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MAPS OF EXPERIENCE
Object and Meaning

The 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 know
ing *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 attibuted 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.[9]

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….
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> 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.[10]

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."[11] 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.[12] 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.[13]

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.[14]

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[15]) 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.
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> 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, sideward, 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.
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> "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?"[16]

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[17] 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.[18]

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.[19]

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, statable, 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.[20]

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.
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> 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?[21]

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.

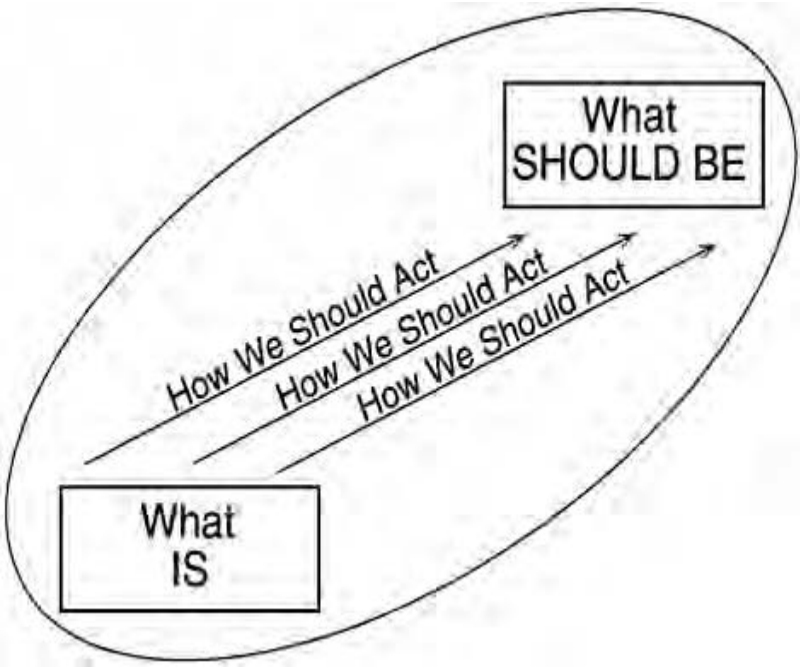

Figure 1: The Domain and Constituent Elements of the Known

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 days journey, the amount of space we can cover under the cycle of the sun. By a very easy extension of metaphor we get the days 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 smarita." 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.[22]

The "way" is the path of life and its purpose.[23] 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.

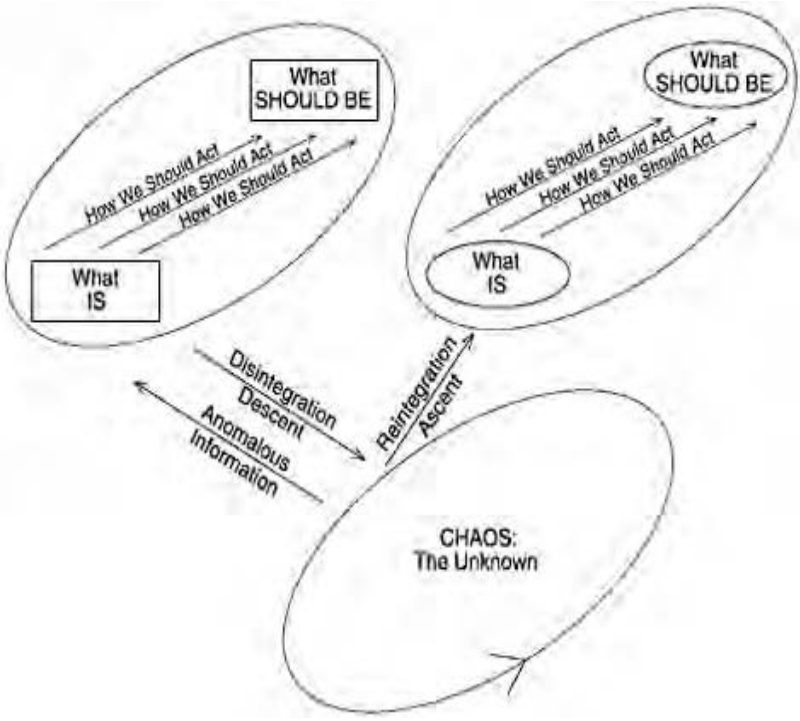

Figure 2: The Metamythological Cycle of the Way

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.[24] 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 property*. 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.