

# Joseph Campbell

## Cosmology and the Mythic Imagination

*Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) wrote this article as the first chapter to the last book that he was able to complete in his lifetime, The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and Religion. This chapter serves as an introduction to one of Campbell's favorite themes—that all mythic and religious symbols are metaphoric rather than literal in nature. Inner Reaches was originally published in 1986, and will be reissued by New World Library in the spring of 2002.*

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# THE INNER REACHES OF OUTER SPACE: METAPHOR AS MYTH AND AS RELIGION

## CHAPTER 1

# Cosmology and the Mythic Imagination

It was a startling experience for me, as it must have been for many others watching at that time the television broadcast of the Apollo space-flight immediately before that of Armstrong's landing on the moon, when Ground Control in Houston asked, "Who's navigating now?" and the answer that came back was, "Newton!"

I was reminded of Immanuel Kant's discussion of space in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, where he asks: "How is it that in this space, here, we can make judgments that we know with apodictic certainty will be valid in that space, there?"<sup>1</sup>

The little module was out beyond the moon. That was a part of space that no one had ever before visited. Yet it was known to the scientists in Houston exactly how much energy to eject from those jets, when turned in just what direction, to bring the module down from outer space to within a mile of a battleship waiting for it in the Pacific Ocean.

Kant's reply to the question was that the laws of space are known to the mind because they are of the mind. They are of a knowledge that is within us from birth, a knowledge *a priori*, which is only brought to recollection by apparently external circumstance. During the following flight, when Armstrong's booted foot came down to leave its imprint on the surface of the moon, no one knew how deeply it might sink into lunar dust. That was to be knowledge *a posteriori*, knowledge from experience, knowledge *after* the event. But how to bring the module down, and how to get it up there, had been known from the beginning. Moreover, those later spacecraft that are now cruising far out beyond the moon, in what is

known as outer space! It is known exactly how to maneuver them, to bring messages back, to turn them around, even to correct their faults.

In other words, it then occurred to me that outer space is with-in inasmuch as the laws of space are within us; outer and inner space are the same. We know, furthermore, that we have actually been born from space, since it was out of primordial space that the galaxy took form, of which our life-giving sun is a member. And this earth, of whose material we are made, is a flying satellite of that sun. We are, in fact, productions of this earth. We are, as it were, its organs. Our eyes are the eyes of this earth; our knowledge is the earth's knowledge. And the earth, as we now know, is a production of space.

Alerted by such remotely intimate thoughts, and deciding to learn something more (*a posteriori*) about the anatomy of our great-grandmother, Space, I turned for information to that remarkable world atlas (actually, an atlas of the universe), which had been issued as the fifth edition (1981) of the *National Geographic Atlas of the World*. I had thought myself already somewhat informed of the findings of those scientists who man the great telescopes on our mountaintops (the eyes and ears of our planet); but what I learned from the first fifteen pages of that volume amazed me. There is one two-page spread on which our solar system is pictured, and then the galaxy of billions of stars within which this solar system rides, and then the cluster of twenty galaxies of which our galaxy is a member, which local cluster, in turn, is represented as but one of thousands of such local clusters of galaxies, themselves gathered in superclusters in a universe whose limits are not yet known.

What those pages opened to me, in short, was the vision of a universe of unimaginable magnitude and inconceivable violence: billions upon billions—literally!—of roaring thermonuclear furnaces scattering from each other, each thermonuclear furnace being a star, and our sun among them: many of them actually blowing themselves to pieces, littering the outermost reaches of space with dust and gas, out of which new stars with circling planets are being born right now. And then, from still more remote distances, beyond all these, there come murmurs—microwaves, which are echoes of the greatest cataclysmic explosion of all—namely, the Big Bang of creation, which, according to recent reckonings, must have occurred some 18 billion years ago.

The Big Bang of creation! Out of what did it arise?

The account resembles, in a way, that of the first verses of the Latin poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (composed in the first decade ad), where he writes that originally there was a formless chaos of miscellaneous elements, disarranged, vaguely floating; and that *deus*, a "god," brought order out of this chaos, sending the elements—fire, air, water, and earth—to their places.

From the atlas (and then some further reading) I learned that, originally, what has been described both as a "great featureless mass" and (more mysteriously and, therefore, perhaps more accurately) as an "impulse" (Ovid's *deus*) reached a maximum of concentration that could be sustained no more than a billionth of a second when (and right here, the Big Bang) the inconceivable pressure of an entire incipient universe confined to a single point became

converted into energy and mass, the primal twin manifestations of all perceived “reality” in what is known to the mind as space-time (Sanskrit, *māyā*).<sup>2</sup> A sphere of ravaging intensity began spreading at the speed of light and, as “space” cooled, within the first second, muons and neutrinos had been followed by protons and neutrons, with nuclei capturing electrons and atoms coming into existence. The degree of heat was indescribable. It has been cooling ever since, while the whole event continues to expand with its initial velocity.

And so we come to the picture of this universe today, as disclosed by those marvelous instruments put to use by our astronomers, which are delivering to them a revelation of millions of spinning galaxies, many as great as our Milky Way and each with billions of stars, all moving at prodigious rates away from one another, and with *no still point* anywhere. An epochal series of experiments conducted in Ohio in the middle 1880s (published 1887) by two American scientists, A. A. Michelson and Edward W. Morley (the Michelson-Morley experiment), which had demonstrated definitively that the classic notion could no longer be entertained of a universal ether against which interstellar velocities might be comparatively measured, resulted in 1905 in Albert Einstein’s founding statement of the modern theory of relativity: “It is impossible by any experiment whatsoever to determine absolute rest.” Any place you like may be chosen for your hypothetical still point, and from any such tentative, operational center, what you would see would be this streaming away of those myriads of galaxies going into distance, the furthest of them at such distances that, finally, our greatest telescopes lose track of them entirely—the light coming from them arriving so late that their present positions are out of sight.

And so now, of all the possible centers, our own earth, of course, is the only one available to us. Revolving on its own axis once every twenty-four hours, this operational still point is annually circling one of the several hundred billion suns that constitute our galaxy, this sun itself meanwhile traveling at the rate of 136 miles per second around the periphery of our native galaxy, circling it once every 230 million years. The diameter of this galaxy this Milky Way of exploding stars, is now described as 100,000 light years, a light year being the distance light travels in one year. But light travels at the rate of 186,000 miles per second, and the number of seconds in a year (if I calculate correctly) is 31,557,600. So that if we multiply 186,000 miles by 31,557,600 seconds, we arrive at the idea of one light year, which is, namely (if again I calculate correctly), 5 trillion, 869 billion, 713 million, 600 thousand miles. And 100,000 of these will then amount to 586 quadrillion, 971 trillion, 360 billion (586,971,360,000,000,000) miles. And within this galaxy of that diameter, the nearest sun to our sun, nearest star to our star, is Alpha in Centauri, which is about 4 light years, which is to say, a mere 25 trillion miles, away.

From our position in this inconceivable galaxy, when we look up at night at the Milky Way, we are sighting, as it were, along the radius of a great disk. The other stars that we see in the night sky are members also of this galaxy, but are situated to one side or the other of the crosscut. And this disk, this galaxy of which our sun is a minor member, is but one of what is known to science as a “local group” of galaxies, the number in our particular group being twenty: twenty Milky Ways of billions of exploding nuclear furnaces, flying from each other

through spaces not to be measured, the universe (of which we speak so easily) comprising, literally, quintillions of such self-consuming stars.

And so now we must ask: What does all this do to mythology? Obviously, some corrections have to be made.

For example: It is believed that Jesus, having risen from the dead, ascended physically to heaven (Luke 24:51), to be followed shortly by his mother in her sleep (Early Christian belief, confirmed as Roman Catholic dogma on November 1, 1950). It is also written that some nine centuries earlier, Elijah, riding a chariot of fire, had been carried to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11).

Now, even ascending at the speed of light, which for a physical body is impossible, those three celestial voyagers would not yet be out of the galaxy. Dante in the year ad 1300 spent the Easter weekend in a visit to hell, purgatory, and heaven; but that voyage was in spirit alone, his body remaining on earth. Whereas, Jesus, Mary, and Elijah are declared to have ascended physically. What is to be made today of such mythological (hence, metaphorical) folk ideas?

Obviously, if anything of value is to be made of them at all (and I submit that the elementary original idea must have been something of this kind), where those bodies went was not into outer space, but into inner space. That is to say, what is connoted by such metaphorical voyages is the possibility of a return of the mind in spirit, while still incarnate, to full knowledge of that transcendent source out of which the mystery of a given life arises into this field of time and back into which it in time dissolves. It is an old, old story in mythology: of the Alpha and Omega that is the ground of all being, to be realized as the beginning and end of this life. The imagery is necessarily physical and thus apparently of outer space. The inherent connotation is *always*, however, psychological and metaphysical, which is to say, of inner space. When read as denoting merely specified events, therefore, the mirrored inward images lose their inherent spiritual force and, becoming overloaded with sentiment, only bind the will the more to temporality.

There is a beautiful saying of Novalis: “The seat of the soul is there, where the outer and the inner worlds meet.” That is the wonder-land of myth. From the outer world the senses carry images to the mind, which do not become myth, however, until there transformed by fusion with accordant insights, awakened as imagination from the inner world of the body. The Buddhists speak of Buddha Realms. These are planes and orders of consciousness that can be brought to mind through meditations on appropriately mythologized forms. Plato tells of universal ideas, the memory of which is lost at birth but through philosophy may be recalled. These correspond to Bastian’s “Elementary Ideas” and Jung’s “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious.” In India, as noticed by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy,<sup>4</sup> works of art representing indifferent objects, local personages and scenes, such as fill the walls and rooms of most of our museums, have been characterized as *deśī*, (“local, popular, provincial”) or as *nāgara* (“fashionable, worldly”) and are regarded as esthetically insignificant; whereas those representing deities or revered ancestors, such as might appear in temples or on domestic shrines, are perceived as tokens of an inward, spiritual “way,” or “path,” termed *mārga*,

which is a word derived from the vocabulary of the hunt, denoting the tracks or trail of an animal, by following which the hunter comes to his quarry. Similarly, the images of deities, which are but local forms of “elementary ideas,” are footprints left, as it were, by local passages of the “Universal Self (*ātman*), through contemplating which the worshiper attains “Self-rapture” (*ātmānada*). A passage from Plotinus may be quoted to this point: “Not all who perceive with eyes the sensible products of art are affected alike by the same object, but if they know it for the outward portrayal of an archetype subsisting in intuition, their hearts are shaken and they recapture memory of that Original.”<sup>5</sup>

All mythologies, finally, are works of art of this order and effect. Sociologically and psychologically, however, it makes a great difference what images they present; for the degree of their opening of inner space is a function of the reach into outer space that they unclose. In the earliest, most limited and limiting mythologies of which we have knowledge, for example, the horizons are local and tribal. Such mythologies are neither addressed to, nor concerned with, humanity at large. The tribe and its landscape are the universe. Read again the first, second, third, and fourth chapters of the Book of Genesis. Such a tiny, minute affair! What relation does such a cosmology bear to the universe now perceived? Or to the histories of any but one of the people of this earth? As stated unequivocally in II Kings 5:15, “There is no God in all the earth but in Israel.” For at that time the center of the universe was Jerusalem. And the center of Jerusalem was the Temple. And the center of the Temple was the Holy of Holies in the Temple. And the center of the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant therein. And the foundation of the universe was the Stone that was there before the Ark. Mythologically, metaphorically, that was a perfectly good cultic image. But it had nothing to do with the universe, or with the rest of the peoples of this planet.

Then came the year ad 70, the catastrophic destruction by the Romans of both Jerusalem and its temple and, following that, the historic dispersion of God’s people among the Gentiles, the so-called Diaspora (Hebrew, *galut*, the “exile”), which threatened the very subsistence of what had been called in Ezra’s time, the “holy race” (Ezra 9:12). Two subsequent centuries of rabbinical consultation, dialogue, and debate, however, as registered in the Mishna (that third century compilation of authoritative post-biblical laws, judgments, and determinations) sufficed to rescue the tradition by an adroit redefinition. The center now was to be known, not as a place, but as a people; not the Temple or the Ark, which meanwhile had disappeared, but the Israelite community over the earth. And so again in strictly ethnocentric terms, a tribal concept of the universe, its history, and its destiny (now highly intentional and sophisticated) was devised, having as its central feature the one and only holy thing upon all this earth; these people, themselves, of God’s holy race.

In aboriginal societies, the tribal myths, while unexceptionally ethnocentric, do not anywhere exhibit such an exclusive fascination with the people themselves; for every feature of the landscape, the whole world of nature and everything around them, is encompassed in their regard. The earth for them is not of dust (Genesis 3:19), but alive and a mother. The animals and plants, and all the peoples dwelling on her bosom, are her children, also regarded in a sacred way. Moreover, the laws by which the people live, though from their ancestors and proper to themselves, do not elevate them beyond nature; nor are the gods and habits of their

neighbors viewed as abominations (Ezra 9:1 and *passim*). Local cult and custom are recognized for what they are—namely, relative, not absolute—so that, although indeed limited and limiting, they may open the mind and heart to the world. For example:

There is an important little volume by the Nebraskan poet John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, in which the prophetic boyhood vision is recounted of an old Sioux medicine man, Keeper of the Sacred Pipe of his people, who at one point declared that in imagination he had seen himself standing on the central mountain of the world, which in his view, of course, was nowhere near Jerusalem, but Harney Peak, in the Black Hills of South Dakota. And while there, “I was seeing in a sacred manner,” he said, “the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all things as they must live together, like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus from the humanity of an awakened inner eye and consciousness, a vision released from the limitations of its local, tribal horizon might open to the world and even to transcendence. For, as Black Elk remarked to Neihardt when telling of this vision beheld from Harney Peak, South Dakota, as center of the world: “But anywhere is the center of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

There, I would say, was a *true* prophet, who knew the difference between his ethnic ideas and the elementary ideas that they enclose, between a metaphor and its connotation, between a tribal myth and its metaphysical import. For when the inner eye is awakened and a revelation arises from inner space to meet impressions brought by the senses from outer space to the mind, the significance of the conjunction is lost unless the outward image opens to receive and embody the elementary idea: this being the whole sense of the transformation of nature in art. Otherwise, nothing has happened; an external event has been merely documented and a cultic, ethnic centrality given as the last word of religion, with naturalism the end and beginning of art.

A decisive, enormous leap out of the confines of all local histories and landscapes occurred in Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium BC, during the period of the rise of the ziggurats, those storied temple towers, symbolic of the *axis mundi*, which are caricatured in the Bible as the Tower of Babel. The leap was from geography to the cosmos, beyond the moon, whereupon the primal, limited and limiting tribal manner of thought (which the Hebrew prophets chose deliberately to retain) was by the Gentile civilizations left behind. That was the period when writing was invented; also, mathematical measurement, and the wheel. The priestly watchers of the night skies at that time were the first in the world to recognize that there is a mathematical regularity in the celestial passages of the seven visible spheres—the sun, the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—along the heaven-way of the Zodiac. And with that, the idea dawned of a cosmic order, *mathematically* discoverable, which it should be the function of a governing priesthood to translate from its heavenly revelation into an order of civilized human life. The idea of the hieratic city-state made its appearance at that time, with kings and queens symbolically attired, enacting together with their courts an aristocratic mime in imitation of the celestial display, the king crowned as

moon or the sun, his queen and the other members of their court as planetary presences. And those allegorical identifications were to such a degree taken seriously that when celestial signs that were interpreted as marking the end of an eon appeared, the kings and queens, together with their courts, were ceremoniously buried alive. Sir James G. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough* (12 volumes, 1907–1915), published evidence from many parts of the world of the practice of such rites. Buried courts have been unearthed from Sumer and Egypt to China.

Some notion of the whole, profoundly conceived, macro-microcosmic import of such courtly mimes may be gained from a consideration of the mathematics of the mythological and actual cycles of the calendars to which such rites were attached. For example, in the Hindu sacred epics and *purāṇas* (popular tellings of ancient lore), the number of years reckoned to the present cycle of time, the so-called Kali Yuga, is 432,000; the number reckoned to the “great cycle” (*mahāyuga*) within which this *yuga* falls being 4,320,000. But then reading one day in the Icelandic Eddas, I discovered that in Othin’s (Wotan’s) warrior hall, Valhöll, there were 540 doors, through each of which, on the “Day of the Wolf” (that is to say, at the end of the present cycle of time), there would pass 800 divine warriors to engage the antigods in a battle of mutual annihilation.”<sup>8</sup>  $800 \times 540 = 432,000$ . And so I asked myself how it might ever have come to pass that in tenth-to-thirteenth century Iceland the same number of years were reckoned to the present cycle of time as in India.

In Babylon, I then recalled, there had been a Chaldean priest, Berossos, who, c. 280 bc, had rendered in Greek an account of the history and mythology of Babylonia, wherein it was told that between the time of the rise of the first city, Kish, and the coming of the Babylonian mythological flood (from which that of the Bible is taken), there elapsed 432,000 years, during which antediluvian era, ten kings reigned. Very long lives! Longer even than Methuselah’s (Genesis 5:27), which had been of only 969.

So I turned to the Old Testament (Genesis 5) and counting the number of antediluvian patriarchs, Adam to Noah, discovered, of course, that they were ten. How many years? Adam was 130 years old when he begat Seth, who was 105 when he begat Enosh, and so on, to Noah, who was 600 years old when the flood came: to a grand total, from the first day of Adam’s creation to the first drop of rain of Noah’s flood, of 1656 years. Any relation to 432,000? Julius Oppert, a distinguished Jewish Assyriologist of the last century, in 1877 presented before the Royal Society for Sciences in Göttingen a paper on “Dates in Genesis,”<sup>\*</sup> in which it was shown that in 1656 years there are 86,400 seven-day weeks.  $86,400 \div 2 = 43,200$ .

Antediluvian  
Patriarch

Age when  
Begetting Son

Age at  
Time of Death

1. Adam (Genesis 5:3–5)	130	930
2. Seth (ib. 5:6–8)	105	912
3. Enosh (ib. 5:9–11)	90	905
4. Kenon (ib. 5:12–14)	70	910
5. Mahalalel (ib. 5:15–17)	65	895
6. Jared (ib. 5:18–20)	162	962
7. Enoch (ib. 5:21–24)	65	365
8. Methuselah (ib. 5:25–27)	187	969
9. Lamech (ib. 5:28–31)	182	767
10. Noah (ib. 7:6), who was	600 years old when the Flood came.	
Grand Total from Creation:	1656 years to year of the Flood.	

And so it appears that in the Book of Genesis there are two contrary theologies represented in relation to the legend of the Deluge. One is the old tribal, popular tale of a willful, personal creator-god, who saw that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth...and was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them’ “ (Genesis 6:5–7). The other idea, which is in fundamental contrast, is that of the disguised number, 86,400, which is a deeply hidden reference to the Gentile, Sumero-Babylonian, *mathematical* cosmology of the ever-revolving cycles of impersonal time, with whole universes and their populations coming into being, flowering for a season of 43,200 (432,000 or 4,320,000) years, dissolving back into the cosmic mother-sea to rest for an equal spell of years before returning, and so again, again, and again. The Jews, it will be remembered, were for fifty years exiled from their capital to Babylon (586-539 bc), when they were subject, willy nilly, to Babylonian influences, so that although the popular, exoteric version of their Deluge legend is from the period of David’s kingdom, tenth century or so bc, the exquisitely secreted indication of a priestly knowledge, beyond that, of a larger, cyclic version of the legend—where the god himself would have come into being and gone out of being with the universe of which he was the lord—is post-Exilic, as are, also, the genealogical datings of Genesis chapter 5, which are so very nicely contrived to join the 600 years of Noah’s age at the time of the Flood to furnish a total exactly of 1656.

It is to be noticed, by the way, that  $1 + 6 + 5 + 6 = 18$ , which is twice 9, while  $4 + 3 + 2 = 9$ : 9 being a number traditionally associated with the Goddess Mother of the World and its gods. In India the number of recited names in a litany of this goddess is 108.  $1 + 0 + 8 = 9$ , while  $108 \times 4 = 432$ . In Roman Catholic Europe, when the Angelus tolls (at morning, noon, and evening), it rings  $3 + 3 + 3$  and then 9 times, in celebration of the Virgin’s conception of the Savior. The recited prayer at those junctures, “The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary,

and she conceived by the Holy Ghost....and THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH...” is in recognition of this miracle at the opening of a new world age. In ancient Greece, 9 was the number of the Muses, patron goddesses of the arts. They were the daughters of Mnemosyne (“memory”), the source of imagination, which in turn is the carrier of archetypal, elementary ideas to artistic realization in the field of space-time. The number 9, that is to say, relates traditionally to the Great Goddess of Many Names (Devī, Inanna, Ishtar, Astarte, Artemis, Venus, etc.), as matrix of the cosmic process, whether in the macrocosm or in a microcosmic field of manifestation. The reason for the suppression of her image by a clergy interested in the claims only of a divinity heavily bearded, therefore, can be readily surmised; but why the same company of priestly doctors so artfully concealed in their document an unmistakable notice of their own knowledge of her power awaits interpretation.

The profundity and sublime majesty of the suppressed mythology can be appreciated best by way of two apparently unrelated clocks, one, the ultimate clock of outer space, and the other of inner space — respectively, the astronomical precession of the equinoxes and the physiological beat of the human heart. Regarding the first: the slow westward motion, in the course of years, of the equinoctial points around the beltway of the zodiac (the vernal equinox, for example, moving from the sign of Aries, where it had been before the birth of Christ, through Pisces, where it is now, toward Aquarius, where it will be in a couple of hundred years), requires for one complete cycle of the twelve zodiacal signs exactly 25,920 years, which term is known as a “great” or “Platonic” year. But if we divide 25,920 by 60 (which is the ancient Mesopotamian *šoss*, or basic sexagesimal unit of astronomical measurement, still used in the measurement of circles, whether of time or of space), the quotient is 432. Moreover:  $2 + 5 + 9 + 2 + 0 = 18$ .

And regarding the second, the inward clock: I have read in a popular book on physical education that “A conditioned man, who exercises regularly, will have a resting heart rate of about 60 beats per minute or less....Sixty per minute times 60 minutes, equals 3600 beats per hour. Times 24 hours, equals 86,400 beats a day.”<sup>10</sup>

It is strange that in our history books the discovery of the precession of the equinoxes should be attributed always to the Greek Hipparchus, second century BC, when the magic number 432 (which when multiplied by 60 produces 25,920) was already employed in the reckoning of major cycles of time before that century. How long before, we do not know. But the Chaldean priest Berossos was of the early third century BC, and the mythology of which he wrote the account was allegedly of Babylon before its conquest by the Persians in 539 BC. Babylonian mythology, furthermore, was a late development out of the very much earlier Sumerian of c. 3000-2000 BC; and our earliest known legend of the universal flood is from Sumer. To suggest that already in the ziggurats of Sumer the priests were reckoning in terms of the precession of the equinoxes would be perhaps too bold. There is every reason to believe, however, that the mythology into which, at some unknown date, the astonishingly accurate numerical insight was introduced had been Sumerian, indeed even possibly pre-Sumerian; for by the end of the third Millennium BC it was already known to all the civilizations at that time in flower from the Nile valley and Aegean Sea to the Indus.

The mystery of the night sky, those enigmatic passages of slowly but steadily moving lights among the fixed stars, had delivered the revelation, when charted mathematically, of a cosmic order, and in response, from the depths of the human imagination, a reciprocal recognition had been evoked. A vast concept took form of the universe as a living being in the likeness of a great mother, within whose womb all the worlds, both of life and of death, had their existence (see Figure 1). And the human body is in miniature a duplicate of that macrocosmic form. So that throughout the whole an occult harmony prevails, which it is the function of a mythology and relevant rites to make known. The Chinese idea of the Tao is a development out of this macro-microcosmic insight. Hinduism in all its aspects carries into every act of life the idea of *dharma* (“virtue”) as conformity to the caste laws of one’s birth, which are understood to be, not of social invention, but given of nature, like the laws of action of the various animal species. The noun *dharma* is from a verbal root *dhri* (to hold, to bear, to support”). For by conforming perfectly to one’s *dharma* (*sva-dharma*), as do the various animal species to theirs, the plants to theirs, and the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars to theirs, one at once supports the universe and is supported by it. And so, indeed, in our modern Western world, when a doctor takes a patient’s pulse, if the beat is sixty a minute (43,200 in twelve hours), it is the pulse of a conditioned athlete in accord at once with his own nature and with the rhythm of the universe: the function of medicine, like that of mythology and ritual, being to keep mankind in accord with the natural order.\*

\*A startling microcosmic revelation of the mystic force of this number came recently to light when engineers in the Wilson Sporting Goods laboratories testing (for distance) golf balls with anywhere from 30 to 1,212 dimples were advised by computer that the optimum number would be 432. For indeed, the Wilson 432 golf ball has been found by professionals to lengthen their drives some ten to thirteen or more yards.

Well and good enough, one might suppose! However—and here is where the West begins—a radical and enormously influential *ethical* protest against the uncritical submission to the will in nature that is implicit in this finally *mystical* world vision broke forth in Iran, some time in the second or first millenium bc, in the dualistic religious view of Zarathustra (known to the Greeks as Zoroaster). The dates of this earliest known prophet of an absolute distinction between good and evil—in contrast to the cosmological, mystical insight—are in dispute. Some scholars place him c. 1200 bc; others, six to seven centuries later. In either case, the god of light and truth and justice whose gospel he preached, Ahura Mazda, was the god professed by the Persian King of Kings, Darius I (ruled 521-486 bc), during whose reign the first moves were undertaken to return the Jews to Jerusalem; and that Zoroastrian patterns of thought and verbal stereotypes were absorbed into Pharaonic as well as into Essene Judaism, there is today no question. The recently discovered Essene Dead Sea Scroll known as “The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness,” for example, is a classic instance of Zoroastrian ethical dualism, fused, however, with the Jewish tribal notion of themselves as the one and only people of God. As the “Sons of Light,” at the end of time, in a holy war of exactly thirty-five years with a year of rest every seventh, they are to attack and

overcome in programmed stages, with timely help from the great hand of God, all the Gentile nations, the “Sons of Darkness,” of this earth.\*

For according to Zarathustra, there were two creator-gods, a good god, Ahura Mazda, of light, of truth, and of justice, and an evil god, Angra Mainyu, of darkness, deception, and malice. In the beginning, Ahura Mazda created a universe of virtue and light, which Angra Mainyu then maliciously corrupted; so that the world in which we live is mixed of good and evil. Man is therefore *not* to put himself in accord with nature—as in the ancient and oriental worlds—but to make a decision for the good, put himself in accord with the good, fight for justice and the light, and correct nature.

### Insert figure 1

Figure 1. Jaina world image in the form of a great goddess. Gouache on cloth, 15 x 11 inches. Rajasthan, eighteenth century.

At the level of the waist is the plane of earth. Below are the purgatories and above the heavens to which “souls” (*jīvas*) descend or ascend between incarnations, according to their lives. *Aṃhisa*, “non-injury, or non-violence,” is for the Jains the determining virtue. The aim is to ascend, completely cleansed of impulse to “action” (*karma*), to the gaining of “release” (*moksha*) from the “round of rebirths” (*saṃsāra*) in the removed realm here shown as above the brows of the cosmic being. This “release” is not conceived of in Jainism as it is in Hinduism and Buddhism, as a *nirvāṇa* of nonentity, but as *kaivalyam*, a state of unconditioned, isolated perfection in timeless omniscience.

Mahāvira (c. 599-527 BC), last of the twenty-four founding “Conquerors” (*jinās*), or teachers of the way to this victory, was an older contemporary of the Buddha (c. 563-483 BC). The number of his named predecessors reaches back beyond historical time into ages purely mythological. There can be no doubt that already in the period of the Indus Civilization, c. 2300-1750 BC, there were in India practitioners of an austere type of yoga who may indeed have been of the Jina line. See Figures 5 and 6 (page 75).

### End of figure 1 description

The nature of the first man, Gayomart, was corrupted by the malice of Angra Mainyu. Man, therefore, is “fallen man.” His nature is not to be trusted. A great prophet, however, Zarathustra, has come into the world, born, they say, of a virgin, who has taught the way of virtue which is to lead in the end to a restoration of Ahura Mazda’s uncorrupted universe. In a prodigious final battle, the powers of light and justice, led by a radiant reincarnation, Saoshyant, of the seed of the prophet Zarathustra, born again of a virgin, will engage, overwhelm, and destroy the whole production of Angra Mainyu, indeed even Angra Mainyu

himself. The universe will be cleared of darkness, and the dead, now purged of death, will be resurrected as bodies radiant of uncorrupted being.

Thus a completely new mythology arose, and instead of the ancient Sumero-Babylonian contemplation of the disappearances and reappearances of planets as revelatory of an order of nature with which society was to be held in accord, an idea of good and evil, light and dark, even of life and death as separable took hold, and the prophecy was announced of a progressive restoration to righteousness of the order of nature. Where formerly there had been the planetary cycles, marking days and nights, the months, years, and eons of unending time, there was now to be a straight line of progressive world history with a beginning, a middle, and a prophesied end—Gayomart, Zarathustra, and Saoshyant: Adam, Jesus, and the Second Coming. Where formerly there had been, as the ideal, harmony with the whole, there was now discrimination, a decision to be made, “not peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34), effort, struggle, and zeal, in the name of a universal reform. In the Persian empire this ethical world-ideal became identified with the political aims of the King of Kings himself, who reigned as the regent of Ahura Mazada; in Christendom, by a sort of spiritual contagion, *Gott mit uns* has ever been the war cry of every national army, on both sides of the line; while throughout the territorial reaches of Islam, the rhetoric of righteousness has been epitomized in the matched phrases, *dar al’islām* (“the realm of submission [to Allah]”) and *dar al’harb* (“the realm of war”), which is to say, the rest of the world.

And so throughout the complex of mythologies now operative in the West—which by virtue of their common impulse to missionary imperialism are today reshaping the planet, save where the no less reformatory zeal of the mission of Karl Marx has taken over the enterprise—the reaches of outer space to which the religious mind is formally directed are not cosmic, but geographical, and defined in terms, moreover, of dark and light, God’s portion (*dar al’islām*) and the devil’s (*dar al’harb*); prayers still being addressed in all seriousness to a named and defined masculine personality inhabiting a local piece of sky a short flight beyond the moon.

Meanwhile, certain spiritually significant changes have occurred in the psychophysical environment of our species. The first, of course, followed the publication, ad 1543, of Copernicus’ “Six Books On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs” (*De revolutionibus orbium coelestium libri VI*), when the sun displaced the earth at the center of God’s universe; so that, whereas our eyes see the sun rise daily in the east, hang high in the heavens at noon, and go down in glory in the west, what our brains now know is nothing of the kind. With that fateful publication, the recognized *idea* of the earth in relation to outer space became forever separated from the daily *experience* of the same. An intellectual *concept* had refuted and displaced the nevertheless persistent sensory *percept*. The heliocentric universe has never been translated into a mythology. Science and religion have therewith gone apart. And that is the case to the present hour, with the problem even compounded by our present recognition of the inconceivable magnitude of this galaxy of stars, of which our life-giving sun is a peripheral member, circling with its satellites in this single galaxy among millions within a space of incredible distances, having no fixed form or end.

“Have you not heard,” asked Nietzsche, already in the introduction to his *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–84): “Have you not yet heard that God is dead?": the god in point, of course, being the named and defined creator-god of the historically limited Bible. For the conditions, not only of life, but of thought also, have considerably changed since the centuries of the composition of that guide to truth and virtue, which with its deliberately restricted and restricting ethnocentric horizon and tribal “jealous God” (Exodus 20:5) is culture specific to such a degree that its “folk ideas” and “elementary ideas” are inseparably fused.

The first step to mystical realization is the leaving of such a defined god for an experience of transcendence, disengaging the ethnic from the elementary idea, *for any god who is not transparent to transcendence is an idol, and its worship is idolatry*. Also, the first step to participation in the destiny of humanity today, which is neither of this folk nor of that, but of the whole population of this globe, is to recognize every such local image of a god as but one of many thousands, millions, even perhaps billions, of locally useful symbolizations of that same mystery beyond sight or thought which our teachers have taught us to seek in their god alone. Black Elk’s word, “The center is everywhere,” is matched by a statement from a hermetic, early medieval text, *The Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers (Liber XXIV philosophorum)*: “God is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.”<sup>12</sup> The idea, it seems to me, is in a most appropriate way illustrated in that stunning photograph (Figure 2) taken from the moon, and now frequently reproduced, of an earthrise, the earth rising as a radiant celestial orb, strewn light over a lunar landscape. Is the center the earth? Is the center the moon? The center is anywhere you like. Moreover, in that photograph from its own satellite, the rising earth shows none of those divisive territorial lines that on our maps are so conspicuous and important. The chosen center may be anywhere. The Holy Land is no special place. It is every place that has ever been recognized and mythologized by any people as home.

Moreover, this understanding of the ubiquity of the metaphysical center perfectly matches the lesson of the galaxies and of the Michelson–Morley finding that was epitomized in Einstein’s representation of the utter impossibility of establishing absolute rest. It is the essence of relativity. And, when translated from the heavens to this earth, it implies that moral judgments depend likewise upon the relation of the frame of reference to the person or act being measured. “Judge not that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). There is no absolute good or evil. So that, as Nietzsche has suggested, if Zarathustra were to return today, his message would not be of good and evil as absolutes. The lesson of his first teaching, which was of integrity, has been learned. The lesson now, beyond good and evil, is to be of life. For as Nietzsche himself stated: “All ideals are dangerous, since they denigrate and stigmatize what is actual. They are poisons, which, however, as occasional medicaments, are indispensable.”<sup>13</sup>

## Insert figure 2

Figure 2. Earthrise over moon landscape. Photographed 1968, Apollo 8 Mission.

**End of figure 2 description**

And so, in mythological terms what is to happen now? All of our old gods are dead, and the new have not yet been born.

There is a medieval Hindu story in one of the *purāṇas*, the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa, of about the fifth century ad, which is of the Vedic-Aryan tribal deity Indra, who is a mythological counterpart in India of Yahweh in the Near East, also of Olympian Zeus of the ancient Greeks, Ashur of the Assyrians, Tarhun of the Hittites, and so forth.

Those were all guardian family gods of the various nomadic herding tribes that throughout the second millennium bc were invading and assuming control of the cultivated lands and their temple-cities, all the way from southeastern Europe, across Asia Minor and the Near East, to the Indus Valley.

The chief gods of the invaders were predominantly male warrior gods, champions, each, of his special people. Those of the invaded agricultural territories, in contrast, were chiefly of the earth's fertility and life, local forms, for the most part, of the one great "Goddess of Many Names" (as she was later termed), of whom all beings, even gods and demons, are the progeny. Divinities of her kind are the local representatives of those powers of nature that indeed are the creative energies of all life. They are not of this day or that, but forever. Mythologies of the every-returning cycles of unending time are everywhere of her order of being. So, too, are the mystical philosophies and meditational disciplines of the inward, individual quest for identification with the ground of one's own and the world's existence. In fundamental contrast, the sociological tribal gods are of a secondary, local-historical definition and relevance. They are of this people or that, this moment or that in the vast history of the universe. Moreover, their dwelling is not, and can never be, inward of nature, in the way of an immanent, pantheistic presence domiciled in the heart as the actuality of its life. As guardians, they are always invoked from "out there." They are lawgivers, supportgivers to those they favor and to those alone, since they are not of nature, but of a people. Consequently, when such a secondary deity, on achieving at some historical moment mastery over a certain parcel of this earth, exalts himself to a posture of omnipotence, like the Aryan Indra in the following exemplary tale, the moment is at hand for a higher revelation.

There had been a period of drought and disaster over all the earth (or so it had seemed). A prodigious dragon, known as Vṛitra (the "Encloser") had for a thousand years enveloped and held within itself all the waters of the world's life. Planted fields lay waste. Cities were cities of the dead. Even the capital city of the gods, on the summit of Mount Sumeru, the pivotal center of the world, was in ruins. Then the vanquisher of demons, Indra, who is above all the Vedic-Aryan gods supreme, flung into the midst of the monstrous coils a thunderbolt that shattered the demon entirely. The waters burst free and streamed in ribbons over the land, to circulate once again through the body of the world.

That had been a mighty victory. The gods, the saints and sages, learning of it, flocked from all directions, their hearts pulsing with joy, to celebrate their champion as in glory he proceeded to the summit of Mount Sumeru. And when, upon arriving, he beheld the

devastation, he summoned Vishvakarman to his side, the architect and craftsman of the Vedic pantheon, commissioning him to reconstruct the city in such a way as would be worthy of such a world savior as himself—which in one year that miraculous builder accomplished. In the center of that godly residence, radiant with innumerable gems, marvelous with towers, gardens, lakes, and palaces, stood the royal dwelling of the god Indra himself, incomparable in the world, with which, however, he was not even then satisfied. He had additional ideas: more lakes and palaces over there; a different sort of garden here! His vision of glory ever enlarging, he brought Vishvakarman to the point of despair. There was no escape for the craftsman till released by his insatiate employer.

Sick at heart, therefore, Vishvakarman turned for protection secretly to Brahmā, the universal creator, who abides far beyond and above the historical sphere of Indra's temporal victories. Brahmā sits enthroned on the radiant lotus of a cosmic dream represented as growing from the navel of the slumbering divinity, Vishnu. Metaphorically, that is to say, the universe together with Brahmā, its creator, is the emanation of some superior god's imagination. Vishnu is represented couched upon a prodigious seven-headed cobra named Ananta, which means "endless." The serpent floats upon the cosmic Milky Ocean that is the mother of us all. Its boundless energy gives the impulse that provokes the world-dreamer's dream and appears in space-time as the universe, that radiant lotus on which, not only Brahmā, but any god may be envisioned enthroned. It is in Vishnu's dream personified as his *śakti*, the goddess Padmā or Padmāvati (Sanskrit, *padmā*, "lotus"), *śakti* being a term signifying "power, energy," and specifically, the active energy of a deity, personified as his wife.<sup>14</sup>

So when Vishvakarman, in secret prayer, had delivered to Brahma the burden of his plea, the lotus-enthroned divinity responded, "O Blessed One, you shall tomorrow be quit of your task!" and descending from his lotus-support, the god proceeded to Vaikuntha in the northern ocean, where Vishnu couches upon Ananta, while the divine craftsman, unburdened, returned in peace to his work.

And indeed, next morning there appeared at the great gate of Indra's palace, surrounded by a cluster of children infatuated by his beauty, Vishnu himself in the form of a ten-year-old, blue-black boy attired in a white dhoti, with a bright religious mark painted on his forehead, a parasol in one hand and a pilgrim staff in the other. "O Porter," he said to the porter at the gate, "hurry and let your Indra know that a Brahmin has come to see him." Which the porter promptly did. And when Indra then arrived to greet his guest and beheld that smiling, beautiful child, he gladly invited him in. And having welcomed him with an offering of honey and milk and fruits, he asked: "O Venerable Boy, pray tell me the purpose of your coming. " Where-upon that lovely child, with a voice as soft and deep as of a gently thundering cloud replied, "O King of Gods, I have heard of the wonderful city and palace that you are building, and have come to refer to you a few questions that are in my mind. How many more years do you expect to spend in this magnificent construction? What further engineering feats will be required of Vishvakarman? O Greatest of the Gods, no Indra before you has ever completed such a residence."

Full of the wine of his triumph, the god broke into a loud laugh, “Indras before me?” he said. “Tell me, Child, how many might those Indras or Vishvakarmans be whom you have seen, or of whom you may have heard?”

The brahmin boy laughed as well. “My child,” he answered; and his words, though gentle, delightful as nectar to the ears, sent through Indra, slowly, a chill: “Kashyapa, your father, I knew, the Old Tortoise Man, Lord Progenitor of All Creatures; also, Marichī, your grandfather, a saint whose only wealth lay in his devotion; likewise, Brahmā, offspring of the world-navel of Vishnu; and Vishnu, too, I know, the Preserver of Brahmā.

“O King of Gods, I have beheld the dreadful dissolution of the universe, when everything, every atom, melts into an immense sea, empty of life. No one can say how many universes there may be, or how many cycles of ages in each universe there may ever have been; how many Brahmās, how many Vishnus, how many Śivas. O King of Gods, there are those in your service who hold that it might be possible to number the particles of sand on earth, or drops of rain that fall from the sky, but no one will ever number all the Indras.

“The life and kingship of an Indra last, according to the divine standard of measure, seven eons; and the period of twenty-eight Indras amounts to one day and night of Brahmā. Brahmā’s length of life is 108 years, according to that standard [108 x 4 = 432]. My Child, not to speak of Indras, of those Brahmās there is no end. Brahmā follows Brahmā. One sinks, the next arises. Nor can anyone estimate the number of the universes, side by side, at any moment of time, each containing a Brahmā, a Vishnu and a Śiva. Like delicate boats they float upon the fathomless, pure waters of the body of Mahā-Vishnu. And like the pores of the body of that Great Vishnu, those universes are numberless, each harboring no end of gods such as yourself.”

A procession of ants in military formation had made its appearance on the floor of the great hall during the discourse of that beautiful boy, and when he saw them he laughed, but then fell silent and withdrew deeply into himself. Indra’s lips, palate, and throat had gone dry. “Young Brahmin, why do you laugh?” he asked. “And who are you, here in the guise of a boy? To me you seem to be the Ocean of Virtue, concealed in deluding mist.”

The magnificent child resumed. “I laughed because of those ants. The reason is a mystery. Do not ask me to disclose it. The seed of woe, as well as the source of all wisdom, is hidden in this secret. Like an ax it strikes at the root of the tree of wordly vanity; yet to those groping in darkness it is a lamp. Seldom revealed even to saints, buried in the wisdom of the ages, it is the living breath of ascetics, versed in the Vedas, who have renounced and transcended their mortality. But fools deluded by pride and desire it destroys.”

The boy sank into silence, smiling, and Indra, unable to move, his lips, palate, and throat parched, presently asked, humbly: “O Son of a Brahmin, who you are I do not know. You seem to be Wisdom Incarnate. Disclose to me this secret of the ages, this light that dispels the dark.”

Requested thus to teach, Vishnu in the guise of a boy opened to the god a hidden wisdom rarely revealed even to yogis. “O Indra,” said he, “those marching ants that we saw in long

parade, passing file by file, innumerable: each formerly was an Indra. Like you, each by virtue of selfless deeds once rose to the rank of a king of gods, but then, full of pride, self-serving, returned through many births to the condition of an ant. That was an army of former Indras.

“Piety and selfless deeds elevate the inhabitants of this earth to exalted spiritual estates: the condition of a brahmin, a king, an Indra, to the heaven of a Brahmā, a Vishnu, or a Śiva. But then, self-serving acts reduce them to the realms beneath, of sorrow and pain, rebirths among birds and vermin, or out of the wombs of pigs and beasts of the wild, or among trees. Action is a function of character, which in turn is controlled by custom. This is the whole substance of the secret. This knowledge is the ferry across the ocean of hell to beatitude.

“For all the animate and inanimate objects in this world, O Indra, are transitory, like dream. The gods on high, the mute trees and stones, are but apparitions in the fantasy. Good and evil attaching to a person are as perishable as bubbles. In the cycles of time they alternate. The wise are attached to neither.”

An old yogi had entered while the beautiful boy was speaking. His head was piled high with matted hair, he wore a black deerskin around his loins, on his forehead a white religious mark was painted, and on his chest was a curious circle of hair, intact at the circumference, but from the center many hairs were gone. Over his head he held a parasol of grass. And coming directly between the king and the boy, he sat down on the floor like a lump of stone.

Then the great and glorious Indra, recovering his character as king, bowed to his stern guest, paid obeisance, and having offered him refreshments, honey and milk and fruits, bade him welcome; whereupon the boy, doing him reverence, began to ask the very questions the king would have proposed.

“O Holy Man,” he said, “from where do you come?” What is your name? And what brings you to this place? Where is your present home? What is the meaning of the grass parasol over your head? And what is the portent of that circular hairtuft on your chest: why is it dense at the circumference, but at the center almost bare? Be kind enough, O Holy Man, to answer these, my questions. I am curious to hear.”

Patently the old saint smiled and slowly began his reply. “O Young Brahmin, Hairy is my name. I have come here to see Indra. Since I know that my life is to be short, I have decided to possess no house of my own, neither to marry, nor to labor. For the present, begging is my livelihood, and to protect myself from rain and sun, I hold this parasol over my head. But as to this circle of hair on my chest, it is to the children of this world a source of fear, yet productive also of wisdom. With the fall of an Indra, one hair drops out. That is why in the center all the hairs are gone. When the rest of the period allotted to the present Brahmā will have expired, I myself shall die. O Brahmin Boy, it follows I am short of days. Why therefore a house, a wife, or a son?

“When every blink of the eyes of Vishnu marks the passing of a Brahmā, it necessarily follows that everything is as insubstantial as a cloud taking shape and dissolving. I therefore devote myself exclusively to meditation on the eviternal lotus feet of Vishnu. Rest in

transcendent Vishnu is more than redemption, since every joy, even heavenly bliss, is fragile as a dream and only interferes with concentration on the Supreme.

“Śiva, the peace-bestowing, highest spiritual guide, taught me this wisdom,” said the old man as he vanished. The boy also disappeared. And the king, Indra, sat alone, bewildered and unstrung.<sup>15</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, par. 36–38,
2. This creative point corresponds in sense and function precisely to the Indian bindu (“drop”) out of which the original sound, *nāda* “shouted forth the universe.”
3. Plato, *Timaeus*, 90d.
4. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life,” in Roger Lipsey, (ed.), *Coomaraswamy*, 3 vols. Bollingen Series LXXXIX (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), Vol. 1, pp. 71 ff.
5. Plotinus II.9.16, cited and translated by Coomaraswamy, “Samvega: Aesthetic Shock,” in Lipsey, (ed.), op. cit., p. 185, note 10, addendum.
6. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), pp. 20–47.
7. *Ibid.*, footnote.
8. “Grimnismal,” 23; Henry Adams Bellows, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation; London: Oxford University Press, 1923) p. 93.
9. Julius Oppert, “Die Daten der Genesis,” *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*. Nachrichten, No. 10 (May 1877), pp. 201–223.
10. Kenneth H. Cooper, M.D., M.P.H., *Aerobics* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 101
11. See Theodore H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 281–306.
12. *The Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers* (Liber XXIV philosophorum), in *Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiete der Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte*. Festgabe zum 70. Geburtstag Georg Freiherrn von Hertling (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1913), p. 13.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht* (1901), par. 223.
14. James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* gives Anna Livia Plurabelle, the heroine of his dream book, the same polymorphous character, introducing throughout detectable references to her Hindu prototype, while casting H.C.E., her snoring spouse, in the role of Vishnu.
15. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇ-janma Khanda, 47.50–154. Translation following Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, edited by Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series VI (New York: Pantheon, 1946; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 3–11.

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