



## Review

## A narrative review of Greek myths as interpretative metaphors in educational research and evaluation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a series of Greek myths put forward as cultural narratives that could be used as metaphors or interpretative similes for explanatory and evaluative purposes in educational research and evaluation. These myths have been used in educational research literature, and most of them were found by carrying out an exhaustive search of that literature. In particular, the paper discusses Procrustes, referring to the use of arbitrary evaluative standards; the myth of Mentor, the embodiment of the researcher as facilitator/improver for new, inexperienced researchers; Prometheus, or the archetype of the self-sacrificing researcher; Periphetes, representing the evaluator who is cruel through incompetence; Sisyphus, symbolising the researcher's anxiousness to achieve his goals; and Ulysses, an archetype for qualitative research.

These myths are still absolutely relevant today, after more than 20 centuries, and can be used as powerful explicative frameworks of phenomena in the field of educational research and evaluation. By using myths to interpret educational phenomena, one reconnects contemporary qualitative educational enquiry with its ancient predecessor forms of meaning making.

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## 1. Sense of the Myth

Myths are used to tell a story or talk about a certain event or relevant person in the form of a metaphor. As such, they can be used to embody, examine and explain certain phenomena and characters. The myth is one of the enlightening phenomena with the greatest direct influence on the way in which humans think about their conscience, their history and the exegesis and hermeneutics of their seminal texts.

Greek myths are present in all sorts of societies and cultures around the world. They are a peculiar type of story invention, and their effectiveness lies, in great measure, in their ability to combine fun and learning, pleasure and doctrine. In European cultural tradition, Greek and Roman mythology, which has become classic mythology as a result of its representation in the arts, has shown tremendous vitality. These ancient fables have repeatedly shed their skins and changed their clothing, crossing over different cultures and mentalities, to become powerfully complex multi-faceted symbolic artefacts. Epistemologically, the use of myths has had both supporters and critics. The list of authors that follows outlines the main, well-defined stances in this regard. These are not haphazardly selected philosophers but relevant thinkers in this field. [Vico \(1978\)](#) was the first philosopher to discuss the relevance of the myth in “scienza nuova”. [Gadamer and Habermas](#), who studied the role of myths in depth, have opposing views, while [Cassirer](#) has a third, somewhere between the other two.

[Giambattista Vico<sup>1</sup> \(1978\)](#) claimed that mythology was the first culture. He even spoke of a Homeric model of a primitive, brutal culture which was replaced by Platonical-Aristotelian thinking. [Berlin \(1995\)](#), who has studied Vico’s thinking in great depth, speaks of the Homeric value of imagination versus thought.

One author who feels that myth is of philosophical relevance is [Gadamer \(1997, p. 27\)](#) who believes that myth has its own significance and credibility, and for that reason it is relevant and justifiable to research it. There is no gap between *mythos* and *logos*. The assumption of complete rationality is an illusion. [Gadamer](#) believes that there is no jump between *mythos* and *logos* as an epistemological progress, in which *mythos* is weak/soft knowledge and *logos* is strong/hard knowledge.

An intermediate stance is provided by [Cassirer](#), who criticises myth but also works with it and believes in its symbolic potential. [Cassirer](#) developed an earlier conception and theory of myth as provided by his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (1979)* and it is used and conceived in his *The Myth of the State (1982)* as a form of cultural consciousness which is constituted by specific symbolic processes. Nevertheless, [Cassirer](#) critiques the technological use of myth. In fact, as [Ikonen \(2011\)](#) shows using the antagonism between two classical myths, [Cassirer’s](#) critique of culture can be seen as an effort to find a middle path between *Lebensphilosophie* (Scylla) and the positivism of the Vienna Circle (Charybdis).

Many authors are openly critical of myth, questioning its meaning and functionality. Marxist, feminist, anti-racist and other critical theorists often condemn myths as a tactic to legitimise and secure consensus for dominant discourses ([Colley, 2002](#)). It is not always easy to differentiate between mythology and ideology. But the greatest criticism of the use of myths comes from [Habermas \(1984, pp. 96–131\)](#), specifically in his book *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In the chapter entitled *Some Characteristics of the Mythical and the Modern Ways of Understanding the World*, he describes myth as a fuzzy and backward form of thought. [Habermas](#) uses the premises of contemporary thought as found in structuralism and semantics to criticise myth as simply unclear, as having a poor demarcation between language and world. He rejects the ways in which even an isolated mythic world-view allows for critical conflict and ambiguity of interpretation, as almost any of the Greek myths attest. Further examples of [Habermas’](#) crucial criticisms of mythical worldviews are that they are marked by an insufficient differentiation among basic approach to the objective, social, and personal worlds; and the lack of reflexivity in worldviews that cannot be identified as cosmogonies or cultural traditions. [Habermas’](#) disapproval might be definitive, but the myth is still used nowadays in several forms and acceptations.

Obviously, these philosophical stances do not just have an informative purpose. Above all, they validate the contents of this narrative. So the authors openly declare that they support [Gadamer’s](#) view, discussing the traditional classic myth as well as its contemporary interpretation, stressing the need to interpret it in order to understand it rather than for the purposes of universalist argumentation, and even less so for a participative transforming action/praxis, which would make this paper quite pretentious.

In this sense, a great number of Greek or classical myths can be found in research literature: in medicine, psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy and many other disciplines and fields, especially psychoanalysis (think of the Oedipus complex, Electra

<sup>1</sup> The Gadamer vs. Habermas debate is a highly relevant war of paradigms in the realm of hermeneutics and provided fuel for a heated debate in Germany in the 1960s but is too complex to be discussed in this article. This should be left to other authors better equipped for the task ([Ricoeur, 1984](#)). This debate has become widespread in the epistemology and methodology of social sciences, education, and even liberation theology ([García-Guadarrama, 2006](#); [Hoyos, 2012](#)). However, [Habermas](#) may have had a predecessor in his denial that *mythos* is *logos*: a practically unknown researcher called [Wilhelm Nestle \(1940\)](#) who openly disputed it because myth would be irrationality, an error in reasoning or truth.

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