

- 1 Personalized myths of fortune are reinforced by complementary cosmic myths that involve stories about generalized powers.

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- 2 These myths are presented in such movies as Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom and stories about such things as the supposed curse of the long-dead Egyptian king Tutankhamen.

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- 3 The story of Tutankhamen is typical of how curse myths are generated.

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- 4 When the tomb was dug up in 1922, there was an unexpected delay in the opening of the burial chamber.

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- 5 An overzealous reporter wrote a story saying that this delay was due to the discovery of an "ancient Egyptian inscription" that laid a curse on anyone who entered the tomb.

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- 6 Five months later one of the leaders of the expedition, Lord Carnarvon, died suddenly, and the story of the curse became firmly established in the public mind.

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- 7 In fact no such inscription had been found, and all the other members of the expedition, including those who were the first to enter the main chamber, lived long and successful lives.

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1 Put at its simplest, the problem of induction can be boiled down to the problem of justifying our belief in the uniformity of nature across space and time.

2 If nature is uniform and regular in its behaviour, then events in the observed past and present are a sure guide to unobserved events in the unobserved past, present and future.

3 But the only grounds for believing that nature is uniform are the observed events in the past and present.

4 (Perhaps to be precise we should only count observed events in the present, especially when claims about the past also rely on assumptions about the uniform operations of nature, for example memory.)

5 We can't then, it seems, go beyond observed events without assuming the very thing we need to prove — that is, that unobserved parts of the world operate in the same way as the parts we observe.

6 Believing, therefore, that the sun may possibly not rise tomorrow is, strictly speaking, not illogical, since the conclusion that it must rise tomorrow does not inexorably follow from past observations.

- 1 In June 2001, while traveling in the backcountry west of the Carson Sink, I set out on an unimproved road that was clearly marked in the DeLorme Atlas of Nevada.
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- 2 Suddenly, just beyond a small canal that also showed on the map, the road I was traveling on simply ended.
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- 3 Disbelieving, I gazed northward through the weeds and bushes, but there was no trace of a road.
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- 4 Yet there it continued on the map.
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- 5 This is a reminder that the disclaimers on the mapmakers' products — "the information in this atlas was correct to the best knowledge of the publisher at publication time, but is subject to change" — are put there for a good reason.
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- 6 This point, coupled with the fact that most mapmakers build in occasional deliberate errors, ought to make one cautious of trusting everything on a map.
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- 7 Those errors, by the way, are put on some maps as "signatures" or "hooks" that can help mapmakers prove their case when they take a copyright violator to court.
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- 8 Pity the poor plagiarizer of a map that is produced and marketed with one of these signatures.
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- 9 He will have to explain how in the world he depicted something that does not exist or exists in only one other place - on the map whose maker is suing for damage.

- 1 Unlike hunter-gatherers, pastoralists accumulate a surplus of food, allowing their societies to include more members than hunting-gathering bands.
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- 2 There is also marked social inequality based on the size of an individual's herd.
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- 3 Some anthropologists argue that animal holdings represent an unstable form of wealth because, as one herder puts it, "Owning animals is like the wind. Sometimes it comes and sometimes it doesn't."
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- 4 When a disaster such as an epidemic or a severe drought strikes, the wealthy herders are assumed to suffer such great losses that social inequality cannot be maintained.
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- 5 But in his study of the Komachi pastoralists in south-central Iran, sociologist Daniel Bradburd found that disasters cannot wipe out inequalities in animal wealth.
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- 6 While disasters befall rich and poor alike, they do not befall each with quite the same effect, Bradburd explains.
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- 7 A poor man who loses half his herd frequently finds it reduced to a size from which recovery is impossible; on the other hand, a wealthy man who loses half his herd will frequently be left with enough animals to rebuild the herd without great difficulty.
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