# The Mystical Function And The Primal Goddess

This function of mythology introduces us to (and reminds us of) the fact that there are things about existence, the universe, and life experience that are *transcendent*, not submissible to formal, scientific analysis; things which simply must be accepted as they are and recognized as having a significant impact on human experience.

The biologist J. B. S. Haldane wrote that, “Theuniverse is not only[stranger] than we imagine, it is[stranger] than we *can* imagine.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The fact that there are aspects of living experience which are not explicable via reason does not mean that those experiences are to be avoided nor dismissed — they are certainly not to be denied. Indeed, the very nature of “mythos” in contrast to “logos” is the assimilation of the wisdom of experience *disconnected* from reason and logic. Some things *just are*.

The **Primal Goddess** is the representative of this function because of her association with the mysteries of life and death. Her dichotomous nature as *both* mother-nurturer *and* implacable punisher reflects the inexplicable variety and vagaries of the natural world: the Earth provides food but also produces earthquakes and volcanoes. This contradiction was a mystery, certainly to early cultures, and it is not unknown even to contemporary societies, as reflected in the question: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Protology: Automatic Myths Of Origin

There also occurs a parallel between this function of mythology and *automatic* creation/origin myths, wherein the fundamental elements of creation either already exist or come into being without explanation (they are *automatically* part of the myth, and accepted as apodictic). Examples include Gaia in the Greek tradition[[3]](#footnote-3), arising from the primordial chaos — she does not cause her own creation (*sui creates*) — she just “happens” as a result of the inherent properties of the *ylem[[4]](#footnote-4)*; Tepeu and Gucumatz in the Mesoamerican tradition, pre-existing in a cosmic ocean (again, without an explained origin)[[5]](#footnote-5); the Great God Vishnu (*Mahavishnu*)[[6]](#footnote-6) in the Hindu tradition, who is interwoven throughout the fabric of the universe, but nevertheless contains it simultaneously. There are examples from every mythic tradition, no matter how ancient.

## The First Steps Away From Animism

The British historian and documentarian, Bettany Hughes, in the first episode (“When God Was A Girl”) of her three-part her televised series, *Divine Women* discusses the fact that, “If you look at the total number of human figures unearthed between now and around 30,000 BC, then the massive majority of them are of the female form”[[7]](#footnote-7), and goes on to propose that the earliest expressions of human spiritual awareness are evidenced first in abstracted feminine figurines and later in specifically goddess-depicting statues and carvings. Among the earliest such depictions she references is a carving of a woman who “… looks like she is both being penetrated and giving birth at the same time … and whoever made it obviously thought it was both important, and appropriate that a woman should be commemorated right at the heart of a prehistoric temple”[[8]](#footnote-8).

She posits that the mystery of the Earth giving rise to plants (humankind’s earliest source of nutrition) and of the females of all species giving birth (apparently miraculously) to live young were connected in the minds of Neolithic peoples. Reay Tannahill, in her 1980 book, *Sex In History*, also opines that “… homo sapiens, after more than 100,000 years of fully-fledged existence, may still have been unaware of the biological facts of life·when the·Neolithic Revolution began.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

These two examples give weight to the idea that early humans were unaware of the relationship between sexual intercourse and birth, and that they found the production of life to be a mysterious, even magical, event typical of their broader experience of the world as a place of unexplained and inexplicable objects and occurrences which must simply be accepted in-and-of themselves. As a species, we were primary *reactive*.

Thus, in Campbell’s words, the Mystical Function is that of “…opening the world to the dimension of mystery … [realizing] the mystery that underlies all forms,”[[10]](#footnote-10) and reminding us that there are aspects of human experience which science cannot explain (and which it often declines to investigate).

For example: Imagine you find yourself thinking of a friend or family member to whom you haven’t spoken in quite some time; your phone rings, and when you answer it, that self-same person is calling you.

Logos would call this event a *coincidence*; arguing that in an infinite universe, “uncanny” events are bound to happen from time-to-time. Logos-thinking declares that there is no demonstrable *causal connection* between you thinking of the person and them choosing that precise moment to place a call to you.

Carl Jung, working with Wolfgang Pauli, described such a happenstance as *synchronicity*; arguing that although there may be no demonstrable physical causal connection between the two events, *psychologically there seems to be a connection*, and this seeming causal connection impacts your *reaction* to the event, which then has an effect upon your immediate environment. Thus an event of synchronicity has an effect “… equal in rank to causality as a principle of explanation”[[11]](#footnote-11). It may be objectively insignificant, but it’s *subjective* significance is profound and not to be dismissed.

A fascinating sidenote here is that the word “coincidence” is Latin, meaning “happening at the same time”; whereas “synchronicity” is Greek, meaning … “happening at the same time.” The older language is Greek, and as stated earlier, the pre-Socratic Greeks saw mythos as the primary means of acquiring knowledge. Thus, the words, themselves, encode the realization that humans were having experiences and assigning meaning to them (the Mystical Function) long before we began to cogitate upon their causes (the Cosmological Function).

## The Growth Of The Goddess

As human consciousness expanded, men and women began to ask “why?”, “… the question that marked humanity's final, irrevocable divergence from the apes,”[[12]](#footnote-12) and to utilize the rudimentary answers they found in their first, halting steps to have some sense of agency and empowerment to consciously direct the paths of their lives. This marks the transition of the female figurine from a simple expression of the abstract concept of the powers of nature into representations of a personified originator and director of natural events.

The discovery at the bottom of a grain bin at Çatalhöyük of a carving of a seated woman flanked by two lionesses has been described by Shahina Farid, field director of the site until 2012 as

… a life-giving force, [but] I don't think she's a goddess at this stage, and I think we're at the beginning of this role of the female form becoming a goddess. Mother Goddess did not come from nowhere; she has to start somewhere. And we think that Çatalhöyük is one of the places where she started.[[13]](#footnote-13)

As Hughes then points out, “As societies developed in scale and got more sophisticated the goddess … got bigger; she's no longer one of those diminutive little figurines at Çatalhöyük. Now, she's a kind of dominatrix, guarding and ruling over a vast landscape.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Dr. Taciser Sivas of Anadolu University at Eskişehir, Turkey, has remarked, “… she controlled nature. She controls the animals. She controls the wild world … so the Mother Goddess was the protector of the people.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Hughes continues, “As prehistory gives way to history, and men and women start to write down the stories of their lives, we begin to learn the names of some of these divine women: Isis; Ishtar; Inana, the Queen of Heaven. They actually come in all shapes and sizes, but a notable number share two key traits: These are still creatures in charge of both life and death, of conflict and fertility: they inspire awe … and they are terrifying.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

But, the continued growth of human intelligence and the increasing levels of our ability to manipulate nature (which gave us a grown false sense of control), meant that our thinking processes steadily progressed from mere awareness of experience to contemplation of causes and effects. Thus, we began to develop disciplined structures of asking questions and ferreting out answers, a process which Richard Shlain believes led to the domination of the “left-brain” in human cognition, at the expense of the insights of the “right-brain”. He observes:

… when a critical mass of people within a society acquire literacy, especially alphabet literacy, left hemispheric modes of thought are reinforced at the expense of right hemispheric ones, which manifests as a decline in the status of images, women's rights, and goddess worship.[[17]](#footnote-17)

And as Robert M. Pirsig observes in *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, “It’s been necessary since before the time of Socrates to reject the passions and the emotions, in order to free the rational mind for an understanding of nature’s order, which was as yet unknown.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

## The Cosmological Function And The King God

Examination and exploration of the natural world led to the inevitable conclusion that natural events happen as a result of knowable causes and effects, which engendered the idea that the universe functioned according to certain knowable, immutable laws. A dropped object falls to the ground; water seeks its own level; decay is the default process of life[[19]](#footnote-19); cause always precedes effect.

The reasoning seems to have been something like:

1. There are universal laws of the natural world which are always true and unbreakable.
2. Rules of behavior result from the ordering of thoughts by conscious will.
3. Therefore, the universal laws of nature must have been formulated, enacted, and are continually enforced, by an overarching, controlling consciousness.

### Protology: Architectural Myths of Origin

The Cosmological Function is thus associated with *architectural* creation/origin myths, in which the physical universe is conceived, manifested, structured, and ordered by the *conscious agency* of a deity or deities. The manifested deity or deities (who often arise *increatus,* “uncreated”) set about to build the universe according to some design.

Thus, *all automatic origin myths become architectural at some point.* This may happen quickly, as we see in the first line of Genesis, “In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The first phrase, “In the beginning, God,” is an automatic origin myth; neither God’s origin nor nature is explained — it is assumed, he is . The remainder of the passage begins an architectural origin myth; the physical universe and everything in it brought into existence through the conscious actions of God, for his own reasons and purposes.

The overarching, controlling consciousness of architectural myths of origin was almost everywhere assigned to a male deity in preference to a female. Edith Hall, Professor in the Department of Classics and Centre for Hellenic Studies at King’s College, London, tells Bettany Hughes:

Walled cities start to be built all around the, sort of, Mediterranean world, and you get large armies; you get very powerful kings; you get accumulation of money and capital. You get something you've got to defend, something really worth fighting for. And violence, in terms of policing the world, becomes–I think–much more common. Mass violence, between different communities. And that's the moment at which you start to get these big, masculine gods, that's I think a reflection of a much more militaristic culture on the ground.[[21]](#footnote-21)

But why? Shlain suggests that it was because big-game hunting generally fell to males:

The prolonged childhood of their progeny precluded most women from hunting. A mother could not leave her young for long and a crying baby could not accompany a hunting expedition. Among other social predators such as wolves, lions, and killer whales, the females actively participate in both hunting and killing. Humans became the first group of social predators in which females left this critical task to the males. A hunter must maintain a singularity of purpose when focused on prey; a mother must keep a field awareness of all that is going on around her.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Thus, according to Shlain, the average male became more goal-oriented and task-focused, while the average female became more process-oriented and multi-tasking[[23]](#footnote-23). He also contends that the perpetuation of culture became the purview of mothers, while socializing the young became the task of the father.

Besides providing her young with breast milk, a mother became responsible for imparting the knowledge of the *culture*, imprinting upon the infant's mind essential lessons regarding love, honor, respect, courage, loyalty, honesty, curiosity, playfulness, and self-esteem. To enhance their offspring's chances of survival, the females also reached across the growing divide separating the sexes and engaged the males of the tribe in the job of *socializing* children.[[24]](#footnote-24) [emphasis added]

Society, by its very nature, is a set of permissions and prohibitions dictated to individuals by the collective will of the body politic. Thus, the argument goes:

1. The laws of nature are formulated, enacted, and continually enforced, by a Father God.
2. Society is bounded by laws, just as nature is bounded by laws.
3. Because males are more logically minded than females[[25]](#footnote-25), it is in the male nature to explore and apprehend natural laws.
4. Familiarity with the essence and functioning of natural law qualifies males to conceive, enact, and enforce societal laws.

(Yes, there is more than a hint of a circular argument, here, but, as Gary Zukav points out, mythos “… follows a much more permissive set of rules”[[26]](#footnote-26) than does logos.)

The final point is the least palatable. Because, as Shain says, “Hunting demands ‘cold-bloodedness’ tinged with cruelty; nurturance requires emotional generosity combined with warmth,”[[27]](#footnote-27) and hunters are perforce male[[28]](#footnote-28); males are, therefore, naturally better equipped to enforce the sometimes rigorously inequitable and unjust rules of society to provide the greatest good to the greatest number for the majority of the time.[[29]](#footnote-29)

This has also been supposed to explain that “The male brain tends to be more efficient to lateralize and compartmentalize, which has the advantage of making him more task-focused. The female brain has more [nerve] connections and constantly cross-signals and takes in more, so it tends to see and feel more than the male brain.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

It so often happens that when a hetero-husband is discovered to have cheated on his spouse, his response is something like, “It was one time; it has nothing to do with *us*!” He apparently literally believes that his dalliance with another woman is completely and utterly unrelated to his relationship with his wife. The spouse, on the other hand, tends to respond along the lines of “It has *everything* to do with us!” In her awareness, *he is her husband at all times and in all situations[[31]](#footnote-31)*, whether she is physically present with him or not; as far as she is concerned, he might just has well have engaged in sex with the other woman while his wife was in the same room.

It is not that either of them is more-or-less “right” about the situation; they simply have conflicting understandings of the circumstances. Shlain concludes:

Evolution, in time, equipped men and women emotionally to respond differently to the same stimuli. This resulted in men and women having different perceptions of the world, survival strategies, styles of commitment, and, ultimately, different ways of *knowing:* the way of the hunter/killer and the way of the gatherer/nurturer.[[32]](#footnote-32)

## The Demotion Of The Goddess

This led to a gradual diminution of the power of the Primal Goddess in mythological stories. As Hesiod reports the outcome of the civil war among the Greek gods in his *Theogeny*, “Now King of the Gods, Zeus was wiser than any other god, or any mortal man.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

1. J. B. S Haldane, Alfred H. Jacobs, and Charles E. Rosenberg, *Possible Worlds and Other Papers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 298-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Burkert and John Raffan, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Ylem.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ylem. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. V. Satish., *Tales of Gods in Hindu Mythology* (n.p.: Partridge Singapore, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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-10)
11. Persi Diaonis and Frederick Mosteller, "Methods of Studying Coincidences," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 84, no. 408 (December 1989), 853-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Viking/ Penguin, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Bantam edition. ed. (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1975), 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Later formalized as the Second Law of Thermodynamics: “The universe tends towards disorder.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Genesis 1:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Viking/ Penguin, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I am fully aware that these statements border on being baldly gender-binary and over-simplified; for the sake of brevity and clarity, I have chosen to risk this perception in preference to the torturous circumlocutions of language necessary to give full-and-proper attention to diversity and inclusion. I humbly beg for grace from the reader. Also, when directly quoting sources, I do not feel myself empowered to drastically change the original author’s text, but consider myself bound to report it as-written. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Viking/ Penguin, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I’m just reporting the ancient attitude; don’t shoot the messenger. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics* (New York: Morrow, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Viking/ Penguin, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. “The prolonged childhood of their progeny precluded most women from hunting.” (Shlain, *The Alphabet*). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The ubiquitous declaration of Utilitarianism. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Michael Gurian, *What Could He Be Thinking?: How a Man's Mind Really Works* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “Out of sight, out of mind” is no excuse. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Viking/ Penguin, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Mark P. O Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)