

"LIFE 'OUT THERE': WHY SUCH FASCINATION?"

When was it that "out there" became a noun? Maybe not long after the "Hill St. Blues" sarg, at every dismissal of the police corps, said "Be careful out there!" The noun first meant the dangerous urban streets. Then it widened to include every dangerous venue beyond "in here," each person's private world. It has been further enlarged to mean astrophysical space beyond what science-worshiper Carl Sagan called "the tiny blue dot" (earth as seen from Jupiter). It could even be stretched (but has not been) to mean transphysical (meta-physical, supra-natural) reality, God & the trans-human personal creation (bright-angelic, dark-demonic).... This session & Thinksheet have to do with these last two meanings.

1 No matter what you think of UFOers or life-on-Mars meteorites or astro-audio-telescopes patiently silently saying "Anybody out there?"--no matter your opinion of all this (& mine's dim), please think about the whole business as a **basic religious response** to that realm of reality Rudolf Otto well named *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the overwhelming, impenetrable Mystery causing, within our depths, such fear that we want to flee & such fascination that we want to stay).... A few questions:

(1) Focus in on the feelings you've had about the three items in the first clause of the sentence before this one: do those feelings, vis-a-vis any/some/all of the three, include fear? fascination? both?

(2) What are your opinions vis-a-vis the three items, & how do those feelings & these opinions interrelate?

(3) In this Thinksheet's introductory ¶, I said that "out there" could mean (but at least has not yet come to mean) the spiritual realm-level-dimension beyond "nature" & therefore (natural) "science." What feelings/opinions do you have that are (a) common to both the latter & the former, (b) responses to one but not the other?

(You are called to be an explorer of the space "in here" between your ears. Writing your answers to these three questions--especially if you use the paper's space to visualize your answers-responses--would make you a better explorer. You could be surprised at your discoveries!)

2 Historical philosophers talk about **category-formation**, how ideas get planted & sprout & spread (like the branching system of a tree & the dendritic system of the brain) till they touch other developing ideas & idea-systems (philosophies, theologies, ideologies). Today in our garden, Loree & I were speculating as to why, of two contiguous begonia plants, one's magnificent & the other is runty: same soil, amt. of sun-water-wind, so there must be something wrong with the runt. In history, some ideas prove magnificent, some runty.

Is "life 'out there'" a magnificent idea or a runt? We know the criteria for distinguishing between runty & magnificent begonias, but are UFOs a magnificent (true) or runty (false) idea? Nobody knows--or do you think *you* do?

3 Historically in all civilizations we know much about, "out there" interests flourish when "in here" (external living conditions, interpersonal & intergroup relationships, & personal inner life) are (a) precarious, anxiety-producing, hope-quenching or (b) boring from satiety. Many passages in the Egyptian Book of the Dead illustrate the latter: upper-class Nile life is so "good" that the bored soul yearns for the afterlife beyond mortality, the all-"good"-canceling ("The Gate between Heaven and Earth stands open, / Glad is my path").

Resist the temptation to geographical determinism when you consider that the geographically-secure Egyptians longed to go up (at death, in the Sun god Ra's chariot) & the geographically insecure Jews longed for "Heaven" to come down to deliver them from their enemies & related afflictions: "out there" was not a place to go to but the place for their God's "anointed" (Heb., **messiah**) to come from as a prophet (the prophetic messiah), priest (the hieratic messiah), &/or king (the royal messiah of David's line). (This variegated messianic picture is laid out in great detail in Jn. J. Collins' *THE SCEPTER AND THE STAR: THE MESSIAHS OF THE DEAD SEA AND OTHER ANCIENT LITERATURE* [Doubleday/95].)

4 So what, fundamentally, does the Bible have to say about "out there"? (1) That

*The apocalyptic down-direction intensified after the (AD70CE) loss of Jerusalem, its Temple having been the religion's earth-land center.

it is not sky/space but heaven, the home of "Our Father who art in heaven"; (2) That it is whence our salvific (life-saving) help comes; (3) That that help comes as three divine "sendings" (angels, the Son as God incarnate, the Holy Spirit); & (4) That God's consummation will embrace both "out-up there" & "in-down here," as "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev.21.1). (Jesus, Son of the Father, fulfils-completes the messiah category in the offices of Prophet, Priest, & King.) The Bible warns us against the idolatry of focusing our fascination on "the creature [nature, space, the merely physical "out there"] rather than on the Creator" (Ro.1.25). The Bible is anti-idolatry, not anti-science: natural science has flourished best where biblical religion has, by engendering devotion to the Creator, freed the creature (nature) from the the trammels of sacrality (including untouchability, the taboo against using the scientific method to explore "nature" [the creature's name in distinction from the Creator]).

5 While he believed there's no evidence for the existence of God or of life "out there," Carl Sagan believed in the latter but not the former: life "out there" would **confirm** his materialist holism (the doctrine that the nonmaterial is "myth" & not entitled to the category "reality"), but belief in God would mess up his paradigm, which could find no room for God (as the first cosmonauts reported no evidence of God in space). I'm not so narrow-minded: life "out there," if any, would fit nicely into my belief in God....#2828 details what happened when in the press, as an obit, I accused C.S. of narrow-mindedness: a swarm of his devotees attacked me. And I do mean devotees: his mix of science & atheist mysticism, + his celebrity manipulation of the media, gave him demigod status (as Princess Di, a clever masseuse of the media, had demigoddess status)....It's a fact one need not be cynical about: human beings are more interested in confirmation of their commitments than they are in truth. I find that fact more fascinating than whether there's "life 'out there'."

6 "Life 'out there'" is fascinating because of the human hunger for the **weird** (the different, the odd). Asked last week what he has on his nightstand, Alan Dershowitz said "The Bible, which I read every night before sleep, & WHY PEOPLE BELIEVE WEIRD THINGS. People believe weird things because the Bible is so full of them." How come God, who's weirder than any "life 'out there'" & so should be more fascinating, is for millions less fascinating than any possible "life 'out there'"? Because the multitudes in "the spiritual ice belt" (Martin Marty's term for the God-frozen-out territory westward from Austria through Japan) have been indoctrinated to be more wowed by (allegedly omniscient materialistic) "science" than by religion.

7 Would finding "life 'out there'" (a) be *ad maiorem dei gloriam* ("to the greater glory of God") **or** (b) make faith in God more difficult? Depends on whether your wineskin is young & flexible or old & brittle (Mt.9.17 & parallels). Millions lose their childhood God because they kept growing & he (inside them) didn't--occasioning J.B. Phillips' YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL. The path of the pious, who practice the presence of God throughout the stages of their life, "is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until the full day" (Prov.4.18 NRSV).

8 Psychospiritually, life "out there" is subtly related to life "after here": both the latter, if any, & the former have come to be assumed to be benevolent (ie, no bad guys out there [even though in the early scifi days, out there there were nothing but bad guys], & no hell). People yearn for something better to come **down** here (a yearning that in the later stages of the messiah-idea development in Judaism took the form of the heavenly messiah, in Christianity fulfilled by Jesus Christ as Savior & Lord).* The benevolence theme obtains even in most of the UFO-abduction stories, as it does also in most New Age preachments of metempsychosis (reincarnation) & of "soul" ascent, everybody going **up** to heaven after death. In commercial eschatology, "2001" presented us with a kindly guru who blessed Luke Skywalker with "The Force is with you." And a wish-fulfilment comes again & again as a command in "Star Trek": "Scotty, beam us up."....This Thinksheet asks "Why such fascination?" with "Life 'out there'"? Partly because it's exotic (Gk., for "out there"). Mainly because pagans are making an alternative religion of it. (Today, junk-bond ex-con Michael Milken told Charlie Rose that "Scotty, beam me up" gave him the courage to go on when he discovered he had late-stage cancer.)....In biblical perspective, the "out there" & "down here" & "in here" & "after here" realities are quite otherwise.