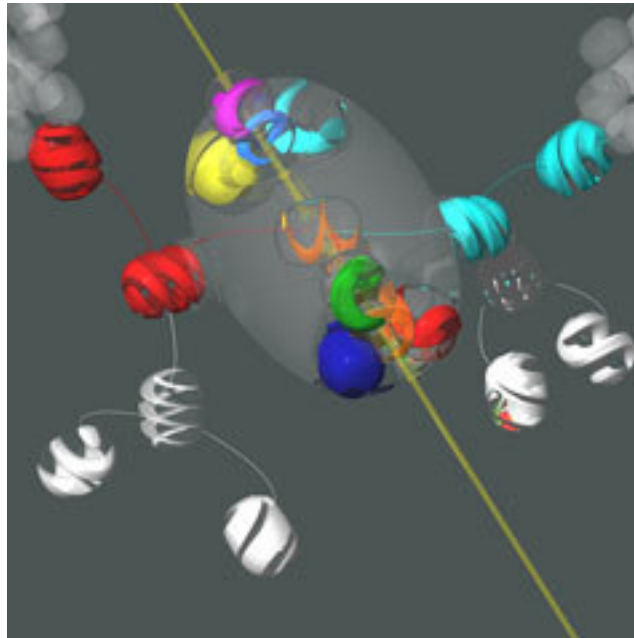
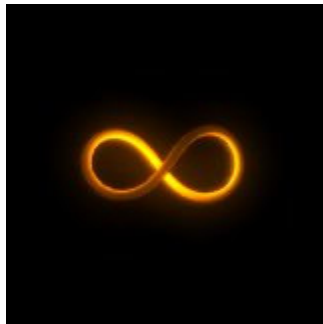


The Difference Between 1 and 2 by Kent Duryée



I believe that God exists within the concept and “place” known to us as infinity. My problem is that I often loose my grasp on this concept. I should say that I often loose my grasp on what I *think* is my concept of infinity, and therefore I loose my concept of what I *think* God may be. Everyone seems to have their own version, from Physicists to Janitors, Astronomers to Wal-Mart Greeters. Even Mathematicians have a concept of infinity. When I loose mine, as often happens because the entire idea is slippery, I begin reconstruction with the familiar example of the number line. I can easily imagine a set of numbers increasing to infinity to the right of zero. I can then, more often than not, grasp the fact that there is yet another set of numbers decreasing to that same infinity on the left of the zero.

I need to ground myself on the number line before taking this next step, because I'm almost certain that the idea of God, the idea of the infinite, exists in the fact that there is *also* an infinite set of numbers between 1 and 2 on the number line, and in turn an infinite set of numbers between those numbers, and so on. Is anyone up to carrying this on to its logical conclusion? Carrying it on, so to speak, until the cows come home? Of course, those bovines are herd animals, and as such wander constantly, never really making it home, unless they're prodded by some other, thinking animal. Yes, the herd mentality; tell enough people something utterly unbelievable often enough, and they'll believe it's true. Don't believe me? What about virgin birth and rising from the dead? Millions believe these things have happened. These facts, if true, should be of much comfort to parents of adolescents, and very bad news for undertakers everywhere. I merely point out the logical incongruity; I make no moral judgment.



For myself, I'm comfortable with letting the concept of God lie in the lofty realm of sleeping dogs and infinity. I don't require the concept of a personal god that I can pray to, or rather talk at, believing that this entity can cause something to happen that will make a difference in my life. Staring squarely into the face of infinity, my problems are so small as to be non-existent, so it would be quite presumptuous, dare I say useless, of me to try to lay something of mine so trivial at the metaphysical feet of something so

indefinably large. I'm humbled in the face of eternity, which I presume is also the face of God.

I've used the terms "indefinably large" and "indefinably small". How can something be either, let alone both? Rest assured that I will provide no answer to this riddle, because that answer would be a definition, and infinity, by definition, can't be defined. So, while many of us associate infinity with hugeness, I prefer to *descend* into infinity in order to discover its vastness.

Yesterday, I went for a walk in the desert, and I stumbled squarely upon God and the vastness of the infinite universe. My walk began at sunrise. There is a nice wash behind the house where Cactus wrens and Gila woodpeckers squawk and chatter, and where coyotes make regular forays in search of rabbits and squirrels to supplement their diet of trash stolen from my garbage cans. (These are sleek, suburban coyotes, bearing little resemblance to their scruffy, wild kin, what with their bushy tails, full, shiny coats, and haughty demeanor.) There is a pair of Harris hawks that make their home in a large mesquite tree between the wash and the house, and to round things out, a family of 20 or so Javelina call the ecosystem around the wash their home.

As I walked downstream, I was preoccupied with thoughts of God and the infinite. The desert is a good place to think about these things – after all, many have come here in the past to simply ponder the imponderables, or, on the other hand, to go slowly mad while pondering these things, under the blazing, life-giving, desiccating, killing sun – mad enough to see God face to face, or to scream prophesies of a savior at anyone who would listen. I'm not dressed in skins, but the crazed glint in my eyes was slow to fade.

In the wash, dry now after a series of heavy, drenching rains, I found much evidence of the late winter storms. At a bend, caught in the branches of a large Paloverde tree 10 feet above my head, was some debris which included a shirt and a deflated football. This flotsam had been deposited in the branches a couple of weeks ago when the wash contained a raging torrent of muddy water many feet deep, and marks the high water mark. Everywhere in the wash was evidence of the power of water. Huge boulders, ripped from the banks upstream had been rolled downhill and lay in the channel, draped with branches on their upstream sides. Still-alive, but uprooted, doomed and confused Mesquite and Paloverde trees slowly withered in the wash, branches buried in silt, their roots reaching in vain toward the sky.

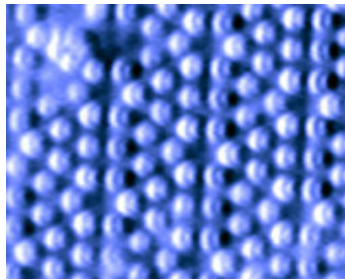


I leaned against a granite boulder that dwarfed me; it must have weighed in at 10 tons – I looked upstream from where it had come and pictured it, crashing and rolling down the channel, propelled by the sheer force of flowing atoms of gas: hydrogen and oxygen.

Held together by chemical and electromagnetic bonds, the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen form molecules of what everybody knows and recognizes as water, but the essential makeup of the stuff is undeniably gas. These atoms of gas in turn are composed of electrons, protons and neutrons; particles that whiz around a nucleus, forming what is

called the “atomic cloud”. Now, imagine the space between an orbiting electron and its nucleus within the atom: this empty space makes up most of the mass of the atom. What this means is that most of the matter in the Universe is made of...empty space.

(Physicists will no doubt argue that when the inter-orbital space appears empty, it’s actually filled with electromagnetic photons and something called the “weak force”, so the space is *not* empty, but that’s all just lingo for invisible stuff. The inter-orbital space can be thought of here, for strictly non-scientific purposes, as essentially empty.)



Now, since the space between the subatomic particles makes up most of the actual mass of the given atom, that means that atoms are made mostly of open space. Carried to the next logical step, since everything in the Universe is composed of atoms, everything must be mostly constructed of open space. It’s flawless logic, really.

As I leaned against my boulder, which was moved here by atoms of gas made up of mostly empty space, I pictured the atomic clouds mentioned above, and considered the orbiting subatomic particles. I was lead, kicking and screaming, deeper into subatomic space. “What”, I asked myself, “makes up those subatomic particles that go whizzing and whirring in a cloud-like frenzy around the atomic nucleus?” They have to be made of something, right?

Quarks and anti-quarks make up the subatomic particles. Quarks in turn come in several varieties: up, down, top, bottom, strange and charmed. My favorite, of course, is the charmed quark, followed closely by the strange one. Everyone should have a favorite quark.

From here, the argument descends still further into that realm of infinity existing between 1 and 2 on the number line, and into particles known as hadrons, gluons, fermions, and kaons. I'm sure you see where I'm going with this: what are the hadrons, gluons, fermions and kaons made out of? Next of course, what are *those* things made of? It goes on and on, descending endlessly into the vastness of infinity.



I adjusted my position on the boulder, and turned to look at a crystal of pink orthoclase feldspar. I looked at the silver-gray quartz crystals and the green-black plates of biotite mica that combine to produce granite. I turned my thoughts toward the silica, aluminum and potassium atoms that in turn combine together to produce the minerals in the rock. Then I descended again into the realm of sub-subatomic particles, and I leaped away from the boulder, convinced that all the empty space would collapse in on itself, and I was afraid that I would lose control of my Universe. Then there would be hell to pay.

It didn't. I didn't. There wasn't.

In fact, the empty space of the boulder stared back at me with a sort of infinite stoniness.

I inched closer, bending over to peer more intently at the boulder. I leaned in. I wanted to see *into* the boulder. My eyes widened, gaining that certain, crazed expression. I wanted to utilize the empty space those atoms and molecules are made out of to see *through* the boulder. I straightened up, the hair on my arms rising. If I saw through the boulder, I would necessarily see through the little mesquite tree standing behind the boulder. In fact, it occurred to me that were I able to see through the boulder and the mesquite, I would indeed be able to see through the Earth itself and out into the vastness of star studded space...but I wouldn't see the stars. I would see through them, too, since they're made out of subatomic particles, atoms, and molecules, and vast empty spaces, just like we are.

What *would* I see? Standing in the wash, the sun coming up orange and red in the cloudless eastern sky, with Brittlebrush and Marigold flowers standing brave and yellow against the muted sands of the wash, the boulder looming large and solid under my hand, I realized that I would be staring squarely into the eyes of infinity, and I believe *that* is where we are most likely to see the face of God.

