

# ASYMMETRY

## IMBALANCE

ASYMMETRY is an interesting idea.

It seems to contradict established ideas about the world. Western civilization as inherited from the ancient Greeks is driven by the belief that reality is symmetric, that it consists of two irreducible aspects: mind/soul, mind/matter, good/evil, or in some modern examples, particle/wave and software/hardware. Many Oriental philosophies imply symmetry by teaching that balance between Yin and Yang should be the goal of life.

Asymmetry asserts itself in important ways though. From philosophy, Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) believed human history to be asymmetrical and not cyclical. It moves inexorably from thesis to antithesis to synthesis which then becomes a new thesis. This process implies that history moves in one direction, culminating in what Hegel calls the Absolute but does not define.

From science, many physicists believe that asymmetry is a fundamental reality of the physical world. For example, time moves asymmetrically, in one direction only. Also, the second law of thermodynamics states that heat will never flow naturally from a colder to a warmer body but only from a warmer to a colder. Then there's the apparent imbalance of matter over dark matter in the universe. There is no evidence, however, for any "supersymmetry."

From the arts, much of Mozart's music is based on apparent asymmetrical organization and phrasing. For example, musicians like Leonard Bernstein believe that Symphony # 40 largely relies on it for overall effect. Too much symmetry would detract; it's the asymmetry that "makes it art" (Bernstein 105).

Even in popular culture, asymmetry has an important role. In the area of sports, many major league baseball stadiums, like Fenway Park in Boston, derive their charm from the asymmetrical way they and their playing fields are laid out. Its left field wall is the famous "Green Monster."

- *Is dualism a correct way to understand life and the world?*
- *Is human history linear and not a series of repeating cycles?*
- *Is an expanding universe evidence of asymmetry, or will there be a "big crunch"?*
- *Does the second law of thermodynamics (the entropy law) imply that natural history is asymmetrical?*
- *Is natural selection evidence of asymmetry, or is devolution an alternating cycle?*
- *Some argue that humans have an impulse to be symmetric. If true, does this impulse limit or constrain creativity and innovation?*
- *Does symmetry create a predictability which diminishes novelty in our lives?*
- *Does ingenuity require asymmetric thought patterns?*
- *Is asymmetric thinking similar to 'thinking outside the box' or 'jumping out of the system'?*
- *More importantly, is there no ultimate moral balance sheet. Is there no karma?*

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Bernstein, Leonard. *The unanswered question: six talks at Harvard*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976.