

COSMOLOGY without HEADACHES

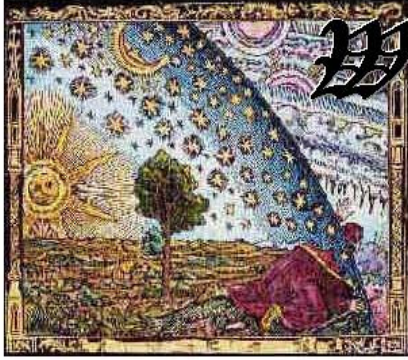
(Lecture Series)

(*compiling, transcribing, researching, editing in progress*)

Course Introduction:

To understand the currents of a river, he who wishes to know the truth must enter the water.

-Nisargadatta Maharaj



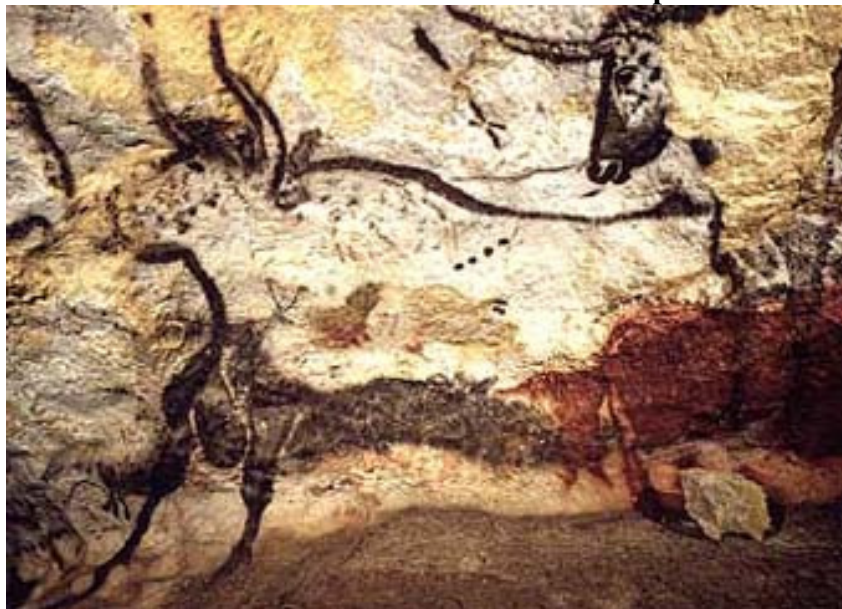
What is...? -- That is the primary question of consciously reflective beings, and presents the first problem for (*is*, in fact) the very basis of philosophy. What is *this*? What is *that*? What am I? What are we? What is the world? Of course we have no idea who first asked such questions; nor are the earliest answers recorded—and the first primitively recorded answers are hardly what we would call ‘philosophical’ in content or scientific in method. But answers (beyond “Who knows?”) were surely attempted as soon as the question could be framed.

The answers were of major significance in the development of early cultures, in the formation and character of every civilization, and in each society’s growth, prosperity, decline, and in its ultimate demise. As we generally equate primitive faith with magic, and since the most modern view has found science incapable of satisfactory answers to the big questions posed above—and is perhaps even misleading—we shall have much to do with religion and philosophy in our examination of evolving world views. After all, there is more to the Cosmos than meets the eye.

The idea here is not to ridicule or to kill faith nor to urge adoption of any particular religion, but to explore it more deeply with respect to how it has influenced and has in turn been influenced by the various and evolving concepts of Cosmos—the All—and how this interaction of reason and revelation affects the growth and decline of human cultures and thus the shaping of civilization. Though we will deal at first with civilization generally, after our discussion of the ancient Greeks we will concentrate on Western civilization, since it is the only one to have lifted itself out of the various ancient, non-progressive views, to have demythologized the cosmic works, and to have continued in its development by following the path of reason into what is called modernity. The modernizing West, through the method of science, has not only discovered much about the working of nature and the Universe, but has put these lessons to use in attempting to improve the lives of humans, and thus has invented the idea of progress. We can argue whether or not such ‘progress’ has actually improved or proved detrimental to the world at large, but we cannot deny the West its due in making it possible.

Does the world actually impose itself upon us as it is, or is it all about what we think of it, or some reasonable middle ground whereby subject and object are entangled? This course is about how we have come to our vision of the world; to our understanding of the Universe, and about how we have been shaped as individuals and as a culture—and are even now being shaped—by our changing perceptions of the Cosmos.

LECTURE I: Dawn of Consciousness and Conceptualization



A course essentially about thinking might well begin with the beginning of that process. We would reasonably seek the very earliest answers to the ‘*What is?*’ questions among the earliest of Mankind. With no written records of such quests, we must make do with what shards of evidence we can find. In the caves and at the living areas of the earliest men, or proto-men, we find evidence of thought about the future, ironically, in burial customs. Death is dealt with in a manner beyond the power of beasts, who know it only by direct confrontation. The higher orders seem to feel a loss and express confusion, even apparent sorrow, but have no way of resolving it except forgetting. Early man is distinguished by his expectation of death, the horror of it resolved by denying it; making of it merely a passage to another life, or even expecting resurrection—an idea generated by observation of the cycle of life, clarifying that death and decay give way to new and variegated life. The animal cults, such as that of the great cave bear among Neanderthal (e.g., *Drachenlach*), show a respect for life as something shared; perhaps an inkling of guilt, thereby, over the taking of life along with the understanding of the need for death (death of the bears and of other animals, both predators and prey; death even of the elderly and infirm) in the interest of tribe survival and health of the group. The death-life relationship, the concept based on experience that death not only preserves life but even seems to produce it, very likely fostered the notion of the life-essence or spirit returning in another form. This may have led to the expectation that death was but another phase of life—for ‘man’ and for the animals; that the killed animal’s spirit survived and might somehow negatively affect the lives of the killers, particularly by bringing ill fortune to the hunters. The need for appeasement may have led to what now appears as animal worship through rites of gratitude, praise, and careful preservation of the remains; rituals and practices not significantly different, in the earliest days, from those accorded deceased family members and fellow tribesmen. Eating the animals’ flesh and wearing their skins, etc., might endow the hunter with the great life power and perhaps ferocity and/or natural wisdom of the slain beasts. Moreover, if they could gain in turn their respect, the souls of the dead prey might lend assistance, bringing good fortune.

This ritualizing concerning the animals has been assumed as worship by many experts in this field of study, bringing up the notion that here is the beginning of religion. But it is not clear that the animals were exactly ‘worshipped’ in the full meaning of that term. It is not at all established that the bears were somehow considered gods, or that there was any conception of a supernatural power, nor for these primitive proto-men was there any thought of a ‘beginning’ of all things: of cosmogenesis—or even a universe. They lived, if not completely in the present like the higher beasts, at least in an immediate world rather than a theoretical one. The spirit world to them was not unnatural or supernatural, but as real as the material world—just another aspect of what Joseph Campbell calls “animal economics: *nutrition, reproduction, self- and species-preservation, the building and defense of nests, leisure-time entertainment, and the comforting of wounds.*” We cannot safely read back our highly developed sense of wonder and our concept of body/mind or life/spirit duality, with all its philosophical sophistication (or baggage) accumulated since the rise of civilization, into the barely opening minds of our distant ancestors and presume that we understand the worlds of the misty past as they did—or *better* than they did. It would seem more reasonable to grant, per the admonition of Andre Leroi-Gourhan, one of the most scrupulous of scholars in this field, only the minimum understanding demanded by the evidence uncovered. He has refused to accept as proven any pre-historic concepts beyond what is actually evident in the ‘finds,’ and he refuses to interpret imaginatively even what is evident. Regarding the bear cult discoveries, for instance, he admits to an order of interests on the part of Neanderthals (whom he does not regard as of *sapiens* rank) that are, “...not confined to eating and drinking.” Regarding certain artifacts he says:

That the extraordinary should have been explicitly perceived, warrants a strong presumption in favor of an intuition of the supernatural, though probably not in the sense in which we have conceived of it for some millenniums. . . Certain facts sufficiently well authenticated suffice to show that practices not related to techniques of the material life existed before the period of *Homo sapiens*; we may call them religious because they testify to interests beyond those of the vegetative life.

LET US DIGRESS FOR A MOMENT TO PEER THROUGH THE MODERN LIBERAL LENS AT THE SPIRIT WORSHIP/APPEASEMENT IDEA:

From these comments it would seem reasonable to assume that Prof. Leroi-Gourhan does not distinguish humanity by thoughts of the future or even by religion. Where, then, lies the difference between human and non- or sub-human? There are two possible answers:

One, that the order ‘human’ is not restricted to *Homo sapiens*. In that case we must ask where the line ought to be drawn between humans and others—if not between us and Cro-Magnon or Neanderthal or Java Man, how about *Homo habilis*, or *Homo erectus*? Is Zinjanthropus then human?—Australopithecus? —the anthropoid apes of today, some of which (*whom?*) have learned, through sign language and/or by computer interface to ‘speak’ with us across the once thought impenetrable species divide)? In the interest of

organizing a science of anthropology, assigning the prefix, ‘homo’ to the arbitrary names of certain two-legged, Paleolithic beings has tended to skew our judgment of their status in this regard. In judging whether their behavior is human, or semi-human, or sub-human, or non-human, we must define what is naturally and/or actually human.

Now the question arises: Is our behavior human just because we so behave? I.e., does our behavior, simply because we call ourselves humans, define humanity?—and, if so, the definition is not static, but adaptive: changing over time as our behavior changes, such that certain early behavior that was once human, or thought to be, is no longer so. Or, is it possible there is something natural about humanness, and that, with the advent of our achievements in the manipulation of nature—with the very recent idea of the conquering of nature—we moderns have superseded human behavior as we have stepped beyond nature, partly evidenced by our excess of technology? Have we become, then, superhuman, or simply *a*-human in the process of becoming amoral and *a*-natural? Or,

TWO, that there is no difference—no difference in kind, but only in degree. [Mention here Mortimer Adler’s book: *THE DIFFERENCE IN MAN AND THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES*; Holt, Rinehart & Winston, NY, 1967.] If we accept this answer, there is no point in drawing lines, since we now know, at the microbial level, that even the line between living and non-living things is blurred. How then can we distinguish what is human from what is sub-human, or proto-human, or protoplasm? The answer to that is, we make it up. We determine it. We notice differences—first in appearance, then in behavior, then in structure—and we conceive of other, more subtle distinctions. The more stark the perceived differences, the less likely are we to allow the ‘other’ into our ranks. But are these differences of natural significance?—differences in kind? Or are they merely arbitrary differences—lines we have drawn simply for our own use in our efforts to organize, thus to make sense of—thus to help in conquering—the world? But in conquering, we also destroy. The more recent, modern-liberal idea of humanness includes *humaneness*. (Is this not an idea of how humans *ought* to be, rather than what they are—and in that sense a retreat to classical political philosophy; i.e., a rejection, unwittingly, of the oft-maligned early hero of modernity, Machiavelli?) Destruction is bad, in this view [not Machiavelli’s, but the modern-liberal), because the other is *not* distinguishable from us—therefore, *is* us. The guilt over destruction of the other—the eating of the other—returns us to the situation of the prehistoric cave-bear cults and their appeasing the spirits. They sought some resolution of their guilt, but not by becoming vegetarians, since neither did they know agriculture nor did they live in a biblical paradise with nutrients springing from the ground and falling from the trees. Take a long walk through one of our large wilderness preserves and see if you could figure out what is edible and sufficient for human nutrition without hunting or trapping. Prehistoric guilt was resolved not only by prayer and sacrifice but by respecting and preserving the inedible parts of the corpses of their enemies/victims, thus to influence the spirits.

Enslavement to the spirit world through guilt and worry over possible punishment or retaliation via bad luck was eventually overcome by establishment of the idea of the ‘difference in kind’. Humans—or, at first, only the members of a given race or tribe—were seen as radically different than other beings. The gods were tribe-connected; the whole (if relatively little-known) world existed for the tribe; for them, alone. The ‘other’ was either fitted into the given cosmic order, or was feared, avoided, or extinguished as unnecessary or as evil—perhaps a creature of another, darker power in conflict with that

which created and guided ‘us’. Thus ‘we’ (our tribe or race) could kill and conquer and enslave without guilt. Not only that, we could do so in service of our gods and our way of life—for the benefit of our tribe or cult. Such action, offensively or defensively, even came to be seen as a command from the beyond to kill or abuse the representatives of rival gods or of new and threatening ideas or ways. With the decline of the ‘difference in kind’ view—that is among ‘progressive’ civilizations—due mainly to the blurring of the lines by modern scientific investigation, and to the concept of universal sharing of the one and only God, we have, in modern times, begun a renewal of our kinship with all-life through the equally shared miracle of being. So we now feel a resurgence of that guilt; especially acute now as science provides ever more efficient tools for conquering nature, thus establishing our responsibility for the maintenance of life on Earth.

On the other hand, also at the hand of science, God is now dead. The calculus blots out the Bible. We are losing faith in the influence of ritual upon the physical world. Belief in our ability to appease spirits of the dead is in decline, and with it, in even more rapid decline, goes belief in the ability of the spirits (if any) to affect our lives. So, to overcome our rediscovered and intensified sense of guilt over not only the taking of life but over the failure to prevent death and extinction of species and even worldly suffering and sorrow, we have no recourse but to cease the killing. As it is natural (Nature’s way) that life thrives on death, the proto-men got that right: ceasing the killing means our own extinction. But we are guilty even in that. Extinction, like execution, does not blot out guilt. If we, the newly enlightened, super-civilized ones, cease to exist, we free the rest of life (the unenlightened barbarians and beasts) to go on eating each other. So, if we must end our awful and failed reign over the Earth by self-extinction, yet we cannot allow our particularly guilty Western civilization to commit this suicide—at least not until:

ONE, we have *all* other civilizations and groups of all kinds on-board—i.e., the others (some, a small minority perhaps, still enclosed in a pre-historic, spirit appeasing mind-set; others, in the billions, still clinging to the pre-modern, guilt-free concept of ‘difference in kind’) have been persuaded to relinquish their ‘ignorance’ (or we conquer them and extinguish those beliefs, if necessary—and it probably would be necessary—by extinguishing the believers [which we cannot do without overwhelming guilt, but *must* do to stop their ignorant and wanton destruction of all-life]); and,

TWO, all other species—all life forms to be left behind after our purposeful, self-sacrificial demise—have been taught or trained not to prey on one another. But then, as it is the eternal *tao* of nature that life progresses by death, life would no longer progress.

This is, of course, absurd; the very level of absurdity reached by the logical extension of every philosophy. We could never extinguish all these varying beliefs; nor train or teach the wild beasts to starve themselves and stop procreating so that death could ultimately reign in peace throughout the Universe. In fact, if we are to somehow manage a reduction in the killing, we must control it, not end it. We must remain alive and well to do so. To remain alive and well, we must partake in the controlled killing of others, both predators and prey; not kill ourselves. In that sense, it seems Nature can be manipulated—to a degree as yet unknown—but she cannot be conquered. The suicide of mankind (as the ‘Anti-Nature’) will simply put the lion and the crocodile; the insect and the worm; the forest and the grass; the microbe and the virus back on their thrones.

NOW TO RETURN TO THE PALEOLITHIC WORLD:

This death-as-passage idea led quite naturally, if not so quickly, to an anthropomorphing of the after-life. I.e., the dead were only different from the living in that they were invisible, thus the providing of ‘invisible’ artifacts and weapons—even servants and kin to adorn, protect, assist, and accompany the dead in the next world. This indicates a presumption on the part of such cultures that the ethereal world of the spirits was not exactly what we would consider ‘heavenly.’ In essence, it seems not much different from the natural world in that weapons and assistants and food are needed—or, perhaps only the spirits of weapons, assistants, and food. Burying weapons and food and utensils with the body may have seemed the most reasonable means of so supplying the deceased with necessities. The desire to provide spirit-servants to a deceased chieftain, or person of high importance led quite logically to human sacrifice. Of course, the prehistoric people did not have a concept of ‘humanity,’ and it would be presumptuous to think they saw themselves as superior to the animals. In fact, many groups seem to have considered the animals superior—at least the most outstanding and important ones. There seems to have been a fundamental but not philosophically fleshed-out concept of ‘all-life’ that went into decline in the transition to modern culture, but, which, since Darwin, has seen a resurgence, especially with the recent explosion of the environmental movement, particularly among ‘vegans’ and PETAns. But with this new movement, after having been elevated for so many centuries above the beasts, we do not deign to descend again to their level, but rather raise them up toward us, providing them with whatever dignity we have earned for ourselves—or which has been earned painstakingly, and passed on, if unwittingly rather than generously by our many layers of ancestors—a level of dignity only reachable by the human mind—not that every mind achieves it. We are now on the verge of granting rights to the beasts (lawyers are representing laboratory animals and even pets in court – [mention the novel about the aborigine slave-killing, a sacrifice made to force English law to recognize their humanity (or not) by punishing the killer (or not). FIND IT for recommended reading list] – and all this taking place in the same historical era that has cast doubt on the very nature of rights, *per se*. In some modern ‘philosophies,’ even nature is seen as ‘invented’ by Man as we, intellectually, lapse again into total uncertainty.

But again we have been diverted; a digression, which will be renewed from time to time as we move through this history.

In addition to artifacts from the dawn of humankind, mostly grave goods, there are stories still told today that have come down to us from somewhat nearer than Paleolithic, but still primitive times; verbal descriptions of the beginning of ‘peoples,’ and even as to how the world was made; stories altered and embellished substantially, we must expect, by the eons and the layers of ancestors through which they have filtered. Research has found patterns in these stories (as also found by Carl Jung in his ‘archetypal’ dream elements) that surprise many people at first encounter. In many of the tales there is no prime creation, but a god or gods already existing in the world; gods who manipulate the already existing things such that they improve the pre-world, or make it more variegated. Those that do deal with a beginning of everything generally accept an *a priori*, anthropomorphic creator who lives in or arises from darkness. Usually, his first act

is to somehow create light so he can see what he is doing. Earth is either already in existence, or he causes it to be, and to rise out of the water, which is almost always pre-existing and usually contained by the sky. The living things, plant and animal creatures he usually grows on his body, or pulls them out of his organs, including humans—at least the first humans. Or, in some versions, he shapes them from mud or rock.

Here is one such story from Africa, where we ought to expect to find the very oldest of ideas:

UNUMBOTTE (remarkable that ‘un’ or ‘unum’ is widely found as a root word for ‘one’ in modern languages) creates a human (Man); also he makes Antelope, and Snake—only 3 individuals, plus one palm tree. But he must have given Man a wife, too, because she is referenced later in the story. He gives them seeds to plant (but we know not from where—presumably created also by Unumbotte). One seed grows into a tree with red fruit, which Unumbotte comes and eats once in a while. Snake advised everyone to eat the fruit. Antelope was speculative, and said “We don’t know anything about this fruit.” Man & wife ate some, and Unumbotte questioned them about that. They said Snake told them to do it. He asked why they listened to Snake (we don’t know their response—presumably something like ‘it seemed like a good idea at the time’). Unumbotte then gave Antelope grass to eat, and gave sorghum, yams, and millet to Man, and people (presumably the offspring of Man and his wife) gathered about to eat from bowls in groups—but never from the bowls of other groups. From this, different languages arose.

Bassari—northern Togo.

In the islands and near the sea-shore, such as best represented by Polynesian culture, the creator is normally, as one might expect, a sea-god (Tarroa, or Tangaroa, or Tanoa, or Kanaloa) who creates everything, including, for the Polynesians, a heaven or paradise called Hawaii.

In meso-America the images are similar: The *POPOL VUH*, Guatemala: There was only sky and the bounded sea and nothing else, darkness; plus the Creator and the Maker (Tepeu and Gucumatz—those that engender) living in the waters. They gave forth an increasing light. They planned creation and brought the earth into being. (After that, they needed another god to help them with the climate, Huracan, whose origin is not explained—nor are origins known of Huracan’s comrades or assistants, Long Flash and Short Flash).

The Quiche people—Mayan

Usually these beginnings were thought by the tribe to have happened only a few generations before, not tens of thousands, or millions, or billions of years ago. But there were fairly early cultures that had the Universe emanating naturally, in stages from the void. A *Pima (Native American)* legend has it – almost – that Man came forth out of the darkness and created everything out of himself. How modern is that?!

The majority of these stories, those with anthropomorphic creators; creators who either always existed, or whose power of creation made them obviously immortal—i.e., unending—brought with them, if only implicitly, an expectation of an afterlife. The dead joined the ‘invisibles,’ in the lore of certain African tribes, thus implying a soul. Since it was plain enough that the body can be killed, or it just stops working and decays (or is eaten), this further implies an on-going spirit world. Hope and fear combined to conceive of an interaction between life and afterlife. One hoped for and wanted to believe in an

afterlife, even while one dreaded the prospect that the dead lived on in spirit and had the power to affect the living, possibly to retaliate. To influence that power toward the positive, the dead were remembered, respected, elevated, consulted, even worshipped. Hypnotic chants and rhythmic drumming or hand-clapping; exhaustion from fasting and dancing; the incredible masks conjuring gods or spirits from the unknown; the ecstasy and/or horror engendered by bloodletting sacrifices; powerful medicines and hallucinogenic substances combined with one's own dreams and the facing of the ultimate mystery of nature and existence, all these promoted altered states, along with the evolution of the idea that, if one could actually approach death, or draw it near without actually dying, perhaps one could glimpse into that spirit world. Thus came into being the shaman, the medicine man, and the priesthood—those who could, somehow, at will and convincingly, via trance and ritual and drugs and at personal risk, reach across that chasm. They, understandably, achieved great respect and social prominence from such wondrous ability. In some African and early American tribes, and apparently among Australian aborigines, common tribesmen were encouraged to visit 'dream-time.' Such visits are the subject of much of the rock paintings found in western America, and which still occurs, today, in basically similar paintings of certain African societies.

They may have had a wrong idea of the physically manifested cosmos, but they seem to have had insight into the mind/spirit dimension that we, through our tried and trusted method of 'knowing,' have lost. They 'knew' the mystical realm first hand—by experience—one might say 'empirically.' They entered it through trance and rituals, including fasting, dancing, and/or drugs, and based on firm belief that what they experienced in the dream-time was as real as rock, perhaps even the foundation of the material world—but that is probably reading our own advanced concepts into their necessarily different, pre-philosophical thought and expression. They explored that spirit world individually, as only one can, but they found a way to share the experience. They made sacred paintings and drawings of what they saw, and thus, as best they could, organized the spirit world—as we have organized the stellar world and the chemical world and the biological world—with artistic renderings and symbolism. They left their records, their 'books,' on the walls of the darkest caves for us to discover, to decipher, and thus to share their dream-traveling as much as 30,000 years later.

Begin reading:

TEXT BOOK 1

Steven Shapin,
THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION;
Univ. of Chicago, 1996