

COSMIC QUESTIONS

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When I was five, I remember asking my mother "If God made the world, who made God?" We were visiting my grandparents, so she directed me to my grandfather, a theologian who was vocationally constituted to answer such questions and generally acclaimed to have insight into mysterious topics. When I put it to him, he eyed me thoughtfully and then said, "Go ask your mother." My future of philosophic inquiry was sealed at that moment. I went on to such greats as "So where is the end of space, and do you fall off there?" I lost a few nights of sleep over that one since I had already set my heart on traveling to far distant places.

Scientists have learned a good deal about the universe in the last century. Cosmologist Brian Swimme, in teaching the scientific story of the universe, describes space itself as unfurling out of the Big Bang. My five-year old mind (still active in there) says "Unfurls into what?" My mature mind is slowly learning that there are not answers to some questions, only (as Proust put it) a new way of seeing and a slow polishing of the dispositions of the heart and mind. Something more must be satisfied than my diligent, hard-wired cerebrum.

As to this unfurling of space, time must arrive in the same way, for such unfurling requires space-for-sequence, which is time. Einstein's discovery of "space-time" requires verbs—like unfurling, expanding, seeing, measuring, traversing—and verbs require time. If nothing else, light is racing across space at the speed of...well...light. Which came first, the noun or the verb? This asks if there is anything still and absolute before even be-ing. That, after all, is also a verb, even without moving a muscle.

Time is what gathers and contains that constant motion of change and makes the unity of it in a thousand ways, from memory to language to art, to blood and genetics...; everything that holds creation still for us to live in, act in, work in, play in, love in; constant change, yet nothing flies apart. The earth is sailing through space, yet we lie quiet in our beds at night and dream. The redwoods in my yard, the emerald moss striped with sun... They are perfectly still. They are tableaux of serenity. Time has made them so, and that is a great mystery of creation that no philosophy, no prediction, no science will ever explain, yet

which we may know by simply being in it. Still and aware for a moment of the tree. The moss. The Sun. A Biblical line comes to mind –

Be still, and know that I am God.

What kind of a knowing is this? What "epistemology" as the philosophers would say. What is the basis of such knowing?

Self-centered creatures that we are, we assume that only we can know things. But I now think that epistemology – a process of knowing – can be applied to everything. Knowledge is a form of receptivity to what is around us that informs the subsequent phases of existence; i.e. the next moment. The rabbit that was almost eaten by the fox in this moment, has a knowledge that will save her in the next. The most primitive living creatures were learning and responding to an environment. Delicate flagellae probing the air, the water, asking questions. Gesturing in response. Down, down through time. But what about stones? Air? Rivers?

The ancient Chinese classic, *I Ching*, says that the trigram images – water, mountain, earth, heaven, thunder, wind, lake – washed and honed each other and brought forth the entire manifest world. "All things under heaven." That interaction was a form of knowledge that laid out a pattern, and such patterns are the very stuff of advanced human knowledge, from mathematics to music to microbiology. Lao Tzu said that behind the myriad patterns was an invisible pattern, a "great image." We find it in his description of the Sage: "To him who holds in his hands the Great Image (of the invisible Tao), the whole world repairs. Men resort to him, and receive no hurt, but (find) rest, peace, and the feeling of ease." This is why Bishop Berkeley could argue that the world is held in the human mind beholding it, and when the human looks away, it is still held in the mind of God. It is held in *something* – that knowledge which briefly resides in the nature of each existent thing. Knowledge of heat and cold, night and day, the contour of soil and water. Knowledge of the way the Dow Jones works or corporate law or the sound of parallel fifths in music. Knowing the secrets of soil and yeast and spices, woods and winds.

I don't think we should be arguing about whether there is or isn't God, like searching out the proper price of avocados. We should be accepting the challenge of our time to expand ourselves to embrace the largest, deepest knowing and the most aware and reverent form of presence in and relationship to the Whole. To

its great mystery. What is the knowledge that holds the galaxies apart – even though they occasionally collide to release staggering new energies – and shapes the particularity of things, honing them into ever more intricate and complex forms? What is it that we can know if we gather this all in stillness?

And if we're searching for the largest, most comprehensive knowledge that informs stones and galaxies as well as humans, then we should also be searching for the largest most comprehensive love. For a while, maybe we need to drop the nouns and consider rather the verbs and adverbs. There is the danger that our nouns may be extractions from things that are too small and don't fully embrace. (Now there's a verb for you.) We get lost in the illusion that coins are value, rather than *having* value, which we ourselves have bestowed upon them. Have a look at the deutschmark after World War II or the fluctuation of currencies all over the world.

We should regularly ask ourselves, remind ourselves, *where the value comes from*. In the end it comes from us, but where do *we* get it from? Now there is a question about both love *and* epistemology. What we value has to do with love. *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*. We spend money on the things we love. (What we love, we put a price on commensurate with that.) And it also has to do with knowledge. Knowledge of how things work, a conscious receptivity and responsiveness, inform our values to advance our existence. Ecology. Economics. Epistemology. Etc. But what was there before the ecologists and the economists, the epistemologists and the et ceterae? If the universe is, say, 15 billion years old and 15 billion years wide (i.e. it would take that many light years for the first flare of light to reach us), then economists and ecologists and epistemologists and all of us are not even a blip on the radar scope of time, or so much as the smallest spark, seen from the outer reaches of space. An amazing and rather humbling thought.

Yet it is also true that we can throw our hearts and minds into the vast enterprise of life on the planet, oiling and spinning the wheels of our particular knowings, to create beautiful or terrible things that will expand through time and space far beyond each of us.

Where does the value come from?

Not from our nouns.

Not from our coins.

Not from our individual bank accounts.

But we're not just some aside or afterthought, a backwater of creation, whether our lamps shine in deep space or not. Whether our money is good anywhere in the Andromeda galaxy or not.

How can it be so?

Because everything has unfurled from the central point in the First Light. Divine Light or Big Bang Light. (*There's a noun that could be updated.*)

A scientific word for this is cosmogenesis; a new noun to describe a really big verb: that the universe, unfurling out of that burst of light, has a certain uniformity of principle. If you chew a piece of bubble gum and blow a huge bubble, the inside is the same throughout. You didn't add bits and pieces of gum to make it bigger, you've just created space inside it that has spread uniformly so that your bubble is perfectly round! A new sense of time has been created too: how long will your bubble last?

We can talk about bubbles, cosmogenesis, the Big Bang, and an expanding universe. We can say with Gerard Manley Hopkins (whom I love for the richness of his verbs)--

*THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Such rich language! Yet even nouns and verbs, marvelous glyphs of much (not all) of the world's language and knowledge, have their origin in silence. Dark, like the place where seed and embryo take shape. Quiet, like the dawn into which the first bird lifts its song. What is it in the stillness before that ignites such singing from tiny, fragile throats in a chorus of celebration?

Something in me says— Let the multiplicity of the world be what it is. We do not have to answer all of the questions for our knowing to be complete. It is not necessary always to be "right" to "walk the red path in a *wakan*, (whole, sacred) way" as the Sioux pray, or to "walk in beauty" as the Navajo pray. There is a danger that we may lose these in our race to know more, do more, and prove to others that we are right and they are wrong.

In the end, the words too are merely coins.

Where does the value come from?

If my philosopher grandfather were alive, my five-year-old mind would want to put the question to him. But I know what his answer would be: "Go and ask your mother."