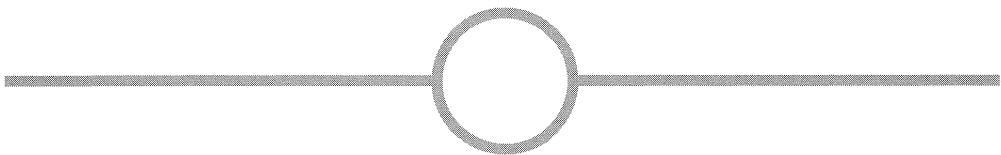


# MAPS OF MEANING



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The Architecture of Belief



JORDAN B. PETERSON

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# CONTENTS

PREFACE	Descensus ad Inferos	xi
1	Maps of Experience: Object and Meaning	1
2	Maps of Meaning: Three Levels of Analysis	19
	<i>Normal and Revolutionary Life: Two Prosaic Stories</i>	20
	<i>Normal Life</i>	23
	<i>Revolutionary Life</i>	29
	<i>Neuropsychological Function: The Nature of the Mind</i>	32
	<i>The Valence of Things</i>	32
	<i>Unexplored Territory: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology</i>	41
	<i>Exploration: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology</i>	48
	<i>Explored Territory: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology</i>	61
	<i>Mythological Representation: The Constituent Elements of Experience</i>	89
	<i>Introduction</i>	91
	<i>The Enuma elish: A Comprehensive Exemplar of Narrative Categorization</i>	108
	<i>The Dragon of Primordial Chaos</i>	131
	<i>The Great Mothers: Images of the Unknown, or Unexplored Territory</i>	148
	<i>The Divine Son: Images of the Knower, the Exploratory Process</i>	176
	<i>The Great Father: Images of the Know, or Explored Territory</i>	187
3	Apprenticeship and Enculturation: Adoption of a Shared Map	216
4	The Appearance of Anomaly: Challenge to the Shared Map	233
	<i>Introduction: The Paradigmatic Structure of the Known</i>	234
	<i>Particular Forms of Anomaly</i>	245
	<i>The Strange</i>	246
	<i>The Stranger</i>	249
	<i>The Strange Idea</i>	251
	<i>The Revolutionary Hero</i>	271
	<i>The Rise of Self-Reference, and the Permanent Contamination of Anomaly with Death</i>	283
5	The Hostile Brothers: Archetypes of Response to the Unknown	307
	<i>Introduction: The Hero and the Adversary</i>	308
	<i>The Adversary: Emergence, Development and Representation</i>	311
	<i>The Adversary in Action: Voluntary Degradation of the Map of Meaning</i>	324
	<i>The Adversary in Action: A Twentieth Century Allegory</i>	342
	<i>Heroic Adaptation: Voluntary Reconstruction of the Map of Meaning</i>	368
	<i>The Creative Illness and the Hero</i>	370

<i>The Alchemical Procedure and the Philosopher's Stone</i>	400
<i>Introductory Note</i>	400
<i>The "Material World" as Archaic "Locus of the Unknown"</i>	401
<i>Episodic Representation in Medieval Christendom</i>	411
<i>The Prima Materia</i>	424
<i>The King of Order</i>	428
<i>The Queen of Chaos</i>	429
<i>The Peregrination</i>	432
<i>The Conjunction</i>	439
<i>Conclusion: The Divinity of Interest</i>	446
<i>Introduction</i>	447
<i>The Divinity of Interest</i>	456

Notes	471
References	503
Permissions	513
Index	515

## FIGURES



1	The Domain and Constituent Elements of the Known	15
2	The Metamythological Cycle of the Way	17
3	Normal Life	28
4	Revolutionary Adaptation	31
5	The Ambivalent Nature of Novelty	44
6	Emergence of “Normal Novelty” in the Course of Goal-Directed Behavior	45
7	Emergence of “Revolutionary Novelty” in the Course of Goal-Directed Behavior	47
8	The Motor and Sensory Units of the Brain	49
9	The Regeneration of Stability from the Domain of Chaos	56
10	The Motor Homunculus	63
11	The Twin Cerebral Hemispheres and Their Functions	68
12	The Multiple Structure of Memory	74
13	Abstraction of Wisdom, and the Relationship of Such Abstraction to Memory	80
14	Conceptual Transformation of the Means/Ends Relationship from Static to Dynamic	84
15	Bounded Revolution	86
16	Nested Stories, Processes of Generation, and Multiple Memory Systems	89
17	The Constituent Elements of Experience	106
18	The Positive Constituent Elements of Experience, Personified	107
19	The Birth of the World of Gods	112
20	The “Death” of Apsu, and the (Re)Emergence of Tiamat as Threat	116
21	“World” of Gods: Hierarchical Organization	120
22	The Enuma elish in Schematic Representation	124
23	The Battle Between Osiris and Seth in the Domain of Order	129

24	The Involuntary Descent and Disintegration of Osiris	130
25	The Birth and Return of Horus, Divine Son of Order and Chaos	131
26	Voluntary Encounter with the Underworld	132
27	Ascent, and Reintegration of the Father	133
28	The Constituent Elements of Experience as Personality, Territory and Process	136
29	The Uroboros—Precosmogonic Dragon of Chaos	141
30	The Birth of the World Parents	145
31	The Constituent Elements of the World, in Dynamic Relationship	146
32	Novelty, the Great Mother, as Daughter of the Uroboros	155
33	The Spontaneous Personification of Unexplored Territory	158
34	Unexplored Territory as Destructive Mother	162
35	Unexplored Territory as Creative Mother	168
36	The “Heavenly Genealogy” of the Destructive and Creative Mothers	170
37	The Exploratory Hero as Son of the Heavenly Mother	182
38	The Metamythology of the Way, Revisited	183
39	Castle, Hero, Serpent and Virgin: St. George and the Dragon	184
40	The Process of Exploration and Update, as the Meta-Goal of Existence	186
41	Order, the Great Father, as Son of the Uroboros	208
42	Explored Territory as Orderly, Protective Father	209
43	Explored Territory as Tyrannical Father	212
44	The “Heavenly Genealogy” of the Tyrannical and Protective Fathers	213
45	The Exploratory Hero as Son of the Great Father	214
46	The “Death” and “Rebirth” of the Adolescent Initiate	224
47	The Paradigmatic Structure of the Known	242
48	The Known: Nested Groups and Individuals	243
49	The Fragmentary Representation of “Procedure and Custom” in Image and Word	252
50	The “Dual Death” of the Revolutionary Hero	273
51	The Crucified Redeemer as Dragon of Chaos and Transformation	280
52	The Socially Destructive and Redemptive “Journey” of the Revolutionary Hero	281



# FIGURES

ix

53	The (Voluntary) Descent of the Buddha	293
54	The World-Tree as Bridge Between “Heaven” and “Hell”	298
55	The World-Tree and the Constituent Elements of Experience	299
56	Genesis and Descent	306
57	The Devil as Aerial Spirit and Ungodly Intellect	315
58	The Vicious Circle of the Adversary	330
59	The Constituent Elements of Existence, Reprise	338
60	The Emergence of Christ from Group Identity and Chaos	386
61	World-Tree of Death and Redemption	399
62	The Alchemical Opus as “Normal Story”	423
63	The Alchemical Opus as “Revolutionary Story”	425
64	The Wolf as Prima Materia, Devouring the Dead King	434
65	Dragon of Chaos as “Birthplace” of Christ and the Lapis	438
66	The Alchemical Opus as Myth of Redemption	446
67	The Restitution of [Christ] the Mystic Apple to the Tree of Knowledge	462
68	The Eternal Return of the Bodhisatva	464


**I will utter things which have been kept  
secret from the foundation of the world.**

**(Matthew 13:35)**

## Preface

# DESCENSUS AD INFEROS

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Something we cannot see protects us from something we do not understand. The thing we cannot see is culture, in its intrapsychic or internal manifestation. The thing we do not understand is the chaos that gave rise to culture. If the structure of culture is disrupted, unwittingly, chaos returns. We will do anything—anything—to defend ourselves against that return.

“The very fact that a general problem has gripped and assimilated the whole of a person is a guarantee that the speaker has really experienced it, and perhaps gained something from his sufferings. He will then reflect the problem for us in his personal life and thereby show us a truth.”<sup>1</sup>

I was raised under the protective auspices, so to speak, of the Christian church. This does not mean that my family was explicitly religious. I attended conservative Protestant services during childhood with my mother, but she was not a dogmatic or authoritarian believer, and we never discussed religious issues at home. My father appeared essentially agnostic, at least in the traditional sense. He refused to even set foot in a church, except during weddings and funerals. Nonetheless, the historical remnants of Christian morality permeated our household, conditioning our expectations and interpersonal responses, in the most intimate of manners. When I grew up, after all, most people still attended church; furthermore, all the rules and expectations that made up middle-class society were Judeo-Christian in nature. Even the increasing number of those who could not tolerate formal ritual and belief still implicitly accepted—still acted out—the rules that made up the Christian game.

When I was twelve or so my mother enrolled me in confirmation classes, which served as introduction to adult membership in the church. I did not like attending. I did not like the attitude of my overtly religious classmates (who were few in number) and did not desire their lack of social standing. I did not like the school-like atmosphere of the confirmation classes. More importantly, however, I could not swallow what I was being taught. I asked the minister, at one point, how he reconciled the story of Genesis with the creation theories of modern science. He had not undertaken such a reconciliation; furthermore, he seemed more convinced, in his heart, of the evolutionary viewpoint. I was looking for an excuse to leave, anyway, and that was the last straw. Religion was for the ignorant, weak and superstitious. I stopped attending church and joined the modern world.

Although I had grown up in a Christian environment—and had a successful and happy childhood, in at least partial consequence—I was more than willing to throw aside the structure that had fostered me. No one really opposed my rebellious efforts, either, in church or at home—in part because those who were deeply religious (or who might have wanted to be) had no intellectually acceptable counter-arguments at their disposal. After all, many of the basic tenets of Christian belief were incomprehensible, if not clearly absurd. The virgin birth was an impossibility; likewise, the notion that someone could rise from the dead.

Did my act of rebellion precipitate a familial or a social crisis? No. My actions were so predictable, in a sense, that they upset no one, with the exception of my mother (and even she was soon resigned to the inevitable). The other members of the church—my “community”—had become absolutely habituated to the increasingly more frequent act of defection, and did not even notice.

Did my act of rebellion upset me, personally? Only in a manner I was not able to perceive, until many years later. I developed a premature concern with large-scale political and social issues, at about the same time I quit attending church. Why were some countries, some people, rich, happy and successful, while others were doomed to misery? Why were the forces of NATO and the Soviet Union continually at each other’s throats? How was it possible for people to act the way the Nazis had during World War II? Underlying these specific considerations was a broader, but at the time ill-conceptualized question: how did evil—particularly group-fostered evil—come to play its role in the world?

I abandoned the traditions that supported me, at about the same time I left childhood. This meant that I had no broader socially constructed “philosophy” at hand to aid my understanding as I became aware of the existential problems that accompany maturity. The final consequences of that lack took years to become fully manifest. In the meantime, however, my nascent concern with questions of moral justice found immediate resolution. I started working as a volunteer for a mildly socialist political party, and adopted the party line.

Economic injustice was at the root of all evil, as far as I was concerned. Such injustice could be rectified, as a consequence of the rearrangement of social organizations. I could play a part in that admirable revolution, carrying out my ideological beliefs. Doubt vanished; my role was clear. Looking back, I am amazed at how stereotypical my actions—reactions—really were. I could not rationally accept the premises of religion as I understood them. I

turned, in consequence, to dreams of political utopia, and personal power. The same ideological trap caught millions of others, in recent centuries.

When I was seventeen I left the town I grew up in. I moved nearby and attended a small college, which offered the first two years of undergraduate education. I involved myself there in university politics—which were more or less left wing at that time—and was elected to the college board of governors. The board was composed of politically and ideologically conservative people: lawyers, doctors, and businessmen. They were all well (or at least practically) educated, pragmatic, confident, outspoken; they had all accomplished something worthwhile and difficult. I could not help but admire them, even though I did not share their political stance. I found the fact of my admiration unsettling.

I had attended several left-wing party congresses, as a student politician and active party worker. I hoped to emulate the socialist leaders. The left had a long and honorable history in Canada, and attracted some truly competent and caring people. However, I could not generate much respect for the numerous low-level party activists I encountered at these meetings. They seemed to live to complain. They had no career, frequently, and no family, no completed education—nothing but ideology. They were peevish, irritable, and little, in every sense of the word. I was faced, in consequence, with the mirror image of the problem I encountered on the college board: I did *not* admire many of the individuals who believed the same things I did. This additional complication furthered my existential confusion.

My college roommate, an insightful cynic, expressed skepticism regarding my ideological beliefs. He told me that the world could not be completely encapsulated within the boundaries of socialist philosophy. I had more or less come to this conclusion on my own, but had not admitted so much in words. Soon afterward, however, I read George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*. This book finally undermined me—not only my socialist ideology, but my faith in ideological stances themselves. In the famous essay concluding that book (written for—and much to the dismay of—the British Left Book Club) Orwell described the great flaw of socialism, and the reason for its frequent failure to attract and maintain democratic power (at least in Britain). Orwell said, essentially, that socialists did not really like the poor. They merely hated the rich.<sup>2</sup> His idea struck home instantly. Socialist ideology served to mask resentment and hatred, bred by failure. Many of the party activists I had encountered were using the ideals of social justice to rationalize their pursuit of personal revenge.

Whose fault was it that I was poor or uneducated and unadmired? Obviously, the fault of the rich, well-schooled and respected. How convenient, then, that the demands of revenge and abstract justice dovetailed! It was only right to obtain recompense from those more fortunate than me.

Of course, my socialist colleagues and I weren't out to hurt anyone. Quite the reverse. We were out to improve things—but we were going to start with other people. I came to see the temptation in this logic, the obvious flaw, the danger—but could also see that it did not exclusively characterize socialism. Anyone who was out to change the world by changing others was to be regarded with suspicion. The temptations of such a position were too great to be resisted.

It was not *socialist* ideology that posed the problem, then, but ideology as such. Ideology divided the world up simplistically into those who thought and acted properly, and those who did not. Ideology enabled the believer to hide from his own unpleasant and inadmissible fantasies and wishes. Such realizations upset my beliefs (even my faith in beliefs), and the plans I had formulated as a consequence of these beliefs. I could no longer tell who was good and who was bad, so to speak—so I no longer knew whom to support, or whom to fight. This state of affairs proved very troublesome, pragmatically as well as philosophically. I wanted to become a corporate lawyer—had written the Law School Admissions Test, had taken two years of appropriate preliminary courses. I wanted to learn the ways of my enemies, and embark on a political career. This plan disintegrated. The world obviously did not need another lawyer, and I no longer believed that I knew enough to masquerade as a leader.

I became simultaneously disenchanted with the study of political science, my erstwhile major. I had adopted that discipline so I could learn more about the structure of human beliefs (and for the practical, career-oriented reasons described previously). It remained very interesting to me when I was at junior college, where I was introduced to the history of political philosophy. When I moved to the main campus at the University of Alberta, however, my interest disappeared. I was taught that people were motivated by rational forces; that human beliefs and actions were determined by economic pressures. This did not seem sufficient explanation. I could not believe (and still do not) that commodities—“natural resources,” for example—had intrinsic and self-evident value. In the absence of such value, the worth of things had to be socially or culturally (or even individually) determined. This act of determination appeared to me *moral*—appeared to me to be a consequence of the moral philosophy adopted by the society, culture or person in question. What people valued, economically, merely reflected what they believed to be important. This meant that real motivation had to lie in the domain of value, of morality. The political scientists I studied with did not see this, or did not think it was relevant.

My religious convictions, ill-formed to begin with, disappeared when I was very young. My confidence in socialism (that is, in political utopia) vanished when I realized that the world was not merely a place of economics. My faith in ideology departed, when I began to see that ideological identification itself posed a profound and mysterious problem. I could not accept the theoretical explanations my chosen field of study had to offer, and no longer had any practical reasons to continue in my original direction. I finished my three-year bachelor's degree, and left university. All my beliefs—which had lent order to the chaos of my existence, at least temporarily—had proved illusory; I could no longer see the sense in things. I was cast adrift; I did not know what to do or what to think.

But what of others? Was there evidence anywhere that the problems I now faced had been solved, by anyone, in any acceptable manner? The customary behavior and attitudes of my friends and family members offered no solution. The people I knew well were no more resolutely goal-directed or satisfied than I was. Their beliefs and modes of being seemed merely to disguise frequent doubt and profound disquietude. More disturbingly, on the more gener-

PREFACE: DESCENSUS AD INFEROS

xv

al plane, something truly insane was taking place. The great societies of the world were feverishly constructing a nuclear machine, with unimaginably destructive capabilities. Someone or something was making terrible plans. Why? Theoretically normal and well-adapted people were going about their business prosaically, as if nothing were the matter. Why weren't they disturbed? Weren't they paying attention? Wasn't I?

My concern with the general social and political insanity and evil of the world—sublimated by temporary infatuation with utopian socialism and political machination—returned with a vengeance. The mysterious fact of the Cold War increasingly occupied the forefront of my consciousness. How could things have come to such a point?

History is just a madhouse  
it's turned over all the stones  
and its very careful reading  
leaves you little that's unknown

I couldn't understand the nuclear race: what could possibly be worth risking annihilation—not merely of the present, but of the past and the future? *What could possibly justify the threat of total destruction?*

Bereft of solutions, I had at least been granted the gift of a problem.

I returned to university and began to study psychology. I visited a maximum security prison on the outskirts of Edmonton, under the supervision of an eccentric adjunct professor at the University of Alberta. His primary job was the psychological care of convicts. The prison was full of murderers, rapists and armed robbers. I ended up in the gym, near the weight room, on my first reconnaissance. I was wearing a long wool cape, *circa* 1890, which I had bought in Portugal, and a pair of tall leather boots. The psychologist who was accompanying me disappeared, unexpectedly, and left me alone. Soon I was surrounded by unfamiliar men, some of whom were extremely large and tough-looking. One in particular stands out in my memory. He was exceptionally muscular, and tattooed over his bare chest. He had a vicious scar running from his collarbone to his midsection. Maybe he had survived open-heart surgery. Or maybe it was an ax wound. The injury would have killed a lesser man, anyway—someone like me.

Some of the prisoners, who weren't dressed particularly well, offered to trade their clothes for mine. This did not strike me as a great bargain, but I wasn't sure how to refuse. Fate rescued me, in the form of a short, skinny, bearded man. He said that the psychologist had sent him, and he asked me to accompany him. He was only one person, and many others (much larger) currently surrounded me and my cape. So I took him at his word. He led me outside the gym doors, and into the prison yard, talking quietly but reasonably about something innocuous (I don't recall what) all the while. I kept glancing back hopefully at the open doors behind us as we got further and further away. Finally my supervisor appeared, and motioned me back. We left the bearded prisoner, and went to a private office. The

psychologist told me that the harmless-appearing little man who had escorted me out of the gym had murdered two policemen after he had forced them to dig their own graves. One of the policemen had little children and had begged for his life on their behalf while he was digging—at least according to the murderer's own testimony.

This really shocked me.

I had read about this sort of event, of course—but it had never been made *real* for me. I had never met someone even tangentially affected by something like this, and had certainly not encountered anyone who had actually done something so terrible. How could the man I had talked to—who was so apparently normal (and so seemingly inconsequential)—have done such an awful thing?

Some of the courses I was attending at this time were taught in large lecture theaters, where the students were seated in descending rows, row after row. In one of these courses—*Introduction to Clinical Psychology*, appropriately enough—I experienced a recurrent compulsion. I would take my seat behind some unwitting individual and listen to the professor speak. At some point during the lecture, I would unfailingly feel the urge to stab the point of my pen into the neck of the person in front of me. This impulse was not overwhelming—luckily—but it was powerful enough to disturb me. What sort of terrible person would have an impulse like that? Not me. I had never been aggressive. I had been smaller and younger than my classmates for most of my life.

I went back to the prison, a month or so after my first visit. During my absence, two prisoners had attacked a third, a suspected informer. They held or tied him down and pulverized one of his legs with a lead pipe. I was taken aback, once again, but this time I tried something different. I tried to imagine, *really imagine*, what I would have to be like to do such a thing. I concentrated on this task for days and days—and experienced a frightening revelation. The truly appalling aspect of such atrocity did not lie in its impossibility or remoteness, as I had naively assumed, but in its *ease*. I was not much different from the violent prisoners—not *qualitatively* different. I could do what they could do (although I hadn't).

This discovery truly upset me. I was not who I thought I was. Surprisingly, however, the desire to stab someone with my pen disappeared. In retrospect, I would say that the behavioral urge had manifested itself in explicit knowledge—had been translated from emotion and image to concrete realization—and had no further “reason” to exist. The “impulse” had only occurred, because of the question I was attempting to answer: “How can men do terrible things to one another?” I meant *other* men, of course—*bad men*—but I had still asked the question. There was no reason for me to assume that I would receive a predictable or personally meaningless answer.

At the same time, something odd was happening to my ability to converse. I had always enjoyed engaging in arguments, regardless of topic. I regarded them as a sort of game (not that this is in any way unique). Suddenly, however, I couldn't talk—more accurately, I couldn't *stand listening to myself talk*. I started to hear a “voice” inside my head, commenting on my opinions. Every time I said something, it said something—something critical. The voice employed a standard refrain, delivered in a somewhat bored and matter-of-fact tone:



You don't believe that.  
That isn't true.  
You don't believe that.  
That isn't true.

The “voice” applied such comments to almost every phrase I spoke.

I couldn't understand what to make of this. I knew the source of the commentary was part of me, but this knowledge only increased my confusion. *Which* part, precisely, *was* me—the *talking part* or *the criticizing part*? If it was the talking part, then what was the criticizing part? If it was the criticizing part—well, then: how could virtually everything I said be untrue? In my ignorance and confusion, I decided to experiment. I tried only to say things that my internal reviewer would pass unchallenged. This meant that I really had to listen to what I was saying, that I spoke much less often, and that I would frequently stop, midway through a sentence, feel embarrassed, and reformulate my thoughts. I soon noticed that I felt much less agitated and more confident when I only said things that the “voice” did not object to. This came as a definite relief. My experiment had been a success; I was the criticizing part. Nonetheless, it took me a long time to reconcile myself to the idea that almost all my thoughts weren't real, weren't true—or, at least, weren't mine.

All the things I “believed” were things I thought sounded good, admirable, respectable, courageous. They weren't my things, however—I had stolen them. Most of them I had taken from books. Having “understood” them, abstractly, I presumed I had a right to them—presumed that I could adopt them, as if they were mine: presumed that they were *me*. My head was stuffed full of the ideas of others; stuffed full of arguments I could not logically refute. I did not know then that an irrefutable argument is not necessarily true, nor that the right to identify with certain ideas had to be earned.

I read something by Carl Jung, at about this time, that helped me understand what I was experiencing. It was Jung who formulated the concept of *persona*: the mask that “feigned individuality.”<sup>3</sup> Adoption of such a mask, according to Jung, allowed each of us—and those around us—to believe that we were authentic. Jung said:

When we analyse the persona we strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed to be individual is at bottom collective; in other words, that the persona was only a mask of the collective psyche. Fundamentally the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. He takes a name, earns a title, exercises a function, he is this or that. In a certain sense all this is real, yet in relation to the essential individuality of the person concerned it is only a secondary reality, a compromise formation, in making which others often have a greater share than he. The persona is a semblance, a two-dimensional reality, to give it a nickname.<sup>4</sup>

Despite my verbal facility, I was not real. I found this painful to admit.

I began to dream absolutely unbearable dreams. My dream life, up to this point, had been relatively uneventful, as far as I can remember; furthermore, I have never had a particularly

good visual imagination. Nonetheless, my dreams became so horrible and so emotionally gripping that I was often afraid to go to sleep. I dreamt dreams vivid as reality. I could not escape from them or ignore them. They circulated, in general, around a single theme: that of nuclear war, and total devastation—around the worst evils that I, or something in me, could imagine:

*My parents lived in a standard ranch-style house, in a middle-class neighborhood, in a small town in northern Alberta. I was sitting in the darkened basement of this house, in the family room, watching TV, with my cousin Diane, who was in truth—in waking life—the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. A newscaster suddenly interrupted the program. The television picture and sound distorted, and static filled the screen. My cousin stood up and went behind the TV to check the electrical cord. She touched it, and started convulsing and frothing at the mouth, frozen upright by intense current.*

*A brilliant flash of light from a small window flooded the basement. I rushed upstairs. There was nothing left of the ground floor of the house. It had been completely and cleanly sheared away, leaving only the floor, which now served the basement as a roof. Red and orange flames filled the sky, from horizon to horizon. Nothing was left as far as I could see, except skeletal black ruins sticking up here and there: no houses, no trees, no signs of other human beings or of any life whatsoever. The entire town and everything that surrounded it on the flat prairie had been completely obliterated.*

*It started to rain mud, heavily. The mud blotted out everything, and left the earth brown, wet, flat and dull, and the sky leaden, even gray. A few distraught and shell-shocked people started to gather together. They were carrying unlabeled and dented cans of food, which contained nothing but mush and vegetables. They stood in the mud looking exhausted and disheveled. Some dogs emerged, out from under the basement stairs, where they had inexplicably taken residence. They were standing upright, on their hind legs. They were thin, like greyhounds, and had pointed noses. They looked like creatures of ritual—like Anubis, from the Egyptian tombs. They were carrying plates in front of them, which contained pieces of seared meat. They wanted to trade the meat for the cans. I took a plate. In the center of it was a circular slab of flesh four inches in diameter and one inch thick, foully cooked, oily, with a marrow bone in the center of it. Where did it come from?*

*I had a terrible thought. I rushed downstairs to my cousin. The dogs had butchered her, and were offering the meat to the survivors of the disaster.*

I dreamed apocalyptic dreams of this intensity two or three times a week for a year or more, while I attended university classes and worked—as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on in my mind. Something I had no familiarity with was happening, however. I was being affected, simultaneously, by events on two “planes.” On the first plane were the normal, predictable, everyday occurrences that I shared with everybody else. On the second plane, however (unique to me, or so I thought) existed dreadful images and unbearably intense emotional states. This idiosyncratic, subjective world—which everyone normally treated as illusory—seemed to me at that time to lie somehow *behind* the world everyone knew and regarded as real. But what did *real* mean? The closer I looked, the less comprehensible things became. Where *was* the real? What was at the bottom of it all? I did not feel I could live without knowing.

My interest in the Cold War transformed itself into a true obsession. I thought about the

suicidal and murderous preparation of that war every minute of every day, from the moment I woke up until the second I went to bed. How could such a state of affairs come about? *Who was responsible?*

*I dreamed that I was running through a mall parking lot, trying to escape from something. I was running through the parked cars, opening one door, crawling across the front seat, opening the other, moving to the next. The doors on one car suddenly slammed shut. I was in the passenger seat. The car started to move by itself. A voice said harshly, "there is no way out of here." I was on a journey, going somewhere I did not want to go. I was not the driver.*

I became very depressed and anxious. I had vaguely suicidal thoughts, but mostly wished that everything would just go away. I wanted to lie down on my couch, and sink into it, literally, until only my nose was showing—like the snorkel of a diver above the surface of the water. I found my awareness of things unbearable.

I came home late one night from a college drinking party, self-disgusted and angry. I took a canvas board and some paints. I sketched a harsh, crude picture of a crucified Christ—glaring and demonic—with a cobra wrapped around his naked waist, like a belt. The picture disturbed me—struck me, despite my agnosticism, as sacrilegious. I did not know what it meant, however, or why I had painted it. Where in the world had it come from?<sup>5</sup> I hadn't paid any attention to religious ideas for years. I hid the painting under some old clothes in my closet and sat cross-legged on the floor. I put my head down. It became obvious to me at that moment that I had not developed any real understanding of myself or of others. Everything I had once believed about the nature of society and myself had proved false, the world had apparently gone insane, and something strange and frightening was happening in my head. James Joyce said, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."<sup>6</sup> For me, history literally *was* a nightmare. I wanted above all else at that moment to wake up and make my terrible dreams go away.

I have been trying ever since then to make sense of the human capacity, *my capacity*, for evil—particularly for those evils associated with belief. I started by trying to make sense of my dreams. I couldn't ignore them, after all. Perhaps they were trying to tell me something? I had nothing to lose by admitting the possibility. I read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and found it useful. Freud at least took the topic seriously—but I could not regard my nightmares as wish-fulfillments. Furthermore, they seemed more *religious* than sexual in nature. I knew, vaguely, that Jung had developed specialized knowledge of myth and religion, so I started through his writings. His thinking was granted little credence by the academics I knew, but they weren't particularly concerned with dreams. I couldn't help being concerned by mine. They were so intense I thought they might derange me. (What was the alternative? To believe that the terrors and pains they caused me were not *real*?)

Much of the time I could not understand what Jung was getting at. He was making a point I could not grasp, speaking a language I did not comprehend. Now and then, however, his statements struck home. He offered this observation, for example:

It must be admitted that the archetypal contents of the collective unconscious can often assume grotesque and horrible forms in dreams and fantasies, so that even the most hard-boiled rationalist is not immune from shattering nightmares and haunting fears.<sup>7</sup>

The second part of that statement certainly seemed applicable to me, although the first (“the archetypal contents of the collective unconscious”) remained mysterious and obscure. Still, this was promising. Jung at least recognized that the things that were happening to me *could happen*. Furthermore, he offered some hints as to their cause. So I kept reading. I soon came across the following hypothesis. Here was a potential solution to the problems I was facing—or at least the description of a place to look for such a solution:

The psychological elucidation of ... [dream and fantasy] images, which cannot be passed over in silence or blindly ignored, leads logically into the depths of religious phenomenology. The history of religion in its widest sense (including therefore mythology, folklore, and primitive psychology) is a treasure-house of archetypal forms from which the doctor can draw helpful parallels and enlightening comparisons for the purpose of calming and clarifying a consciousness that is all at sea. It is absolutely necessary to supply these fantastic images that rise up so strange and threatening before the mind's eye with some kind of context so as to make them more intelligible. Experience has shown that the best way to do this is by means of comparative mythological material.<sup>8</sup>

The study of “comparative mythological material” in fact made my horrible dreams disappear. The cure wrought by this study, however, was purchased at the price of complete and often painful transformation: what I believe about the world, now—and how I act, in consequence—is so much at variance with what I believed when I was younger that I might as well be a completely different person.

I discovered that beliefs make the world, in a very real way—that beliefs *are* the world, in a more than metaphysical sense. This discovery has not turned me into a moral relativist, however: quite the contrary. I have become convinced that the world-that-is-belief is orderly; that there are universal moral absolutes (although these are structured such that a diverse range of human opinion remains both possible and beneficial). I believe that individuals and societies who flout these absolutes—in ignorance or in willful opposition—are doomed to misery and eventual dissolution.

I learned that the meanings of the most profound substrata of belief systems can be rendered explicitly comprehensible, even to the skeptical rational thinker—and that, so rendered, can be experienced as fascinating, profound and necessary. I learned why people wage war—why the desire to maintain, protect and expand the domain of belief motivates even the most incomprehensible acts of group-fostered oppression and cruelty—and what might be done to ameliorate this tendency, despite its universality. I learned, finally, that the terrible aspect of life might actually be a necessary precondition for the existence of life—and that it is possible to regard that precondition, in consequence, as comprehensible and acceptable. I hope that I can bring those who read this book to the same conclusions, without demanding

any unreasonable “suspension of critical judgment”—excepting that necessary to initially encounter and consider the arguments I present. These can be summarized as follows:

The world can be validly construed as a forum for action, as well as a place of things. We describe the world as a place of things, using the formal methods of science. The techniques of narrative, however—myth, literature and drama—portray the world as a forum for action. The two forms of representation have been unnecessarily set at odds, because we have not yet formed a clear picture of their respective domains. The domain of the former is the objective world—what is, from the perspective of intersubjective perception. The domain of the latter is the world of value—what is and what should be, from the perspective of emotion and action.

The world as forum for action is composed, essentially, of three constituent elements, which tend to manifest themselves in typical patterns of metaphoric representation. First is unexplored territory—the Great Mother, nature, creative and destructive, source and final resting place of all determinate things. Second is explored territory—the Great Father, culture, protective and tyrannical, cumulative ancestral wisdom. Third is the process that mediates between unexplored and explored territory—the Divine Son, the archetypal individual, creative exploratory Word and vengeful adversary. We are adapted to this world of divine characters, much as to the objective world. The fact of this adaptation implies that the environment is in “reality” a forum for action, as well as a place of things.

Unprotected exposure to unexplored territory produces fear. The individual is protected from such fear as a consequence of ritual imitation of the Great Father—as a consequence of the adoption of group identity, which restricts the meaning of things, and confers predictability on social interactions. When identification with the group is made absolute, however—when everything has to be controlled, when the unknown is no longer allowed to exist—the creative exploratory process that updates the group can no longer manifest itself. This restriction of adaptive capacity dramatically increases the probability of social aggression.

Rejection of the unknown is tantamount to “identification with the devil,” the mythological counterpart and eternal adversary of the world-creating exploratory hero. Such rejection and identification is a consequence of Luciferian pride, which states: *all that I know is all that is necessary to know*. This pride is totalitarian assumption of omniscience—is adoption of God’s place by “reason”—is something that inevitably generates a state of personal and social being indistinguishable from hell. This hell develops because creative exploration—impossible, without (humble) acknowledgment of the unknown—constitutes the process that constructs and maintains the protective adaptive structure that gives life much of its acceptable meaning.

“Identification with the devil” amplifies the dangers inherent in group identification, which tends of its own accord towards pathological stultification. Loyalty to personal interest—subjective meaning—can serve as an antidote to the overwhelming temptation constantly posed by the possibility of denying anomaly. Personal interest—subjective meaning—reveals itself at the juncture of explored and unexplored territory, and is indicative of participation in the process that ensures continued healthy individual and societal adaptation.

Loyalty to personal interest is equivalent to identification with the archetypal hero—the

"savior"—who upholds his association with the creative Word in the face of death, and despite group pressure to conform. Identification with the hero serves to decrease the unbearable motivational valence of the unknown; furthermore, provides the individual with a standpoint that simultaneously transcends and maintains the group.

Similar summaries precede each chapter (and subchapter). Read as a unit, they comprise a complete but compressed picture of the book. These should be read first, after this preface. In this manner, the whole of the argument I am offering might come quickly to aid comprehension of the parts.

# 1

## MAPS OF EXPERIENCE

### Object and Meaning



**T**he world can be validly construed as forum for action, or as place of things.

The former manner of interpretation—more primordial, and less clearly understood—finds its expression in the arts or humanities, in ritual, drama, literature and mythology. The world as forum for action is a place of value, a place where all things have meaning. This meaning, which is shaped as a consequence of social interaction, is implication for action, or—at a higher level of analysis—implication for the configuration of the interpretive schema that produces or guides action.

The latter manner of interpretation—the world as place of things—finds its formal expression in the methods and theories of science. Science allows for increasingly precise determination of the consensually validatable properties of things, and for efficient utilization of precisely determined things as tools (once the direction such use is to take has been determined, through application of more fundamental narrative processes).

No complete world-picture can be generated without use of both modes of construal. The fact that one mode is generally set at odds with the other means only that the nature of their respective domains remains insufficiently discriminated. Adherents of the mythological worldview tend to regard the statements of their creeds as indistinguishable from empirical “fact,” even though such statements were generally formulated long before the notion of objective reality emerged. Those who, by contrast, accept the scientific perspective—who assume that it is, or might become, complete—forget that an impassable gulf currently divides what is from what should be.

We need to know four things:  
what there is,  
what to do about what there is,

that there is a difference between knowing *what there is*, and knowing *what to do about what there is*  
and what that difference is.

To explore something, to “discover what it is”—that means most importantly to discover its significance for motor output, within a particular social context, and only more particularly to determine its precise objective sensory or material nature. This is knowledge in the most basic of senses—and often constitutes sufficient knowledge.

Imagine that a baby girl, toddling around in the course of her initial tentative investigations, reaches up onto a countertop to touch a fragile and expensive glass sculpture. She observes its color, sees its shine, feels that it is smooth and cold and heavy to the touch. Suddenly her mother interferes, grasps her hand, tells her *not to ever touch* that object. The child has just learned a number of specifically consequential things about the sculpture—has identified its sensory properties, certainly. More importantly, however, she has determined that approached in the wrong manner, the sculpture is dangerous (at least in the presence of mother); has discovered as well that the sculpture is regarded more highly, in its present unaltered configuration, than the exploratory tendency—at least (once again) by mother. The baby girl has simultaneously encountered an object, from the empirical perspective, *and its socioculturally determined status*. The empirical object might be regarded as those sensory properties “intrinsic” to the object. The *status of the object*, by contrast, consists of its meaning—consists of its implication for behavior. Everything a child encounters has this dual nature, experienced by the child as part of a unified totality. Everything *is* something, and *means* something—and the distinction between essence and significance is not necessarily drawn.

The significance of something—specified in actuality as a consequence of exploratory activity undertaken in its vicinity—tends “naturally” to become assimilated to the object itself. The object, after all, is the proximal cause or the stimulus that “gives rise” to action conducted in its presence. For people operating naturally, like the child, what something signifies is more or less inextricably *part* of the thing, part of its magic. The magic is of course due to apprehension of the specific cultural and intrapsychic significance of the thing, and not to its objectively determinable sensory qualities. Everyone understands the child who says, for example, “I saw a scary man”; the child’s description is immediate and concrete, even though he or she has attributed to the object of perception a quality that is in fact context-dependent and subjective. It is difficult, after all, to realize the subjective nature of fear, and not to feel threat as part of the “real” world.

The automatic attribution of meaning to things—or the failure to distinguish between them initially—is a characteristic of narrative, of myth, not of scientific thought. Narrative accurately captures the nature of raw experience. Things *are* scary, people *are* irritating, events *are* promising, food *is* satisfying—at least in terms of our basic experience. The modern mind, which regards itself as having transcended the domain of the magical, is nonetheless still endlessly capable of “irrational” (read motivated) reactions. We fall under the spell of



experience whenever we attribute our frustration, aggression, devotion or lust to the person or situation that exists as the proximal “cause” of such agitation. We are not yet “objective,” even in our most clear-headed moments (and thank God for that). We become immediately immersed in a motion picture or a novel, and willingly suspend disbelief. We become impressed or terrified, despite ourselves, in the presence of a sufficiently powerful cultural figurehead (an intellectual idol, a sports superstar, a movie actor, a political leader, the pope, a famous beauty, even our superior at work)—in the presence, that is, of anyone who sufficiently embodies the oft-implicit values and ideals that protect us from disorder and lead us on. Like the medieval individual, we do not even need the person to generate such affect. The icon will suffice. We will pay vast sums of money for articles of clothing worn or personal items used or created by the famous and infamous of our time.<sup>9</sup>

The “natural,” pre-experimental, or mythical mind is in fact *primarily* concerned with meaning—which is essentially implication for action—and not with “objective” nature. The formal object, as conceptualized by modern scientifically oriented consciousness, might appear to those still possessed by the mythic imagination—if they could “see” it at all—as an irrelevant shell, as all that was left after everything intrinsically intriguing had been stripped away. For the pre-experimentalist, the thing is most truly the significance of its sensory properties, as they are experienced in subjective experience—in affect, or emotion. And, in truth—in real life—to know what something *is* still means to know two things about it: its *motivational relevance*, and the specific nature of its sensory qualities. The two forms of knowing are not identical; furthermore, experience and registration of the former necessarily precedes development of the latter. Something must have emotional impact before it will attract enough attention to be explored and mapped in accordance with its sensory properties. Those sensory properties—of prime import to the experimentalist or empiricist—are meaningful only insofar as they serve as cues for determining specific affective relevance or behavioral significance. We need to know what things *are* not to know what they are but to *keep track of what they mean*—to understand what they signify for our behavior.

It has taken centuries of firm discipline and intellectual training, religious, proto-scientific and scientific, to produce a mind capable of concentrating on phenomena that are not yet or are no longer immediately intrinsically gripping—to produce a mind that regards *real* as something separable from *relevant*. Alternatively, it might be suggested that all the myth has not yet vanished from science, devoted as it is to human progress, and that it is this nontrivial remainder that enables the scientist to retain undimmed enthusiasm while endlessly studying his fruitflies.

How, precisely, did people think, not so very long ago, before they were experimentalists? What were things before they were objective things? These are very difficult questions. The “things” that existed prior to the development of experimental science do not appear valid either as things *or* as the meaning of things to the modern mind. The question of the nature of the substance of *sol*—the sun—(to take a single example) occupied the minds of those who practiced the pre-experimental “science” of alchemy for many hundreds of years. We would no longer presume even that the sun has a uniform substance, unique to it, and would

certainly take exception to the properties attributed to this hypothetical element by the medieval alchemist, if we allowed its existence. Carl Jung, who spent much of the latter part of his life studying medieval thought patterns, characterized *sol*:

The sun signifies first of all gold, whose [alchemical] sign it shares. But just as the “philosophical” gold is not the “common” gold, so the sun is neither just the metallic gold nor the heavenly orb. Sometimes the sun is an active substance hidden in the gold and is extracted [alchemically] as the *tinctura rubea* (red tincture). Sometimes, as the heavenly body, it is the possessor of magically effective and transformative rays. As gold and a heavenly body it contains an active sulphur of a red colour, hot and dry. Because of this red sulphur the alchemical sun, like the corresponding gold, is red. As every alchemist knew, gold owes its red color to the admixture of Cu (copper), which he interpreted as Kypris (the Cyprian, Venus), mentioned in Greek alchemy as the transformative substance. Redness, heat, and dryness are the classical qualities of the Egyptian Set (Greek Typhon), the evil principle which, like the alchemical sulphur, is closely connected with the devil. And just as Typhon has his kingdom in the forbidden sea, so the sun, as *sol centralis*, has its sea, its “crude perceptible water,” and as *sol coelestis* its “subtle imperceptible water.” This sea water (*aqua pontica*) is extracted from sun and moon. . . .

The active sun-substance also has favourable effects. As the so-called “balsam” it drips from the sun and produces lemons, oranges, wine, and, in the mineral kingdom, gold.<sup>10</sup>

We can barely understand such a description, contaminated as it is by imaginative and mythological associations peculiar to the medieval mind. It is precisely this fantastical contamination, however, that renders the alchemical description worth examining—not from the perspective of the history of science, concerned with the examination of outdated objective ideas, but from the perspective of psychology, focused on the interpretation of subjective frames of reference.

“In it [the “Indian Ocean,” in this example] are images of heaven and earth, of summer, autumn, winter, and spring, male and female. If thou callest this spiritual, what thou doest is probable; if corporeal, thou sayest the truth; if heavenly, thou liest not; if earthly, thou hast well spoken.”<sup>11</sup> The alchemist could not separate his subjective ideas about the nature of things—that is, his *hypotheses*—from the things themselves. His hypotheses, in turn—products of his imagination—were derived from the unquestioned and unrecognized “explanatory” presuppositions that made up his culture. The medieval man lived, for example, in a universe that was *moral*—where everything, even ores and metals, strived above all for perfection.<sup>12</sup> Things, for the alchemical mind, were therefore characterized in large part by their *moral* nature—by their impact on what we would describe as affect, emotion or motivation; were therefore characterized by their *relevance* or *value* (which is impact on affect). Description of this relevance took narrative form, mythic form—as in the example drawn from Jung, where the sulphuric aspect of the sun’s substance is attributed negative, demonic characteristics. It was the great feat of science to strip *affect* from *perception*, so to speak, and to allow for the description of experiences purely in terms of their consensually apprehensible features. However, it is the case that the affects generated by experiences are *real*, as well.

The alchemists, whose conceptualizations intermingled affect with sense, dealt with affect as a matter of course (although they did not “know” it—not *explicitly*). We have removed the affect from the thing, and can therefore brilliantly manipulate the thing. We are still victims, however, of the uncomprehended emotions generated by—we would say, in the presence of—the thing. We have lost the mythic universe of the pre-experimental mind, or have at least ceased to further its development. That loss has left our increased technological power ever more dangerously at the mercy of our still unconscious systems of valuation.

Prior to the time of Descartes, Bacon and Newton, man lived in an animated, spiritual world, saturated with meaning, imbued with moral purpose. The nature of this purpose was revealed in the stories people told each other—stories about the structure of the cosmos and the place of man. But now we think empirically (at least we think we think empirically), and the spirits that once inhabited the universe have vanished. The forces released by the advent of the experiment have wreaked havoc within the mythic world. Jung states:

How totally different did the world appear to medieval man! For him the earth was eternally fixed and at rest in the center of the universe, encircled by the course of a sun that solicitously bestowed its warmth. Men were all children of God under the loving care of the Most High, who prepared them for eternal blessedness; and all knew exactly what they should do and how they should conduct themselves in order to rise from a corruptible world to an incorruptible and joyous existence. Such a life no longer seems real to us, even in our dreams. Natural science has long ago torn this lovely veil to shreds.<sup>13</sup>

Even if the medieval individual was not in all cases tenderly and completely enraptured by his religious beliefs (he was a great believer in hell, for example), he was certainly not plagued by the plethora of rational doubts and moral uncertainties that beset his modern counterpart. Religion for the pre-experimental mind was not so much a matter of faith as a matter of fact—which means that the prevailing religious viewpoint was not merely one compelling theory among many.

The capacity to maintain explicit belief in religious “fact,” however, has been severely undermined in the last few centuries—first in the West, and then everywhere else. A succession of great scientists and iconoclasts has demonstrated that the universe does not revolve around man, that our notion of separate status from and “superiority” to the animal has no empirical basis, and that there is no God in heaven (nor even a heaven, as far as the eye can see). In consequence, we no longer believe our own stories—no longer even believe that those stories served us well in the past. The objects of revolutionary scientific discovery—Galileo’s mountains on the lunar orb; Kepler’s elliptical planetary orbits—manifested themselves in apparent violation of mythic order, predicated as it was on the presumption of heavenly perfection. The new phenomena produced by the procedures of experimentalists could not *be*, could not exist, from the perspective defined by tradition. Furthermore—and more importantly—the new theories that arose to make sense of empirical reality posed a severe threat to the integrity of traditional models of reality, which had provided the world with determinate meaning. The mythological cosmos had man at its midpoint; the objective

universe was heliocentric at first, and less than that later. Man no longer occupies center stage. The world is, in consequence, a completely different place.

The mythological perspective has been overthrown by the empirical; or so it appears. This should mean that the morality predicated upon such myth should have disappeared, as well, as belief in comfortable illusion vanished. Friedrich Nietzsche made this point clearly, more than a hundred years ago:

When one gives up Christian belief [for example] one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality. . . . Christianity is a system, a consistently thought out and *complete* view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands. Christianity presupposes that man does not know, *cannot* know what is good for him and what evil: he believes in God, who alone knows. Christian morality is a command: its origin is transcendental; it is beyond all criticism, all right to criticize; it possesses truth only if God is truth—it stands or falls with the belief in God. If [modern Westerners] really do believe they know, of their own accord, “intuitively,” what is good and evil; if they consequently think they no longer have need of Christianity as a guarantee of morality; that is merely the *consequence* of the ascendancy of Christian evaluation and an expression of the *strength* and *depth* of this ascendancy: so that the origin of [modern] morality has been forgotten, so that the highly conditional nature of its right to exist is no longer felt.<sup>14</sup>

If the presuppositions of a theory have been invalidated, argues Nietzsche, then the theory has been invalidated. But in this case the “theory” survives. The fundamental tenets of the Judeo-Christian moral tradition continue to govern every aspect of the actual individual behavior and basic values of the typical Westerner—even if he is atheistic and well-educated, even if his abstract notions and utterances appear iconoclastic. He neither kills nor steals (or if he does, he hides his actions, even from his own awareness), and he tends, in theory, to treat his neighbor as himself. The principles that govern his society (and, increasingly, all others<sup>15</sup>) remain predicated on mythic notions of individual value—intrinsic right and responsibility—despite scientific evidence of causality and determinism in human motivation. Finally, in his mind—even when sporadically criminal—the victim of a crime still cries out to heaven for “justice,” and the conscious lawbreaker still *deserves* punishment for his or her actions.

Our systems of post-experimental thought and our systems of motivation and action therefore co-exist in paradoxical union. One is “up-to-date”; the other, archaic. One is scientific; the other, traditional, even superstitious. We have become atheistic in our description, but remain evidently religious—that is, *moral*—in our disposition. What we accept as true and how we act are no longer commensurate. We carry on as if our experience has meaning—as if our activities have transcendent value—but we are unable to justify this belief intellectually. We have become trapped by our own capacity for abstraction: it provides us with accurate descriptive information but also undermines our belief in the utility and meaning of existence. This problem has frequently been regarded as tragic (it seems to me, at

least, ridiculous)—and has been thoroughly explored in existential philosophy and literature. Nietzsche described this modern condition as the (inevitable and necessary) consequence of the “death of God”:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, “I seek God! I seek God!” As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter.

Why, did he get lost? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances. “Whither is God,” he cried. “I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continuously? Backward, side-ward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God’s decomposition? Gods too decompose.

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?”<sup>16</sup>

We find ourselves in an absurd and unfortunate situation—when our thoughts turn, involuntarily, to consideration of our situation. It seems impossible to believe that life is intrinsically, religiously meaningful. We continue to act and think “as if”—as if nothing fundamental has really changed. This does not change the fact that our integrity has vanished.

The great forces of empiricism and rationality and the great technique of the experiment have killed myth, and it cannot be resurrected—or so it seems. We still *act out* the precepts of our forebears, nonetheless, although we can no longer justify our actions. Our behavior is shaped (at least in the ideal) by the same mythic rules—*thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not covet*—that guided our ancestors for the thousands of years they lived without benefit of formal empirical thought. This means that those rules are so powerful—so necessary, at least—that they maintain their existence (and expand their domain) even in the presence of explicit theories that undermine their validity. That is a mystery. And here is another:

How is it that complex and admirable ancient civilizations could have developed and flourished, initially, if they were predicated upon nonsense? (If a culture survives, and grows, does that not indicate in some profound way that the ideas it is based upon are valid? If myths are mere superstitious proto-theories, why did they work? Why were they remembered? Our

great rationalist ideologies, after all—fascist, say, or communist—demonstrated their essential uselessness within the space of mere generations, despite their intellectually compelling nature. Traditional societies, predicated on religious notions, have survived—essentially unchanged, in some cases, for tens of thousands of years. How can this longevity be understood?) Is it actually sensible to argue that persistently successful traditions are based on ideas that are simply wrong, regardless of their utility?

Is it not more likely that we just do not know how it could be that traditional notions are *right*, given their *appearance* of extreme irrationality?

Is it not likely that this indicates modern philosophical ignorance, rather than ancestral philosophical error?

We have made the great mistake of assuming that the “world of spirit” described by those who preceded us was the modern “world of matter,” primitively conceptualized. This is not true—at least not in the simple manner we generally believe. The cosmos described by mythology was *not* the same place known to the practitioners of modern science—but that does not mean it was not *real*. We have not yet found God above, nor the devil below, because we do not yet understand where “above” and “below” might be found.

We do not know what our ancestors were talking about. This is not surprising, because they did not “know,” either (and it didn’t really matter to them that they did not know). Consider this archaic creation myth<sup>17</sup> from Sumer—the “birthplace of history”:

So far, no cosmogonic text properly speaking has been discovered, but some allusions permit us to reconstruct the decisive moments of creation, as the Sumerians conceived it. The goddess Nammu (whose name is written with the pictograph representing the primordial sea) is presented as “the mother who gave birth to the Sky and the Earth” and the “ancestress who brought forth all the gods.” The theme of the primordial waters, imagined as a totality at once cosmic and divine, is quite frequent in archaic cosmogonies. In this case too, the watery mass is identified with the original Mother, who, by parthenogenesis, gave birth to the first couple, the Sky (An) and the Earth (Ki), incarnating the male and female principles. This first couple was united, to the point of merging, in the *hieros gamos* [mystical marriage]. From their union was born En-lil, the god of the atmosphere. Another fragment informs us that the latter separated his parents. . . . The cosmogonic theme of the separation of sky and earth is also widely disseminated.<sup>18</sup>

This myth is typical of archaic descriptions of reality. What does it mean to say that the Sumerians believed that the world emerged from a “primordial sea,” which was the mother of all, and that the sky and the earth were separated by the act of a deity? We do not know. Our abysmal ignorance in this regard has not been matched, however, by a suitable caution. We appear to have made the presumption that stories such as these—myths—were equivalent in function and intent (but were inferior methodologically) to empirical or post-experimental description. It is this fundamentally absurd insistence that, above all, has destabilized the effect of religious tradition upon the organization of modern human moral reasoning

and behavior. The “world” of the Sumerians was not objective reality, as we presently construe it. It was simultaneously more and less—more, in that this “primitive” world contained phenomena that we do not consider part of “reality,” such as affect and meaning; less, in that the Sumerians could not describe (or conceive of) many of those things the processes of science have revealed to us.

Myth is *not* primitive proto-science. It is a qualitatively different phenomenon. Science might be considered “description of the world with regards to those aspects that are consensually apprehensible” or “specification of the most effective mode of reaching an end (given a defined end).” Myth can be more accurately regarded as “description of the world as it *signifies* (for *action*).” The mythic universe is a *place to act*, not a *place to perceive*. Myth describes things in terms of their unique or shared affective valence, their value, their motivational significance. The Sky (An) and the Earth (Ki) of the Sumerians are not the sky and earth of modern man, therefore; they are the Great Father and Mother of all things (including the thing—En-lil, who is actually a process—that in some sense gave rise to them).

We do not understand pre-experimental thinking, so we try to explain it in terms that we do understand—which means that we explain it away, define it as nonsense. After all, we think scientifically—so we believe—and we think we know what that means (since scientific thinking can in principle be defined). We are familiar with scientific thinking and value it highly—so we tend to presume that it is all there is to thinking (presume that all other “forms of thought” are approximations, at best, to the ideal of scientific thought). But this is not accurate. Thinking also and more fundamentally is *specification of value*, specification of implication for behavior. This means that *categorization*, with regards to value—determination (or even perception) of what constitutes a single thing, or class of things—is the act of *grouping together according to implication for behavior*.

The Sumerian category of Sky (An), for example, is a domain of phenomena with similar implications for behavioral output, or for affect; the same can be said for the category of Earth (Ki), *and all other mythic categories*. The fact that the “domain of the Sky” has implications for action—has motivational significance—makes it a *deity* (which is something that controls behavior, or at least that must be served). Comprehension of the fact that such a classification system actually has meaning necessitates learning to think differently (necessitates, as well, learning to think about thinking differently).

The Sumerians were concerned, above all, with how to act (were concerned with the value of things). Their descriptions of reality (to which we attribute the qualities of proto-science) in fact comprised their summary of the world as *phenomenon*—as *place to act*. They did not “know” this—not *explicitly*—any more than we do. But it was still true.

The empirical endeavor is devoted to objective description of *what is*—to determination of what it is about a given phenomena that can be consensually validated and described. The objects of this process may be those of the past, the present, or the future, and may be static or dynamic in nature: a good scientific theory allows for prediction and control of becoming (of “transformation”) as well as being. However, the “affect” that an encounter with an

“object” generates is not a part of what that object *is*, from this perspective, and therefore must be eliminated from further consideration (along with anything else subjective)—must be at least eliminated from definition as a *real aspect of the object*.

The painstaking empirical process of identification, communication and comparison has proved to be a strikingly effective means for specifying the nature of the relatively invariant features of the collectively apprehensible world. Unfortunately, this useful methodology cannot be applied to determination of *value*—to consideration of *what should be*, to specification of the direction that things *should* take (which means, to description of the future we should construct, as a consequence of our actions). Such acts of valuation necessarily constitute moral decisions. We can use information generated in consequence of the application of science to guide those decisions, but not to tell us if they are correct. We lack a process of verification, in the moral domain, that is as powerful or as universally acceptable as the experimental (empirical) method in the realm of description. This absence does not allow us to sidestep the problem. No functioning society or individual can avoid rendering moral judgment, regardless of what might be said or imagined about the necessity of such judgment. Action *presupposes* valuation, or its implicit or “unconscious” equivalent. To act is literally to manifest preference about one set of possibilities, contrasted with an infinite set of alternatives. If we wish to live, we must act. Acting, we value. Lacking omniscience, painfully, we must make decisions, in the absence of sufficient information. It is, traditionally speaking, our knowledge of good and evil, our moral sensibility, that allows us this ability. It is our mythological conventions, operating implicitly or explicitly, that guide our choices. But what are these conventions? How are we to understand *the fact of their existence*? How are we to understand *them*?

It was Nietzsche, once again, who put his finger on the modern problem, central to issues of valence or meaning: not, as before “how to act, from within the confines of a particular culture,” but “whether to believe that the question of how to act could even be reasonably asked, let alone answered”:

Just because our moral philosophers knew the facts of morality only very approximately in arbitrary extracts or in accidental epitomes—for example, as the morality of their environment, their class, their church, the spirit of their time, their climate and part of the world—just because they were poorly informed and not even very curious about different peoples, times, and past ages—they never laid eyes on the real problems of morality; for these emerge only when we compare many moralities. In all “science of morals” so far one thing was *lacking*, strange as it may sound: the problem of morality itself; what was lacking was any suspicion that there was something problematic here.<sup>19</sup>

This “problem of morality”—*is there anything moral, in any realistic general sense, and if so, how might it be comprehended?*—is a question that has now attained paramount importance. We have the technological power to do anything we want (certainly, anything destructive; potentially, anything creative); commingled with that power, however, is an equally profound existential uncertainty, shallowness and confusion. Our constant cross-cultural interchanges and



our capacity for critical reasoning have undermined our faith in the traditions of our forebears, perhaps for good reason. However, the individual cannot live without belief—without action and valuation—and science cannot provide that belief. We must nonetheless put our faith into something. Are the myths we have turned to since the rise of science more sophisticated, less dangerous, and more complete than those we rejected? The ideological structures that dominated social relations in the twentieth century appear no less absurd, on the face of it, than the older belief systems they supplanted; they lacked, in addition, any of the incomprehensible mystery that necessarily remains part of genuinely artistic and creative production. The fundamental propositions of fascism and communism were rational, logical, storable, comprehensible—and terribly wrong. No great ideological struggle presently tears at the soul of the world, but it is difficult to believe that we have outgrown our gullibility. The rise of the New Age movement in the West, for example—as compensation for the decline of traditional spirituality—provides sufficient evidence for our continued ability to swallow a camel, while straining at a gnat.

Could we do better? Is it possible to understand what might reasonably, even admirably, be believed, after understanding that we must believe? Our vast power makes self-control (and, perhaps, self-comprehension) a necessity—so we have the motivation, at least in principle. Furthermore, the time is auspicious. The third Christian millennium is dawning—at the end of an era when we have demonstrated, to the apparent satisfaction of everyone, that certain forms of social regulation just do not work (even when judged by their own criteria for success). We live in the aftermath of the great statist experiments of the twentieth century, after all, conducted as Nietzsche prophesied:

In the doctrine of socialism there is hidden, rather badly, a “will to negate life”; the human beings or races that think up such a doctrine must be bungled. Indeed, I should wish that a few great experiments might prove that in a socialist society life negates itself, cuts off its own roots. The earth is large enough and man still sufficiently unexhausted; hence such a practical instruction and *demonstratio ad absurdum* would not strike me as undesirable, even if it were gained and paid for with a tremendous expenditure of human lives.<sup>20</sup>

There appears to exist some “natural” or even—dare it be said?—some “absolute” constraints on the manner in which human beings may act as individuals and in society. Some moral presuppositions and theories are *wrong*; human nature is not infinitely malleable.

It has become more or less evident, for example, that pure, abstract rationality, ungrounded in tradition—the rationality that defined Soviet-style communism from inception to dissolution—appears absolutely unable to determine and make explicit just what it is that should guide individual and social behavior. Some systems do not work, even though they make abstract sense (even more sense than alternative, currently operative, incomprehensible, haphazardly evolved systems). Some patterns of interpersonal interaction—which constitute the state, insofar as it exists as a model for social behavior—do not produce the ends they are supposed to produce, cannot sustain themselves over time, and may even produce

contrary ends, devouring those who profess their value and enact them. Perhaps this is because planned, logical and intelligible systems fail to make allowance for the irrational, transcendent, incomprehensible and often ridiculous aspect of human character, as described by Dostoevsky:

Now I ask you: what can be expected of man since he is a being endowed with such strange qualities? Shower upon him every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface; give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and even then out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick. He would even risk his cakes and would deliberately desire the most fatal rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce into all this positive good sense his fatal fantastic element. It is just his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly that he will desire to retain, simply in order to prove to himself—as though that were so necessary—that men still are men and not the keys of a piano, which the laws of nature threaten to control so completely that soon one will be able to desire nothing but by the calendar.

And that is not all: even if man really were nothing but a piano-key, even if this were proved to him by natural science and mathematics, even then he would not become reasonable, but would purposely do something perverse out of simple ingratitude, simply to gain his point. And if he does not find means he will contrive destruction and chaos, will contrive sufferings of all sorts, only to gain his point! He will launch a curse upon the world, and as only man can curse (it is his privilege, the primary distinction between him and other animals), maybe by his curse alone he will attain his object—that is, convince himself that he is a man and not a piano-key! If you say that all this, too, can be calculated and tabulated, chaos and darkness and curses, so that the mere possibility of calculating it all beforehand would stop it all, and reason would reassert itself, then man would purposely go mad in order to be rid of reason and gain his point! I believe in it, I answer for it, for the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not a piano-key! It may be at the cost of his skin, it may be by cannibalism! And this being so, can one help being tempted to rejoice that it has not yet come off, and that desire still depends on something we don't know?<sup>21</sup>

We also presently possess in accessible and complete form the traditional wisdom of a large part of the human race—possess accurate description of the myths and rituals that contain and condition the implicit and explicit values of almost everyone who has ever lived. These myths are centrally and properly concerned with the nature of successful human existence. Careful comparative analysis of this great body of religious philosophy might allow us to provisionally determine the nature of essential human motivation and morality—if we were willing to admit our ignorance and take the risk. Accurate specification of underlying mythological commonalities might comprise the first developmental stage in the conscious evolution of a truly universal system of morality. The establishment of such a system, acceptable to empirical and religious minds alike, could prove of incalculable aid in the reduction of intrapsychic, interindividual and intergroup conflict. The grounding of such a compara-

tive analysis within a psychology (or even a neuropsychology) informed by strict empirical research might offer us the possibility of a form of convergent validation, and help us overcome the age-old problem of deriving the *ought* from the *is*; help us see how *what we must do* might be inextricably associated with *what it is that we are*.

Proper analysis of mythology, of the type proposed here, is not mere discussion of “historical” events enacted upon the world stage (as the traditionally religious might have it), and it is not mere investigation of primitive belief (as the traditionally scientific might presume). It is, instead, the examination, analysis and subsequent incorporation of an edifice of meaning, which contains within it hierarchical organization of experiential valence. The mythic imagination is concerned with the world in the manner of the phenomenologist, who seeks to discover the nature of subjective reality, instead of concerning himself with description of the objective world. Myth, and the drama that is part of myth, provide answers in image to the following question: “how can the current state of experience be conceptualized in abstraction, with regards to its *meaning*?” [which means its (subjective, biologically predicated, socially constructed) emotional relevance or motivational significance]. Meaning means implication for behavioral output; logically, therefore, myth presents information relevant to the most fundamental of moral problems: “*what should be?* (*what should be done?*)” The desirable future (the object of *what should be*) can be conceptualized only in relationship to the present, which serves at least as a necessary point of contrast and comparison. To get somewhere in the future presupposes being somewhere in the present; furthermore, the desirability of *the place traveled to* depends on the valence of the place vacated. The question of “*what should be?*” (what line should be traveled?) therefore has contained within it, so to speak, three subqueries, which might be formulated as follows:

- 1) *What is?* What is the nature (meaning, the *significance*) of the current state of experience?
- 2) *What should be?* To what (desirable, valuable) end should that state be moving?
- 3) *How should we therefore act?* What is the nature of the specific processes by which the present state might be transformed into that which is desired?

Active apprehension of the goal of behavior, conceptualized in relationship to the interpreted present, serves to constrain or provide determinate framework for the evaluation of ongoing events, which emerge as a consequence of current behavior. The goal is an imaginary state, consisting of “a place” of desirable motivation or affect—a state that only exists in fantasy, as something (potentially) preferable to the present. (Construction of the goal therefore means establishment of a theory about the ideal relative status of motivational states—about the *good*.) This imagined future constitutes a *vision of perfection*, so to speak, generated in the light of all current knowledge (at least under optimal conditions), to which specific and general aspects of ongoing experience are continually compared. This vision of perfection is the promised land, mythologically speaking—conceptualized as a spiritual domain (a psychological state), a political utopia (a state, literally speaking), or both, simultaneously.

We answer the question “*what should be?*” by formulating an image of the desired future.

We cannot conceive of that future, except in relationship to the (interpreted) present—and it is our interpretation of the emotional acceptability of the present that comprises our answer to the question “*what is?*” [“what is the nature (meaning, the *significance*) of the current state of experience?”].

We answer the question “*how then should we act?*” by determining the most efficient and self-consistent strategy, all things considered, for bringing the preferred future into being.

Our answers to these three fundamental questions—modified and constructed in the course of our social interactions—constitutes our knowledge, insofar as it has any behavioral relevance; constitutes our knowledge, from the mythological perspective. The structure of the mythic *known*—what is, what should be, and how to get from one to the other—is presented in *Figure 1: The Domain and Constituent Elements of the Known*.

The known is explored territory, a place of stability and familiarity; it is the “city of God,” as profanely realized. It finds metaphorical embodiment in myths and narratives describing the community, the kingdom or the state. Such myths and narratives guide our ability to understand the particular, bounded motivational significance of the present, experienced in relation to some identifiable desired future, and allow us to construct and interpret appropriate patterns of action, from within the confines of that schema. We all produce determinate models of what is, and what should be, and how to transform one into the other. We produce these models by balancing our own desires, as they find expression in fantasy and action, with those of the others—individuals, families and communities—that we habitually encounter. “How to act,” constitutes the most essential aspect of the social contract; the domain of the *known* is, therefore, the “territory” we inhabit with all those who share our implicit and explicit traditions and beliefs. Myths describe the existence of this “shared and determinate territory” as a fixed aspect of existence—which it is, as the fact of culture is an unchanging aspect of the human environment.

“Narratives of the known”—patriotic rituals, stories of ancestral heroes, myths and symbols of cultural or racial identity—describe established territory, weaving for us a web of meaning that, shared with others, eliminates the necessity of dispute over meaning. All those who know the rules, and accept them, can play the game—without fighting over the rules of the game. This makes for peace, stability, and potential prosperity—a good game. The good, however, is the enemy of the better; a more compelling game might always exist. Myth portrays what is known, and performs a function that if limited to that, might be regarded as paramount in importance. But myth also presents information that is far more profound—almost unutterably so, once (I would argue) properly understood. We all produce models of what is and what should be, and how to transform one into the other. We change our behavior, when the consequences of that behavior are not what we would like. But sometimes mere alteration in behavior is insufficient. We must change not only what we do, but what we think is important. This means reconsideration of the nature of the motivational significance of the present, and reconsideration of the ideal nature of the future. This is a radical, even revolutionary transformation, and it is a very complex process in its realization—but mythic thinking has represented the nature of such change in great and remarkable detail.

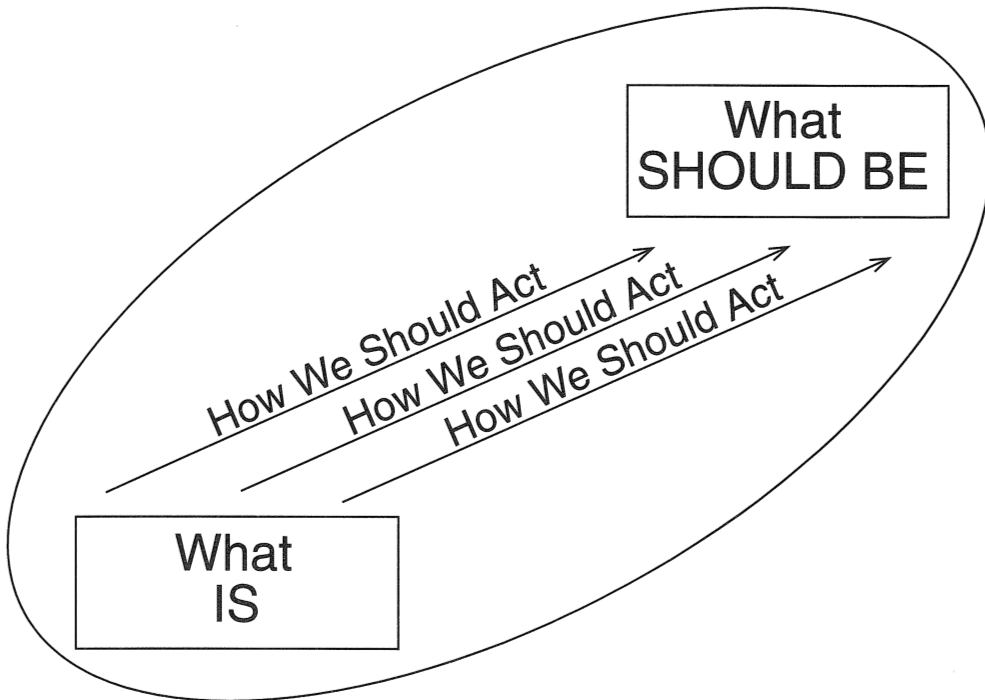


Figure 1: The Domain and Constituent Elements of the Known

The basic grammatical structure of transformational mythology, so to speak, appears most clearly revealed in the form of the “way” (as in the “American Way of Life”). The great literary critic Northrop Frye comments upon the idea of the way, as it manifests itself in literature and religious writing:

Following a narrative is closely connected with the central literary metaphor of the journey, where we have a person making the journey and the road, path, or direction taken, the simplest word for this being ‘way.’ Journey is a word connected with *jour* and *journee*, and metaphorical journeys, deriving as they mostly do from slower methods of getting around, usually have at their core the conception of the day’s journey, the amount of space we can cover under the cycle of the sun. By a very easy extension of metaphor we get the day’s cycle as a symbol for the whole of life. Thus in Housman’s poem “Reveille” (“Up, lad: when the journey’s over/ There’ll be time enough to sleep”) the awakening in the morning is a metaphor of continuing the journey of life, a journey ending in death. The prototype for the image is the Book of Ecclesiastes, which urges us to work while it is day, before the night comes when no man can work. . . .

The word “way” is a good example of the extent to which language is built up on a series of metaphorical analogies. The most common meaning of “way” in English is a method or manner of

procedure, but method and manner imply some sequential repetition, and the repetition brings us to the metaphorical kernel of a road or path. . . . In the Bible “way” normally translates the Hebrew *derek* and the Greek *hodos*, and throughout the Bible there is a strong emphasis on the contrast between a straight way that takes us to our destination and a divergent way that misleads or confuses. This metaphorical contrast haunts the whole of Christian literature: we start reading Dante’s *Commedia*, and the third line speaks of a lost or erased way: “Che la diritta *via* era smarrita.” Other religions have the same metaphor: Buddhism speaks of what is usually called in English an eightfold path. In Chinese Taoism the Tao is usually also rendered “way” by Arthur Waley and others, though I understand that the character representing the word is formed of radicals meaning something like “head-going.” The sacred book of Taoism, the *Tao te Ching*, begins by saying that the Tao that can be talked about is not the real Tao: in other words we are being warned to beware of the traps in metaphorical language, or, in a common Oriental phrase, of confusing the moon with the finger pointing at it. But as we read on we find that the Tao can, after all, be to some extent characterized: the way is specifically the “way of the valley,” the direction taken by humility, self-effacement, and the kind of relaxation, or non-action, that makes all action effective.<sup>22</sup>

The “way” is the path of life and its purpose.<sup>23</sup> More accurately, the content of the way is the specific path of life. The form of the way, its most fundamental aspect, is the apparently intrinsic or heritable possibility of positing or of being guided by a central idea. This apparently intrinsic form finds its expression in the tendency of each individual, generation after generation, to first ask and subsequently seek an answer to the question “what is the meaning of life?”

The central notion of the way underlies manifestation of four more specific myths, or classes of myths, and provides a more complete answer, in dramatic form, to the three questions posed previously [*what is the nature* (meaning, the significance) *of current being?*, *to what* (desirable) *end should that state be moving?* and, finally, *what are the processes by which the present state might be transformed into that which is desired?*] The four classes include:

- (1) myths describing a current or pre-existent stable state (sometimes a paradise, sometimes a tyranny);
- (2) myths describing the emergence of something anomalous, unexpected, threatening and promising into this initial state;
- (3) myths describing the dissolution of the pre-existent stable state into chaos, as a consequence of the anomalous or unexpected occurrence;
- (4) myths describing the regeneration of stability [paradise regained (or, tyranny regenerated)], from the chaotic mixture of dissolute previous experience and anomalous information.

The metamythology of the way, so to speak, describes the manner in which specific ideas (myths) about the present, the future, and the mode of transforming one into the other are initially constructed, and then reconstructed, in their entirety, when that becomes necessary.

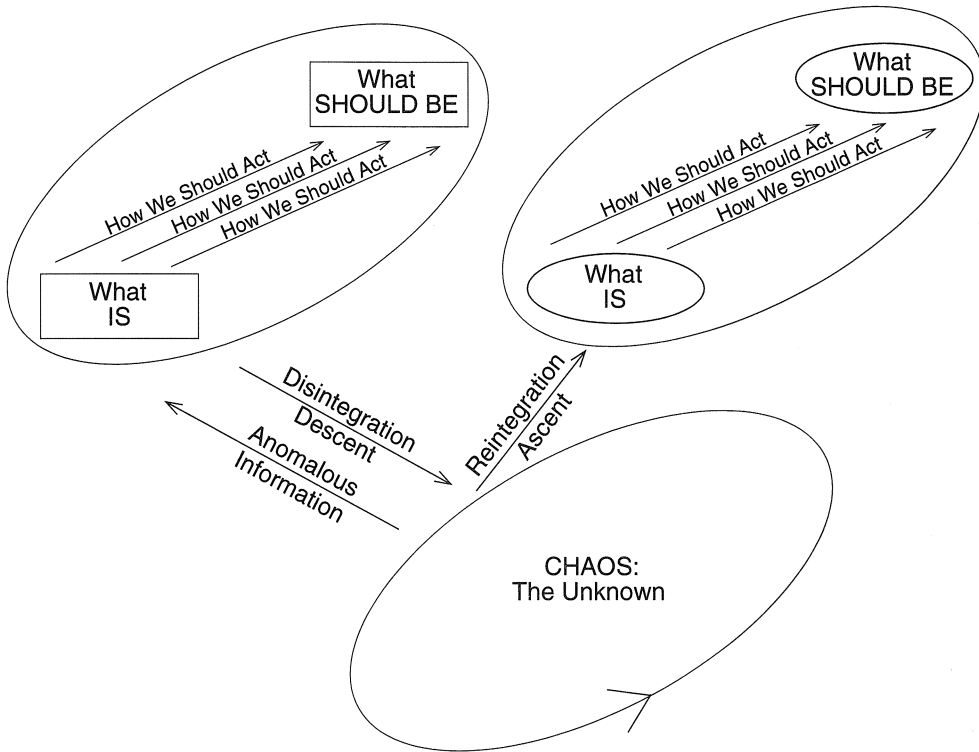


Figure 2: The Metamythological Cycle of the Way

The traditional Christian (and not just Christian) notion that man has fallen from an original “state of grace” into his current morally degenerate and emotionally unbearable condition—accompanied by a desire for the “return to Paradise”—constitutes a single example of this “metamyth.” Christian morality can therefore be reasonably regarded as the “plan of action” whose aim is re-establishment, or establishment, or attainment (sometimes in the “hereafter”) of the “kingdom of God,” the ideal future. The idea that man needs redemption—and that re-establishment of a long-lost Paradise might constitute such redemption—appear as common themes of mythology, among members of exceedingly diverse and long-separated human cultures.<sup>24</sup> This commonality appears because man, eternally self-conscious, suffers eternally from his existence, and constantly longs for respite.

*Figure 2: The Metamythological Cycle of the Way* schematically portrays the “circle” of the way, which “begins” and “ends” at the same point—with establishment of conditional, but determinate moral knowledge (belief). Belief is *disruptible*, because finite—which is to say that the infinite mystery surrounding human understanding may break into our provisional models of how to act at any time and point, and disrupt their structure. The manner

in which we act as children, for example, may be perfectly appropriate for the conditions of childhood; the processes of maturation change the conditions of existence, introducing anomaly where only certainty once stood, making necessary not only a change of plans, but reconceptualization of where those plans might lead, and what or who they refer to, in the present.

The known, our current story, protects us from the unknown, from *chaos*—which is to say, provides our experience with determinate and predictable structure. Chaos has a nature all of its own. That nature is experienced as *affective valence*, at first exposure, not as *objective propriety*. If something unknown or unpredictable occurs, while we are carrying out our motivated plans, we are first *surprised*. That surprise—which is a combination of apprehension and curiosity—comprises our *instinctive emotional response to the occurrence of something we did not desire*. The appearance of something unexpected is proof that we do not know how to act—by definition, as it is the production of what we want that we use as evidence for the integrity of our knowledge. If we are somewhere we don't know how to act, we are (probably) in trouble—we might learn something new, but we are still in trouble. When we are in trouble, we get scared. When we are in the domain of the known, so to speak, there is no reason for fear. Outside that domain, panic reigns. It is for this reason that we dislike having our plans disrupted, and cling to what we understand. This conservative strategy does not always work, however, because what we understand about the present is not necessarily sufficient to deal with the future. This means that we have to be able to modify what we understand, even though to do so is to risk our own undoing. The trick, of course, is to modify and yet to remain secure. This is not so simple. Too much modification brings chaos. Too little modification brings stagnation (and then, when the future we are unprepared for appears—chaos).

Involuntary exposure to chaos means accidental encounter with the forces that undermine the known world. The affective consequences of such encounter can be literally overwhelming. It is for this reason that individuals are highly motivated to avoid sudden manifestations of the unknown. And this is why individuals will go to almost any length to ensure that their protective cultural “stories” remain intact.