# The Cosmological Function

The first aspect of the Cosmological Function of myth seeks to give reasonable, rational explanations for the “why” of all things — the objects of the physical universe (how the Earth, Sun, Moon, stars, etc., came into being, and what their purposes are), the processes and functions of the objects of the physical universe (wind, rain, volcanoes, shooting stars), and of human beings (why we exist, what our purpose was/is, where we fit into the larger scheme of things). It is in this last aspect that we are “…always addressed to the transcendent mystery,”[[1]](#footnote-1) as Campbell put it. Through our encounters and experiences of the physical universe, we are to be kept mindful of our participation in a broader reality of which we form only a part, and of which we perceive only a minute fraction. It is this aspect of the Cosmological function that many technological societies have lost sight of; they see the universe as something of an adversary to be understood chiefly in connection with controlling or overcoming it.

The Greek word *kósmos* “order, form, arrangement” describes more than the physical universe; the cosmos *contains* the physical universe, but it is also the *context* in which physical reality is embedded. The cosmos, here, is the *metaphysical abstraction of the* *potentiality of existence*. It includes *not only that which has existed in the past, but all that exists in the present, and all which* *might possibly* *exist*, in any of various possible futures. It is transcendent. Thus we can also view the Cosmological Function as (in part) serving as a transitional bridge between the Mystical and the Sociological functions. This role of the Cosmological Function provides a backdrop and stage for the dramas of life, and provides a goad and motivator for the actions of living things in responding to the whimsical (and sometimes, it seems, malicious) changes in the universe over time.

In his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes:

It is not that the universe is random in an abstract mathematical sense. The … transformations of energy that occur in it might be predicted and explained well enough. *But natural processes do not take human desires into account*. They are deaf and blind to our needs, and thus they are random in contrast with the order we attempt to establish through our goals. A meteorite on a collision course with New York City might be obeying all the laws of the universe, but it would still be a damn nuisance. The virus that attacks the cells of a Mozart is only doing what comes naturally, even though it inflicts a grave loss on humankind. In the words of J. H. Holmes, "The universe is not hostile, nor yet is it friendly — it is simply indifferent.”[[2]](#footnote-2) [emphasis added]

This fact of human existence is often represented in mythology by the capricious behavior of nature or of the gods, as seen in the Greek story of the Judgement of Paris, wherein three goddesses (motivated by an act of the goddess of mischief) involve the young Paris, Prince of Troy, in judging a beauty contest between them. The result of his decision is the true inciting incident for the events of the Trojan War. This aspect of the Cosmological Function thus also encodes a common belief among earlier cultures that human beings had no *agency*, no power to decide nor direct their own destiny, but were entirely at the mercy of the caprice of the gods (nature).

This role of the function is also expressed mythologically through the metaphor of the creation of humans as mere drudges to provide benefits to the gods, as is depicted in the Sumerian myth of Atrahasis, in which human beings are created for the specific purpose of taking on the manual labor that the lower echelon of deities had decided was beneath their dignity.

The archetype associated with this broader role of the Cosmological Function is the **Father God**, in his role as **Usurper Creator**, (the **Creator God**), as exemplified in masculine-dominated creation/origin myths (e.g. South Asian, Northern European, and Middle Eastern cosmologies). These male-dominated creation myths serve to encode both the universal nature of the questions all cultures pose about the origins and nature of the universe, but also the fascinating variety of ways in which they answered those questions for themselves.

Here, also, is a correspondence between this function and the *architectural* creation/origin myths. The origins of the finer details of the physical universe (in most mythologies) involve the *agency* – the conscious, willful exercise of power – of a creator deity or deities (frequently, but not exclusively, male). These roles are often observed in the myths as having been usurped by Father God from the Primal Goddess (Zeus’ demotion and dominance of Gaea, for instance), and as such may encode the historicity of the shift of human society from the more egalitarian, itinerant hunter-gatherer model to the more materialistic, stratified societies brought about by agronomic activity and the establishment of villages and later cities, and thence to inherited territories, such as kingdoms, nation-states, and empires.

**The Cosmological Function: Culture and Tradition**

Tied to the **Father God** in his manifestation as **Moral Authoritarian** (The **King God**), the role of this aspect of the Cosmological Function of mythology is that of explaining and justifying *human institutions* (traditions, religious practices, social structures), as well as to perpetuate culture and society down through subsequent generations. In this, the Father God bestrides the transitional realm between the Cosmological Function and the Sociological Function. This aspect is also related to the translation of mystical awareness from spiritual experience to structured religious practice witnessed in the transition from earlier polytheistic pantheons to later monotheistic paradigms.

This aspect of the Cosmological Function is often embedded in the same male-dominated creation myths mentioned as above; the Father God, through the process of engendering and ordering creation, also decrees the eternal, inviolable *structure* in which creation is to be maintained, both by divine powers and mundane ones (i.e. religion and its priestly classes). The beliefs and practices of human society (according to this function of mythology) are decreed by the Father God; they are, therefore, sacrosanct and adamantine, and — if need be — enforceable or restorable by divine action (miraculous intervention in the manifest world). Thus, we see the transcendent Father God engaging with the physical world through punishments such as diseases and famines, sea monsters laying waste to whole cities, and world-wide floods of waters to eradicate recalcitrant human populations, and the list goes on. Often, as in Hindu mythology, the Father God, himself transcendent, must incarnate as a physical being in order to interact with manifest reality, leading to the concept of prophets, oracles, and messiahs. Individuals and groups which act in accord with the design and wishes of the Father God are rewarded with blessings and prosperity; those which transgress the limitations and strictures receive just punishment. The deity need not bestow rewards and punishments, itself, however; it may designate human agents to perform these mundane tasks in its name and under its authority.

1. *Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)