

The Infinite Possibilities of Life

I think life has infinite possibility. And you must agree that the concept of infinity is no small thing! It's like that old song that is used to pass the time:

Infinity bottles of beer on the wall,

Infinity bottles of beer,

You take one down, and pass it around,

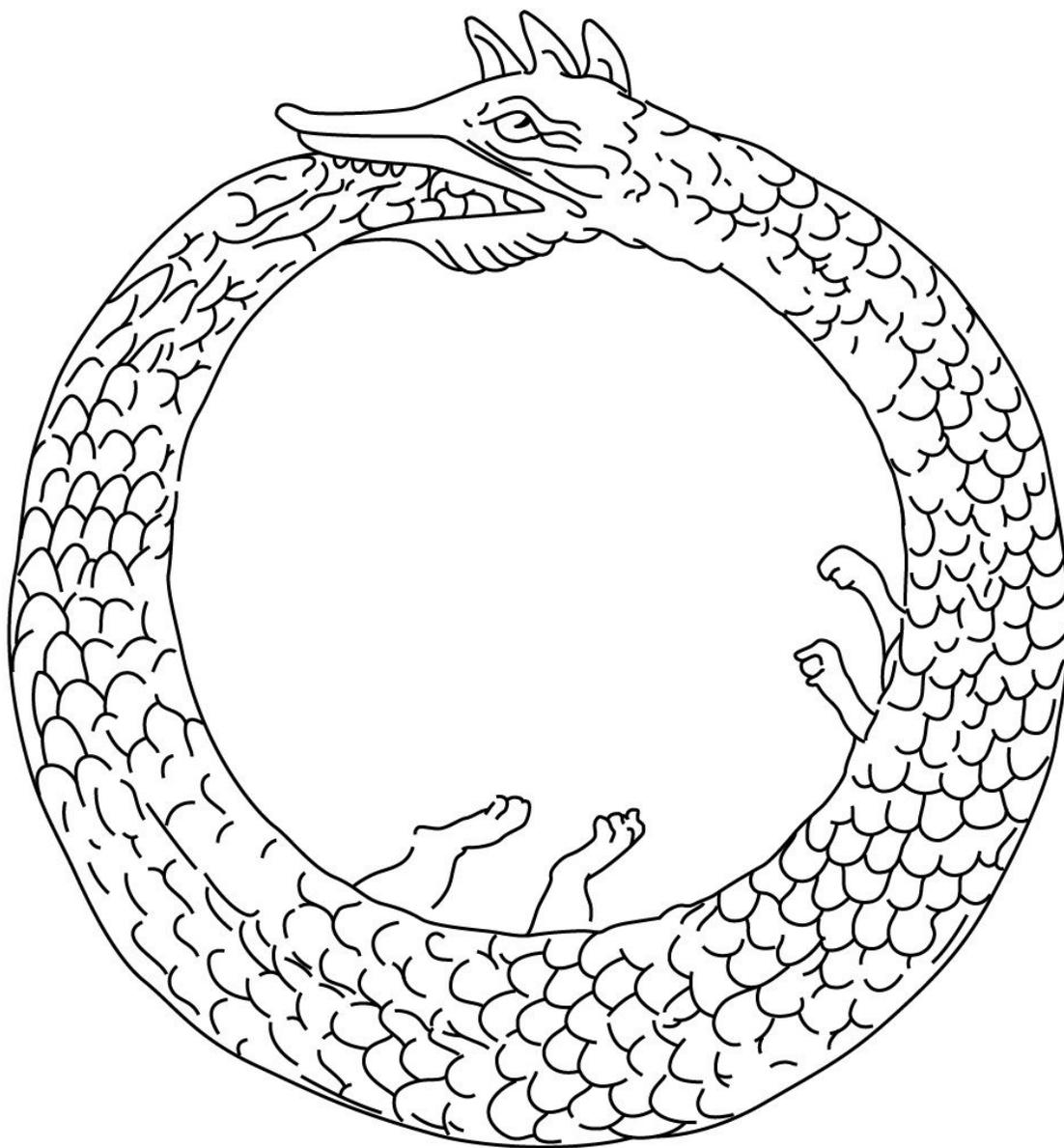
Infinity bottles of beer on the wall...

Life is dynamic, potent, and resilient, but the concept of infinity is so, SO much bigger than anything we can see or measure in our world. And we all know that life isn't perfect.

Is infinity even a real thing? We can't see it or touch it. Can infinity exist in a concrete sense? Is it just a dream, only something we can imagine?

The observable Universe as it exists appears to be anything but infinite. From its fiery beginning nearly 14 Billion years ago, our Universe has, to date, gone through tremendous changes. The fate of our physical Universe is very uncertain, but it seems quite possible that the long, dark, and cold night of entropy waits for this Universe after twenty billion years or so. If the Universe were a person, it would just be reaching "the prime of its life". So where does life fit in? If the Universe, which has given rise to life, is anything but infinite, how does it follow that life is imbued with infinite possibility?

I propose that it is crazy to think of life this way, and yet madness is positioned exactly at the base of humanity's expanding consciousness.



1487: Copy of a diagram by Theodoros Pelecanos,
reproducing a late 4th Century alchemical passage by Syneseus

First I want to share this visual aid: this is a symbol known as Ourobôros (yōōrə' bōrəs). The snake eating its own tail means many things, perhaps foremost, suiting our theme this month, it represents the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. It's an old symbol, in the West as old as the Egyptians, and similar figures are found in many of the world's cultures. From Scandinavia to India, Japan, and South America, the snake encircling the world is broadly shared. For some cultures, the snake biting its tail delimits the edge of the world—within its bounds we live our lives. Perhaps most intriguing, Ourobôros stands for the entirety of the Universe, it is in fact the “All-in-one”, this snake eating its tail is everything that exists.

Ourobôros consumes itself and continues to grow, and as a metaphor for our physical world that rings quite true. It is an ancient intuition of the conservation of matter and energy. And perhaps the tragic nature of the snake's entanglement touches upon the way life rides so tenuously upon the edge of entropy. This is a view of the Universe trapped, tangled into itself. This snake's existence was thought by some to be infinite, and yet this infinity is something tragically unsettling.

I want to use this symbol to give us a lense into our deep past, our evolution upon the African savannah, and then use the lingering symbol of Ourobôros to cut through three sequences of Western thought: the sequence of antiquity, of Christianity, and the modern sequence in which we find ourselves at the late stages.

Why would our ape ancestors have dreamt of a world-snake? For at least 120 Million years, that is, since there have been snakes, these creatures have done their utmost to devour whatever mammals they can squeeze down their ample gullets. This has literally bred into us a healthy fear, respect, and revulsion for snakes. But why the world as a snake? This idea strikes us as totally mad! But picture our neurotic ancestors having visions of a threatening snake in the dark beyond the hearthfire. This madness bred great wisdom. Surely the first of our primate ancestors to hallucinate such creatures were, in a very technical sense, insane, but by rebelling against the grain of a more closed consciousness, we advanced as a species, developing abstract representation. The rebellion against closed consciousness is what makes us human. Do you recall hearing of humanity's rebelliousness, a snake, and the birth of consciousness wrapped up in the story of humanity's beginning?

Our thinking is beset by snakes. We say of the man we cannot trust, "He is a snake." Conspiratorialists literally see the world's elite as "lizard people." The "snake in the grass" is the surprise threat within our social world. For our ancestors on the savannah, the borders of the world, and the world as a complete system was vast and unknowable. They had evolved to perceive the unknown as suffused with potential threat. We are the descendants of those who were both brave enough and smart enough to face the unknown and turn the world, rife with danger, to their advantage. In the transition from hunter-gatherers into settled farmers, this snake-like being of the unknown echoed

through our stories. In the Western tradition it is the dragon, hoarding treasure. In the East, the dragon showers wealth and luck upon the world. Two different philosophical views of the world's enigmatic, primal forces being both vastly more powerful than people, and the greatest source of wealth and wellbeing when dealt with prudently. How long has our humanity been driven forward by our craziest ideas?

In antiquity, the Greek and Roman worldview saw their gods and goddesses not as infinite, but as paradigms of *finite* existence, ideal beings, perfect within the finite possibilities of the world. The world which the gods rule clearly holds inherent flaws, after all there are floods and famines, diseases and disasters. Yielding to the capriciousness of the gods allowed the ancients to pattern their lives upon the world's abundance, while taking into account its unpredictability.

In their perfection, the gods are, despite their fickle tempers, immortal. While we may enjoy the fleeting pleasures of life, humans are inexorably bound by our mortal fate. When conceiving of the ceaseless cycles of death and destruction which beset life, the ancient Greeks saw this infinite possibility as nothing but Tragedy. Thus Ourobôrus exists as a tragic being, doomed to consume itself forever. The mad rebellion against this order should come as no surprise. What arose was the madness of love in the face of hopelessness.

In the Western context, Christianity changed everything. The concept of an infinite world beyond our world of woe, and the infinite Being residing in

that world who, in infinite wisdom created all things, allowed the human mind to dream big. A new future and a new possibility within the embrace of this infinite God provided hope, through the mediation of the Christ, for human beings to move beyond the tragedy of a finite existence bounded by suffering and death.

The genius of this new paradigm was twofold. In one sense, Christianity succeeds because it is profoundly atheistic. What do I mean? As God embodied in the Christ, is brutally killed, we are left to redeem our own souls by accepting grace and holding faith in something beyond this finite existence. And it is then the collective denial of Jesus's mortality, the insane belief in his immortality and our own, which binds the community together.

The second stroke of genius behind Christianity's great success over the course of these last two millennia is its philosophical expansion of our evolved, biological systems of empathy. Care and kindness for our kin has provided us with psychological ballast to weather the monotony and ruthlessness of existence. This network of trust and safety within human tribes allowed us to dream deep, and strive for each other's well being. The game of kindness also, I believe, spurred the development of more advanced consciousness - those who were more gracious, generous, and thoughtful with each other were not only more attractive as mates, but continuously bolstered their kin groups against the whims of an unpredictable environment, improving odds of survival. For us, survival of the fittest has long meant survival of the kindest.

This empathic neurology is then hijacked by the most radical aspect of Jesus's message, found in the gospel of Luke 14:26 *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple."* This verse remains problematic for "family values" Christians to this day, as the imperative is clear, and demands of the believer a rejection of anything less than the radical, universal love of all human kind by the disciple. Within the Christian world, then, this extreme, egalitarian, internationalist inclination helped propel the Church into its role as a stabilizing political entity, and allowed it to develop as a sanctuary of monastic scholarship, even if one limited by its dogmatic principles.

The rebels of Christian era were the alchemists. Through that long age they kept knowledge of Ourobôros alive. They rejected faith in the other world of God, and sought immortality within this world through the transmutation of matter. Their efforts were ultimately only successful as a discipline of self improvement through asceticism and the study of spiritual principles. They did however keep the cauldrons bubbling, the Bunsen burners burning as it were, and by the time Francis Bacon arrived, the Western world was ready for a new rebellion, this time one which fixated upon the myriad details of this elaborate world over which we found ourselves the masters.

Now, at the dawn of the modern sequence, we have three madresses colliding within the Western context. There remains the old fixation upon the

the infinite God and his other world. But a new madness emerged which has driven humanity to astonishing heights, this is the madness of counting the stars, naming the elements, identifying every species, plumbing the depths of geologic time. Science. An analytical finitude which ceaselessly develops human knowledge. The breadth of discovery washing over humanity radically decentered our culture. God died of a thousand cuts, and what was to be done in his absence? The madness of *nihilism* set in, a radically negative disavowal of the infinite, rejecting Christ's mediation, there is no salvation. Here there is no future of possibility. How much more useful was the inspirational insanity of the Christian sequence than the madness of *nihilism* which reduces the cycles of life to meaninglessness.

Thankfully we appear to have evolved a strong instinct toward self preservation. Hopefully it's strong enough to withstand the growing pains of a sequence far weirder than any that has come before. And it's weird because it's true! The development of modern scientific humanism is still a work in progress, but the fuel provided by the insane notion that we *can* discover absolutely everything to be known about the Universe has awakened in us, within the spirit of life, at least the strongest chance yet for infinite potential. If we can imagine peace on earth, then possibility abounds.

In closing I feel compelled to mention that, of all the ongoing discoveries being made, perhaps the most complicated scientific undertaking remains the inscrutable human mind. We have evolved to grapple with abstract concepts of

the unknown, and we have evolved stirring empathy, yet driving all of this is a trait that I believe predates the process of our evolution as living beings. It is our sense of longing, our restless spirit, a persistent desire, the lack at the core of our being that urges us on. Perhaps Ourobôros is also a fitting metaphor for this vexing lack. It isn't just a part of us, it *is* us, "there is no place where you get to the primordial lasting harmony, because to be you, to be a subject, is to live in and as the lack itself." As our knowledge of existence deepens, physicists bear out the fact that the fundamental stuff of the Universe is a constant state of uncertainty and flux. Conceived of as original sin in Christian theology, and implicit in the suffering described by the Buddha, this in-built anxiety fuels our lusts and ignites our hatreds, it becomes Freud's death drive and if roils as religious fervor. The drive underlies our recurrent need to reaffirm our sense of self.

There is no antidote, yet we have each other. The point of religious ritual is enjoyment. And we have the space to breath deep, quiet the mind, and allow *being* to unfold in present moment. We can realize that the lack is also life. Take the time and have the presence of mind to accept life. It is always happening right now.