which evidently does not exist only in Western thought.
ence of one’s own body and those of other living beings (as in the case of reproduction), the experience of human and animal behavior (struggles and agonisms, the chick that emerges from the eggshell, the marine birds that dive into the sea and bring back sand or algae from the bottom), the experience of political organization (command) and ritual (sacrifice, magic). These experiences all have a fundamental structure in common: they are processes and actions, and so they are characterized by the succession in time of cause and effect. Their extension to the entire cosmos means precisely that the order of the universe is apprehended narratively and not synoptically or tabularly, that is, as cosmogony and not as cosmology.

The fact that cosmogonic myth utilizes daily experiences of causality does not, however, mean that it reproduces these exactly. Rather, its outcomes are often in conflict with those of experience exactly because, as we have seen, cosmogonic myth condenses, within the dimension of time, relations that are not themselves temporal. The contrast between before and after manifests and sustains conceptual, religious, moral, and even political structures. The sensible elements do not appear in myth as such, but rather inasmuch as they allow for the embodiment and symbolization of principles and relations. The order of myth—like that of art—exists therefore in a state of tension with experience: it never renounces it, but it never leaves it exactly as it is. This is demonstrated by a well-known text: the already cited cosmogonic story of the first chapter of the *Genesis* (1–2, 1–4).

**Structure and temporalization**

In this myth, the god called Elohim\(^\text{19}\) does not create the cosmos ex nihilo,\(^\text{20}\) but by differentiating a pre-existent unformed mass—“the waters”—on which he breathes a “powerful wind” (*Genesis* 1, 2–3). We are presented here with a well-known representation of the beginning of the cosmos: the primordial ocean surmounted by a sky that is not yet still (the “firmament”) but rather has the unstable form of the wind. The process of the division of this initial mass takes place over six days, divided into two periods of three days each. On the first day, light is separated from darkness, and thus day from night. On the

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19. Elohim is actually a plural form and seems for this reason to be a remnant of polytheism (Burke 1970: 204; cf. Knight 1985: 141).

20. The idea of creation ex nihilo appears much later, in the second century BC.
second day, Elohim, exactly like Marduk, separates water from water—that is, he creates a solid celestial vault (the firmament) between the water below and the water above (from which rain comes). The third day is characterized by two successive divisions: the separation of earth and water under the sky; and the separation of the earth from its products: vegetation. On the fourth day, the sun and the moon are created with the other stars “to separate day from night and serve as signs for feast-days and for the days and the years” (Genesis 1, 14–15). On the fifth day, the creatures of the water and those that fly beneath the vault of the sky are created. On the sixth day the terrestrial animals are created and finally man and woman.

The systematicity and symmetry of this narrative make the fact that it contains an absurdity stand out even more: light (with the contrast between day and night) is created on the first day, while its sources, the sun and the other stars, are created on the third. Furthermore, the vegetation, whose development depends, as all farmers know, on the sun, is created before the sun. Paradoxically, the myth that ought to justify the order of the world seems to contradict both itself and the very experience of the world. Is this an absurd myth, or one that exposes the absurdity of confusing the succession of before and after of myth with that of experience?

Leo Strauss (1981) and Edmund Leach (1969) have noted independently of one another that the six days of creation are really two parallel periods of three days. The clearest sign of this parallelism is that day and night are separated twice: on the first and the fourth days. In short, creation seems to have happened twice. Nevertheless, the parallelism of the two periods highlights a fundamental contrast that was brilliantly identified by Strauss. The separations created in the first three days are all static; those created in the last three are dynamic. In effect, in the first period, light is separated from darkness, the water above from the water below, the earth from the water, and vegetation from the earth. Once moved by God (that is, separated from one another), these things do not move again—rather, they must not move. During the second part of creation, on the contrary, the principle of separation is that of local motion (separation with respect

21. Strauss maintains that the third and sixth days are also structurally identical. The reason given is that the third and sixth days are the only ones which present double creations. But in reality, there is a double creation on the fifth day too (birds in the air and fish in the sea.)
to a place): stars move in the sky, animals and man move in their respective spaces.

The fundamental preoccupation of the myth is therefore that of organizing the fundamental phenomena of the cosmos on the basis of a hierarchical opposition between stasis and dynamism. In fact, as Strauss demonstrates, given that God is essentially movement in this story, the mobile is superior to the immobile. Furthermore, the more a being is mobile, or the less it is static, the closer it gets to God. Man, who is characterized by the maximum mobility, and therefore liberty, is created in the image of God. The stars—which move, but not freely, since they are constrained by their orbits—are inferior to animals. In their devaluation, which contrasts with the Greek and Babylonian overvaluation, Strauss sees an awareness of the risk that stars may compete with the single God. Static things are also hierarchized in relation to the privilege accorded to motion. Light and shadow are created first, since they are the most static realities, while vegetation, which is at the limit between static and dynamic, is created at the end of the static period of creation, and so just before the stars, which represent the inferior form of motion.

In short, a hierarchical structure is temporalized in myth: the static precedes the dynamic, and the relatively more static, or less dynamic, precedes the relatively less static, or more dynamic. Since it has a privileged position in consciousness, temporal succession possesses an obviousness that other kinds of succession do not: the latter are reduced to the former. But in this process of reduction of a hierarchical series to a temporal series, there necessarily emerge conflicts with experience, with the relations between cause and effect as they are perceived in the temporal flux of consciousness, where the sun precedes light because it is its cause. In the biblical myth, light instead precedes the sun, as that which is static precedes that which is dynamic in a hierarchy of progressively superior values.22 Analogously, vegetation, which does not move, or which moves less than the sun

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22. It should be noted that this is my explanation, not Strauss'. For Strauss, the creation of light is at the beginning of creation because light symbolizes separation. But in reality, god separates with the word, not with light. Light is not used to separate the water above from the water below, or the earth from the sea, or vegetation from the earth. My explanation seems to me to be more consonant with the contrast between static and dynamic specified by Strauss, which I have liberally refashioned here.
that nourishes it, must precede it in such a hierarchy, and, given that
this hierarchy is temporalized, precede it in time.

Myth therefore has a paradoxical character: since it is narrative, its
predominant form is temporal succession; but structures of equiva-
ience, implication or logical inclusion, and above all hierarchies of
values, which are not temporal, are also expressed in this form. It
would, however, be erroneous to deduce from this, in the way of
Leach and fundamentally even of Lévi-Strauss, that the temporal di-
mension is extrinsic to myth, because it is reducible to a communica-
tive fact: one thing has to be said after another; verbal communication
is necessarily linear. It seems to me, on the contrary, that many
mythic structures cannot be read indifferently in any and all direc-
tions. Cosmogonic myth, in particular, is firmly orientated, because it
is a movement from the simple to the complex, from the general to
the particular, and above all from that which is presupposed to that
which presupposes it. Precisely for this reason, it has an elective affi-
inity with temporal succession, which is the most orientated form of
experience. Just as the qualities of gold make it suitable to become the
general equivalent of value, without however being reducible to that
value, so the qualities of the temporal series make it suitable to be-
come the general equivalent for the logical relations of myth, without
however being confused with these. In other words, the temporal
form of myth is not irreducible; what is irreducible is the persuasive
power that it lends to the multiple forms that intersect in myth, as in
every other kind of poetic production.

Cosmology and society
What, finally, of the relationship between cosmogonic myth and that
part of experience that includes social and political life? As is well
known, the Durkheimian school maintained that social structure pro-
vides the model for thinking of the cosmos. The order of nature
would be modeled on that of society. This thesis was taken up by
Vernant (1969) in a justly famous essay. Vernant identifies mythic
cosmogonies with myths of sovereignty—that is, with the creation as it
is described in the \textit{Enûma Elish}, in \textit{Genesis}, or in Hesiod’s \textit{The-
ogony}. The world is not intrinsically, and therefore spontaneously,
ordered, but is, on the contrary, intrinsically chaotic. It must be or-
dered by a force which is external to it, by a god who dictates laws to
it, by a sovereign who commands it. For this reason, the diagnostic
characteristic of mythic cosmogonies, says Vernant (ibid.: 112), is the distinction between origin and order, between,

that which comes first from the temporal point of view and that which comes first from the point of view of power, between the principle that is chronologically at the origin of the world and the beginning that presides over its present order.

By contrast, in the naturalistic philosophy of the Ionian philosophers the same principle of order holds from the beginning to the end of the cosmos. Order, rather than chaos, is spontaneous. There is no ordering sovereign, and there is no difference between origin and order.

Mankind, the divine, and the world form a unified, homogenous universe, all on the same level; they are the parts or aspects of a single and same physis that puts the same forces into play everywhere, that manifests the same life-force. (ibid.: 101)

Furthermore, it is not, as in mythic cosmogonies, the beginning “that illuminates and transfigures the quotidien; it is the quotidian that renders the beginning intelligible by providing models for understanding how the world had been formed and ordered” (ibid.: 101).

According to Vernant, this contrast between cosmogonies corresponds to a contrast between political forms. Cosmogonies “of sovereignty” are the counterpart of a social order produced and personified by the king: the divine king in the cosmos corresponds to the human king in society. Naturalistic cosmogonies correspond to the impersonal order immanent in all the citizens of the democratic city-state. In short, social and cosmic order depends in one case on the dominion of one part over the rest; in the other case, on the equilibrium between the parts. Historically, this contrast between hierarchy and equality is found in Greece between the Mycenaean monarchy (in turn re-echoing Eastern models) and the isonomia of the classical period. Free Science in a free State: Vernant serves up in a Durkheimian sauce the foundation myth of the liberal West in its two dimensions—political and cognitive. It is not the first time that a beautiful theory has been spoiled by a few ugly facts. The ugly facts in this case are numerous. Just for starters, there is no synchronism between democratic reforms and the birth of naturalistic philosophy in
Greece. Also, the Ionian philosophers’ naturalistic cosmogonies are much less different from the myths of sovereignty than they appear to Vernant. In any case, it is arbitrary to identify these myths of sovereignty with mythic cosmogonies tout court. The latter are extremely varied and cannot be reduced to a single formula, as we have seen. Many of the characteristics that Vernant attributes to naturalistic philosophy are also found in types of mythic cosmogony that he does not take into consideration. Finally, and above all, if it is true that in Mesopotamia or ancient Greece sovereign cosmogony corresponded to a political life where the sovereign dominated, this correlation is not necessarily found in other parts of the world.

The two last points seem to me particularly important. I would like to illustrate both with a single example: that of the genealogical and more generally evolutionary cosmogonies. Their chief characteristic, as we have seen, is the continuity of principle from the beginning to

23. As is known, Cleisthenes’ democratic reform took place at the end of the sixth century, while the philosophy of Thales and Anaximander is situated in the first half of the same century. Furthermore, Cleisthenes’ reform was in Athens, while the Ionian philosophers lived in Miletus. In a subsequent essay, Vernant (1974, I: 215 ff) attempted to demonstrate that these temporal and local discrepancies have no importance, but his arguments are not, to me, totally convincing.

24. The very idea that the real world must be explained as the result of a process of differentiation from an originary “unlimited” apeiron is a presupposition that Anaximander derives from mythic cosmogonies, and that does not have any basis in Vernant’s “quotidian.” Furthermore, the unlimited is conceived as being intrinsically gifted with movement because alive. It is therefore equivalent to the sovereign gods of mythology; the only true difference is that it is depersonalized. Another mythic presupposition preserved by Anaximander is that this world will end and will return to the originary state of undifferentiation, which is the only state that is eternal. A new process of differentiation, followed in turn by another collapse into undifferentiation will then take place, and so on. Anaximander does not therefore totally abolish the difference between origin and order: the present is illuminated by the original and not just the original by the present. In this cosmos—as in those of other Presocratics—certain principles dominate. These are the principles of conflict, conquest, and compensation, which are found again in myths of creation, and the principle of generation by opposed elements which attract and combine the generation of parts of opposed elements, which are attracted to one another and combine with one another—a barely veiled transformation of the principle of sexual generation in cosmogonic genealogies (on all this, see Cornford 1971: 159, 201).

25. Not to mention that although the majority of Greeks lived in a city-state like the philosophers, they continued to believe in cosmogonies of sovereignty.
the end of the cosmogonic process. The distinction between origin and order which, according to Vernant, characterizes myth is therefore not found here. Order is immanent in the world, not the product of a sovereign creator. The point of departure is not even anthropomorphic, but is an entity that, like the Pō ("night/darkness") of the Hawaiian Kumulipo, is no less abstract than the "unlimited" Apeiron of Anaximander. As in the Ionian cosmologies, it is the present that illuminates the past, given that the interpretive principle of the cosmos is borrowed from the experience of sexual generation and the interconnection of individuals and forms. The difference between Ionian and Polynesian philosophers does not therefore lie in the idea of the immanence of order, but in the very manner of conceiving of order. The Ionians’ order is essentially spatial (and, according to Vernant, modeled on the space of the polis), that of the Polynesians is dynamic, realized in time. There is no intrinsic reason for preferring one to the other, nor for believing that one is more mythical than the other.

In any case, were Vernant’s theory true, the absence of a discontinuity of principle between origin and order in the Kumulipo and similar cosmogonies would have to be the ideological correlate of an isonomic social organization like that of the polis. In particular, these cosmogonies would have to be incompatible with kingship. On the contrary, the Kumulipo was produced in a Polynesian society characterized by the most developed form of sacred kingship, of which the Kumulipo is to the contrary one of the instruments of legitimation. More generally, the principle of social hierarchy is important in all Polynesian societies, whatever cosmogonic model they have elaborated.

How can one explain how in one case (Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece) human sovereignty is translated into a cosmogony centered on divine sovereignty, while in the other (Hawaii) this translation does not exist? Or, to put it better, why in one case do we have an analogic relation between the sovereign as the one who gives order to society and the sovereign as the one who gives order to the cosmos, while in the other case the relationship—or rather, the principal relationship—is metonymic (the human sovereign is at the terminal point of the cosmogonic process)? Naturally, it is possible to maintain that the question has been badly formulated, that, contrary to what Vernant’s Durkheimian thesis assumes, there is not necessarily a direct relation between cosmogony and political organization. But it seems more likely that a relation does exist, although one that is infinitely more
complex than what is supposed by the Durkheimian thesis. For example, it can be observed that genealogical ideology is extremely important in Polynesia because it justifies the king’s supreme hierarchy in society, or, as in Hawaii, in the aristocratic stratum. In such a case, the relation between king and society that is projected onto the Polynesian cosmos is not the relation of command, as in Mesopotamia, but the presupposition of command, that is genealogical “seniority.” There remains the fact that mythic cosmogony cannot be identified with myths of sovereignty, nor myths of sovereignty with the Babylonian or Mycenaean type, which are the only ones considered by Vernant. But above all it is clear that the idea of the immanence of order in the cosmos, which Vernant reserves for the “scientific” cosmology (in pectore) of the Greeks, is not necessarily related to the practice or ideal of isonomia. On the contrary, it can be inspired by hierarchy.

My conclusion is perhaps banal, but I hope at least to have argued it through: cosmogony’s relation to social experience is as complex as its relation to other forms of experience. The order constructed by myth is never the simple echo of a pre-existent order. On the contrary, perhaps it can be said that myth is order’s principal form of existence in so-called “traditional” societies. And, in the final reckoning, all societies are traditional.