

# The Gap

It's all so simple. So wonderfully neat and orderly. There are 30 days to the month, and 12 months to the year, totaling 360 days. Thus the cycles of the earth, moon, sun, and stars are choreographed in a divine dance, the waltz of the ages. The celestial bodies, circumambulating the earth, like devotees at a stupa or young men around a beautiful woman, provide a measure, more regular than any clock, for our messy, turbid world here on earth. We still use the ancient Babylonian mathematics, in base 12 and base 60, in our clocks and calendars, and, significantly, the only other realm to escape metrification, the 360 degrees of the circle.

Stately, dignified and pure, the procession of the constellations makes a mockery of our sordid existence, so desperate and erratic. Raising his eyes from the practical exigencies of survival, man gazed in awe at the heavens. The Beyond. His study of the stars ushered in a new chapter in the history of consciousness. Worship of Mother Earth is all very well (especially from the comfort of a suburban lounge-room) but do we really want to believe that our ultimate destiny is a worm's belly? So mathematics became a tool to apprehend the divine. (Alas, how we have fallen!) Abstraction was the key. Pure ideas. One. Not 'one egg' or 'one potato', but just 'one'. Through his initiation into this immaculate realm, man could approach the divine and realize his true destiny as an eternal bright star; and so until today priests have been astrologers and mathematicians.

But there was a slight problem. A hitch. The figures didn't quite work out. Good enough for day-to-day practicalities, but disappointingly short of divine perfection. A month is not really 30 days, but 29 something. And a year is more than 360 days, 365 and, again, something. Bit of a worry. In between the concept and the reality falls the shadow.

Convinced that the apparent glitch merely masked a higher order perfection, the ancient priests learned to fast-forward and rewind the clock of the skys, searching for the great convergence of the celestial cycles, believing that there God would show his hand. They were stunned at the vast span of time revealed as their numbers became, well, astronomical. After the priests the philosophers continued the search, then the alchemists, then the scientists. They're still searching. Into that hole, that innocuous Gap, falls the whole of humanity's higher thought.

Now, of course, we sophisticates know that the coincidence of the cycles of days, months, and years is just that, a coincidence. And we know that the apparent perfection of the heavenly bodies is just an illusion created by distance. On the moon we found no gods, just barren rock. And what a miraculous fluke it was. If a month was, say, 17 days, and a month was, say, 350, with no obvious correlation between them, the ancients would not have seen God there. But if the cycles were too perfect, they would have stopped content with simple arithmetic. Indeed, so invaluable has been the Gap's contribution to humanity's prodigious intellectual achievements, I would like to propose that February 29 be declared the International Day of the Gap.

But the scientists, for all their brilliance, have yet to close the Gap. Scientific knowledge is itself predicated on concepts, on assumptions. 'A straight line is the shortest distance between two points.' So we learnt at school. Simple enough, a universal truth regarded as self-evident from the time of Euclid; until Einstein proved it wrong. Now it's only good enough, an approximation. The Gap again.

Science becomes ever more abstruse, its domain a dense maze of high-order abstractions that lead to conclusions so counter-intuitive they provoke the revelation of the spiritual aspiration underlying the endless hunt for the perfect theory. Frustrated in his attempts to dislodge Heisenberg's Ambiguity Principle – a classic piece of Gapwork – Einstein declared 'God does not play dice with the Universe'. In the Gap between the world and our descriptions of the world, there lurk the gods and devils, the fantasies and nightmares.

But the Gap haunts religion just as much as science. The problem of evil: how could a perfect God create such an imperfect world? There's no getting around this one. Immanence and transcendence: the poles between which God oscillates. As we bring God into the world, see Her as embodied in the world of nature, She becomes more and more soiled, harder to worship as the Holy, the Pure; in fact, more like a fishwife than a divinity. So we shoot for the stars, placing God on high and worshipping Him as an exalted Eternal, even as a cosmic principle; but He becomes ever more irrelevant to the pressing problems of our lives. How could such a One interfere in our lives, and why? The Gnostic Christians had a snappy answer to that one. Jehovah, the creator deity of the Old Testament, was an evil being. An eminently reasonable proposition, with no shortage of scriptural support, but hardly comforting.

Though the problem of evil has no philosophically tenable solution within a theistic system, it has a workable practical solution – ignorance. Turn a blind eye, create a cult of mindless obedience, and declare the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge to be the 'original sin'. Thus the Gap replicates itself like a virus, forcing a schism between religion and science. With our intellectual mother and father undergoing a traumatic, antagonistic divorce, the Gap manifests as the 'Western neurosis': alienation, materialism, competitiveness, repression.

Some propose to eliminate the Gap by denouncing all abstract thought. But this is a dangerous retrogression – dogs and cods are not enlightened. Regressing to correlative, pre-rational modes of thought – whether astrology, New Age, Christianity, or dreamwork – just increases the fuzziness of our knowledge. That irrepressible vice, hope, can all the more read faces in the clouds or stories in the flames. Rational thought is in fact very useful, a stepping stone on the path to enlightenment.

But reason cannot close the Gap either. Wherever we turn, there the Gap is, leering like a hag's toothless grin: in the cracks in the pavement, in the interminability of  $\pi$ , in the torturous reiteration of inner monologue already as familiar as a mother's nipple to a baby. There's a cliff in Sydney called The Gap, long familiar to locals as a great place to kill yourself. How apt.

The Buddha advised us to forget about trying to close the Gap. The more we try to close it, the bigger it gets. It's the desire to close the Gap that's the real problem, the wish to bridge the gulf between the glorious palaces of our imagination and the tacky shacks of our lives. The Buddha calls this 'craving for existence'. As long as we think in terms of a better state of existence, somewhere, sometime, we create a tension, a pressure, a differential, a potential. Just as heat wants to move from the hot to the cold, or air wants to move from a high-pressure zone to a low, so too we want to squirt ourselves into a future womb. Nature abhors a vacuum.

If we contemplate like this, the Gap becomes, not an adversary, but a teacher. It is in that space, that void, that we find peace. Provisionally, we employ the language of either immanence or transcendence. We are 'in the here-&-now', 'absorbed' in our meditation, 'staying with' the changing moods of our minds. Or we 'go beyond', 'cross over to the far shore', leave suffering behind. But these are just metaphors. Ultimately the least misleading language is emptiness. We aspire not to be one with the fabric of being, nor to perch on some distant pavilion on high, peering disdainfully down on pitiful humanity. No.

It seems odd that the ancients with their great mathematics never noticed the number zero. How could they overlook it, sitting right there next to one. Here it is:  $1-1=0$ . What could be simpler? But numbers are not discovered, they are invented. Why invent nothing? What use is it? It was the Indians who realized the power of zero and who, using the same word 'emptiness' that was fundamental to Buddhist philosophy, incorporated it into mathematics. A plain circle: nothing to it. The same circle, in fact, that is described by the stars in their procession. But the perfect circle is only found when there is nothing to describe it. As soon as we make a circle out of some material substance, the gravity of the circle itself warps the fabric of space; and as soon as we make a concept out of emptiness, the thought itself warps the fabric of consciousness.

When the fury of a hurricane is spent and gone, what happens to the eye?