

THOU AND IT (or, Thou art not It)

There is a fundamental difference between the world of the ancients and the world of modern man. Our rational and empirical society sees the phenomenal world as an impersonal ‘It’, in which all events are the consequence of (what we believe to be) constant and ubiquitous natural ‘laws’ acting on consistent and quantifiable material properties. For ancient (and also for primitive) man, the phenomenal world is ‘Thou’. The difference between these two perspectives can be compared to the relation between subject and object, or to the difference between the way in which I ‘know’ that the Earth is round and way in which I ‘know’ another living being. The distinction between ‘subject-object’ (the actor – and that upon which it acts) is, of course, the basis of all scientific thinking and our conviction that this is ‘reality’ is the essential prerequisite for scientific knowledge.

The way in which ancient and primitive man ‘knows’ the world is through the kind of empathetic understanding to which we refer when we say that “I know how you feel”, or that we ‘understand’ the fear, desire, or anger of another. ‘Thou’, has the unprecedented, unparalleled, and unpredictable character of an individual: a presence known only in so far as it reveals its qualities and its Will. In other words, ‘Thou art unique’. Moreover, ‘Thou’ is not merely contemplated or understood but is experienced directly and emotionally as part of a dynamic reciprocal relationship. Primitive man has only one mode of thought, one ‘kind’ of knowing, and therefore only one mode of expression – the personal. Primitive man projected human characteristics onto an inanimate world (anthropomorphism) because primitive man simply did not ‘see’ an inanimate world.

Primitive man ‘knew’ the world the way one ‘knows’ another living being: as ‘Thou’. Our ancestors interpreted nature and natural phenomena in terms of their own experience; accordingly, every event and every action was charged with meaning. Accordingly, the world appears to primitive man, neither inanimate nor impersonal, but resplendent with Life. In human, in beast and in plant, and in every other phenomenon with which he is confronted (the thunderclap, the sudden shadow, the unknown clearing in the wood, the stone which suddenly trips him while on a hunting trip) Life confronts him, not as an impersonal ‘It’ which acts in accordance with natural laws – but as ‘Thou’: as intent made manifest. In this confrontation, ‘Thou’ reveals its individuality, its qualities, and its will. ‘Thou’ is not contemplated in the abstract or with intellectual detachment; it is understood and ‘seen’ as Life confronting Life – involving us in a reciprocal relationship in which thoughts, no less than acts and feelings, are subordinated to this experience.

Known as *Mythopoeic thought*, this way of making sense of the world assumes that ‘things happen’ because Someone or Something *Wills* it. We smile indulgently at tales of so-called primitives who, frightened by a solar eclipse, throw spears at the monster who devours the Sun, but in times of stress, this new ‘rational’ mode of thought is readily overthrown, and we revert to our ancestors’ mode of relating to the world. (Think back to the last time you desperately wanted or needed something to happen – or not to happen; chances are that you tried to ‘make a deal’ with the powers-that-be.) This is how our ancestors dealt with the world: believing everything that happens is an expression of Will – and that, if offered the right inducement, ‘Thou’ canst be appeased.

Writing about the differences between modern and primitive societies (1933), C.G. Jung wrote:

It is our assumption, amounting to a positive conviction, that everything has causes which we call natural and which we at least suppose to be perceptible. Primitive man, on the other hand, assumes everything is brought about by invisible, arbitrary powers [...] he does not call it chance, but intention.

The way in which we imagine (IMAGInE) the world has a profound impact on the way we think – including what concepts are available to our mind – and which in turn, determines the range of explanations that are possible. It is only since the scientific revolution that we have learned to ‘see’ the physical world as an ‘It’ in which all actions are the result of impersonal, ubiquitous forces acting on material properties. Everything we ‘know’ is based on a conception of a world animated by an impersonal ‘It’ – and (usually) behave accordingly.