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Please write a short abstract of your essay on this form and attach it to your essay. You must also complete and submit the attached permission form and waiver.

Name: Katherine Nagata Lee

College P.O. Box: 4133 Telephone: (610) 717-7954

Major: Biology Username: leekathe

Essay Title: Transcendence and Myth in Science and Religion

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship of science and the five major religious traditions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. By examining roles of transcendence in the Eastern and Western religions, I explore the avenue of conflict between modern science and the Abrahamic faiths in particular. Further, I propose that science and religion are both forms of myth, but that science as myth proves problematic because it does not appear to fulfill a pedagogical role. I suggest that the explicit development of this function of scientific myth could allow for reconciliation between the two fields and bring us to a deeper understanding of what it means to be in the world.

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship of science and the five major religious traditions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. By examining roles of transcendence in the Eastern and Western religions, I explore the avenue of conflict between modern science and the Abrahamic faiths in particular. Further, I propose that science and religion are both forms of myth, but that science as myth proves problematic because it does not appear to fulfill a pedagogical role. I suggest that the explicit development of this function of scientific myth could allow for reconciliation between the two fields and bring us to a deeper understanding of what it means to be in the world.

Prologue

Every Sunday morning when I was in elementary school, my best friend went to church. After Saturday sleepovers, I would witness her family getting ready and often I would tag along, attending the worship service and Sunday school. When I asked my mom why *we* did not go to church as a family, she told me that she and my dad had different religions. My mother is Buddhist, my father, Presbyterian. My mother explained that when I got older, I could decide for myself whether or not religion would play an important role in my life. Until then, I could go to church with my friends or father or stay home on Sundays. Being more interested in stuffed toys and mud pies at that age, I usually chose to stay home.

In sixth grade, religion began to play a larger role in my life. I started going to a Quaker boarding school, which required that I attend Quaker Meeting twice a week. As an eleven year old, I struggled to sit quietly for a full hour, but eventually I came to appreciate this time for reflection. In high school I began taking religion classes and, to my surprise, discovered an

immediate connection with Mahayana Buddhism. I found my worldview reflected in Buddhist texts and teachings, and this awareness of myself as a religious and spiritual person led me to still more applications of Buddhist thought. After studying Buddhism academically, I participated in a retreat to Japan where I lived in a Buddhist temple. There, I experienced the daily aspects of Buddhist monastic life and learned more about what it means to live a religious tradition.

My love of religion has evolved over 22 years, but a discovery of science came quicker, capturing my attention in first grade. I spent the summer at science camp learning about magnets and electricity and doing “backyard science” activities. Ever since, science has been one of my central interests. I majored in biology at Grinnell and have loved the kind of learning and thinking I do in my science classes and labs. Both science and religion have had a significant impact on my life and the way I think. For me, the two fields have been compatible, but I recognize that for many others, science and religion have a much more contentious relationship. How these two fields relate to each other strikes me as an important question, especially in an age of rapid scientific advancement. In this essay, I examine historic models relating the two fields and attempt to develop my own.

Introduction

Science and religion represent two of the most pervasive features of contemporary life yet the two fields maintain a tenuous relationship with each other. Though many individuals retain both religious views and acceptance and appreciation of scientific findings, conflict between science and religion arises; perhaps most famously in the evolution vs. creationism debate. The relationship between the two fields embodies many complexities and a significant body of literature has evolved to address them.

This work examines the relationship between science and religion, specifically addressing the five major traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in order to develop a model that can account for the complexities of conflict and can also offer possible reconciliation between the fields. This model additionally moves beyond academic classification of the two fields to address how their relationship can impact the lived human experience. By looking at the roles of transcendence and myth replacement in science and religion, we can understand the conflict that arises between the Abrahamic religions and modern science, and how we might achieve reconciliation and development of both fields that would allow us to better answer the existential and eschatological questions of how to live, die, and understand meaning in the experience of life.

Previous Philosophies of Science and Religion

A plethora of theories exists relating science and religion. The challenge to define the relationship between these two fields long has entertained religious and scientific authorities who have attempted to define, to distinguish between, and even to unite the two fields. From such diverse work, Ian Barbour (2000) presents a well-accepted, simple classification scheme that summarizes the major theories relating science and religion. Barbour uses four categories to distinguish the major philosophies of thought regarding the relationship between the two fields:

Conflict: Conflict theory views science and religion as opposing claims/methods. This model encompasses the differences that many intuit in thinking about the two fields. Namely, that science is objective, open-minded, universal, cumulative, and progressive, while religious

traditions are subjective, closed-minded, parochial, uncritical, and resistant to change (Barbour 11). More specifically, Barbour highlights the main source of conflict as the irreconcilability of scientific materialism – especially in its reductionist sense, and biblical literalism, which offer conflicting views of the history of nature and draw on different authorities to substantiate their claims.

Independence: Barbour's second model proposes that science and religion occupy different domains and therefore should not come into conflict. One can distinguish between the fields by examining the questions they ask, their domain of effect, their method or way of knowing, and their function. Generally, science asks questions of causation, works in the natural world through secondary causality, creates knowledge through human observation and reason, and functions to predict and control the workings of the natural world. Religion, in contrast, asks questions of purpose, works in the spiritual realm through the primary causality of God, arrives at knowledge through divine revelation, and functions to recommend a practical and normative way of life (Barbour 19). The independence model suggests that when properly understood, the two fields will not come into strife.

Dialogue: The dialogue model maintains that science and religion occupy separate spheres, but highlights similarities in their methods, presuppositions, and concepts instead of emphasizing their differences (Barbour 23). In critique of the previous two models, the dialogue view argues that conflict and independence draw distinctions between science and religion that, though valid to some extent, are emphases and not absolutes. Through the common use of analogies, models, and metaphors, we can see parallels in the methods and purpose of these two fields (Barbour 27).

According to Barbour, this model allows for a constructive dialogue through which science raises “boundary questions” (17) that religion can then answer. This “conversation” view of science and religion retains the integrity of the individual fields, while still allowing for a constructive overlap.

Integration: Barbour’s final model encompasses three positions that all seek a more extensive and unified relationship between the fields of science and religion. The first position, *natural theology*, argues that scientific findings about the design of the natural world support the existence of God—a creator responsible for such design. Thus, scientific findings can support religious claims. A second view, *theology of nature*, argues that religion stands alone, but that certain aspects of traditional doctrines and beliefs must be reformulated in light of established scientific findings—i.e., widely accepted scientific theories. Finally, *systematic synthesis* attempts to combine both science and religion into one coherent worldview. These models of integration recognize certain differences between the fields, but still attempt to unify religion with scientific findings.

Barbour’s scheme organizes the major themes and concerns that arise in work addressing the relationship of science and religion, and many who work in the field of neuro-theology support single categories from his classification. Tad Clements (1990), for example, supports the conflict theory and argues that features intrinsic to each field make science and religion fundamentally incompatible. In contrast, Stephan Jay Gould (1997) supports the independence model, arguing that science and religion represent non-overlapping domains of teaching or magisteria. For Gould, science reigns over the empirical universe while religion concerns itself with questions of morality. Though we may need to draw on either or both domains, the fields

themselves should not come into conflict. Barbour himself supports the integration of science and religion from the theology of nature standpoint. Barbour believes that excessive reliance on science threatens to neglect important religious considerations and experiences (30).

Nevertheless, others have ideas that fail to fall neatly into any of Barbour's categories. Though useful as a tool to begin to organize the major veins of thought about science and religion, Barbour's scheme alone ultimately proves overly simplistic as the complex relationship between science and religion exceeds the confines of any single category.

In his "Forms of Transcendence in Science and in Religion," Ladislav Kvasz (2008) addresses the reductionist aspect of Barbour's scheme. Instead of looking at Barbour's categories as single frameworks from which to understand the relationship of the two fields, Kvasz instead posits that Barbour's system relates specific aspects of science and religion. Conflict arises when science and religion are understood as propositions of closed truths. Barbour's "Independence" category emphasizes science and religion as method and language, which allows the fields enter dialogue through the navigation of "boundary questions" (Barbour, 17), and finally, integration focuses on the synthesis of the essence of the fields. Kvasz opines that Barbour's categories should be viewed as different cognitive levels instead of mutually exclusive categories and introduces his own model, which attempts to reconcile the two fields through their common use of forms of transcendence.

Kvasz's Proposal—Transcendence in Form

Kvasz proposes that science and religion can enter an integrative relationship through the understanding that both fields work within and are reflective of processes or "patterns and forms" of transcendence (103). Kvasz posits that the main function of religion is one of

transcendence: Religion and its associated rituals and ceremonies connect us with our origin, our “coming into being,” our creation. Religion functions as a transcendent process by engaging us and liberating us from our environment and from our sensory perceptions. Science, according to Kvasz, also draws on patterns of transcendence as it goes beyond the boundaries of the known to introduce something radically new and different.

Kvasz points out a historic *connection* between science and religion and draws on the work of Galileo, Descartes, and Newton to demonstrate how these great thinkers relied on religious themes, metaphors, and allusions to introduce their respective contributions to scientific revolution. Descartes, for example, described conservation of motion in his *Principia philosophiae* in the context of religion:

It is most in harmony with the reason for us to think that merely from the fact that God moved the parts of matter in different ways when he first created them, and now conserves the totality of that matter in the same way and with the same laws with which he created them earlier, he always conserves the same amount of motion in it. Although motion is nothing in moving matter but its mode, yet it has a certain and determinate quantity, which we can easily understand to be able to remain always the same in the whole universe of things, though it changes in its individual parts (as quoted in Kvasz 2008).

These well-known, respected scientists demonstrate how science proceeds through the systematic replacement of transcendent frameworks. Kvasz maintains that this scientific process was born from the patterns of transcendent thought that are fixed in the field of religion. It is no coincidence that the presentation of Galileo’s, Descartes’, and Newton’s work is rife with religious language. Kvasz tells us that the patterns of cognition that allow us to break down old paradigms are created and preserved in religion. However, this connection of transcendent forms and patterns in religion and in science has become invisible and thus lost. Kvasz suggests that the reconciliation of the two fields lies in the recognition of their forms of transcendence.

Kvasz's proposal shows that religion and science proceed in the same spirit of inquiry and desire to move beyond the limits of the known. Thus, he demonstrates that science and religion are alike in form. Kvasz states that this commonality could resolve the tension between the two fields and proposes reconciliation via transcendence as a new theory of integration between science and religion. Kvasz's analysis of transcendence in these fields succeeds in its goal of uniting them in method. A deeper analysis of the theme of transcendence in religion reveals how conflict arises between science and the Abrahamic religions specifically.

Transcendent Content

Kvasz's argument offers a new way of thinking about the integration of religion and science, but his theory of transcendent forms proves limited in two ways: First, though Kvasz's model appears inclusive of the major Eastern religions, like Barbour's, Kvasz's work mainly focuses on religion as a Christian experience. Indeed, much of the literature on the relationship between science and religion refers to the Abrahamic faiths, and as Robert Bellah (1970) notes, there has been "almost total failure of the conflict between religion and science to materialize in the Eastern milieu, even though in the minds of some Western scholars it 'ought' to have" (222). Rather than ignoring the Eastern faiths, an inclusive perspective on science and religion could offer a new way of understanding how conflict arises in the West.

Secondly, Kvasz's theory uses forms of transcendence to reconcile science and religion as method, but fails to acknowledge the role transcendence already occupies as religious *content*. Religion can be viewed as a transcendent process—i.e., transcendent in form, but religion also embodies the search for the transcendent (God or otherwise)—i.e., transcendence as content. It is the nature of transcendence as religious content that sets the stage for conflict between science

and religion. Anthony Laden (2007) proposes two forms of transcendence as content that are reflective of both the theistic and non-theistic religions: transcendent objects and transcendent experiences. Transcendent objects such as gods or people exceed human reality in existence or effect. Transcendent experiences also exceed normal human existence, but are focused on drawing us out and beyond the self (Laden 124). Religious conceptualizations of transcendence as object and experience can account for the conflict and harmony seen in the relationships of science and the five major religious traditions - Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

Transcendence as Experience

Buddhism: The Buddhist religion reconciles most easily with science as Buddhists do not recognize any god. Tenzin Gyatso (2005), the fourteenth Dalai Lama explains, “Buddhism and science share a fundamental reluctance to postulate a transcendent being as the origin of all things. This is hardly surprising given that both these investigative traditions are essentially nontheist in their philosophical orientations” (84). This nontheist commonality may contribute to the lack of conflict between Buddhism and science. However, the lack of a god does not mean that Buddhism excludes transcendence entirely. Rather, Buddhists conceptualize transcendence as Nirvana.

According to the *Encyclopedia of World Religions*, Nirvana is a state of being and is defined without conditioned aspects (370). This definition allows outsiders to gain a basic understanding of Nirvana, though the term itself encompasses greater complexity. Nirvana has a two-fold etymological meaning, both “becoming cool, cooling” and also “blowing out, extinguishing” (Poussin 113). Poussin (1917) explains that Nirvana is thus at once “cooling

refreshment...comfort, peace, serenity, bliss” and also “extinction, detachment and annihilation.” It is the end of individual existence (113). Nirvana represents liberation or deliverance from *samsara*—the cycle of birth and death. Thus, Nirvana as the cessation of suffering does not exist as a thing or even as an external reality. Rather, it is an experience of transcendence, which knowledge and modern science do not disrupt.

Hinduism: Hinduism’s pantheon of gods places this major Eastern religion in a theist category with the Abrahamic religions. We might thus expect Hinduism to face the conflict with science that abounds around Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. If this were true, it would suggest an intrinsic incompatibility between science and any theistic religion. However, by looking at the role of transcendence in Hinduism and the Abrahamic religions, we see that the inclusion of god/gods becomes problematic only when the god is understood as object as opposed to experience.

A critical analysis of Hindu polytheism reveals that the pantheon is actually a set of icons used to represent aspects of a single transcendent experience. Klaus Klostermaier (2007) explains this reality using a dialogue from the *Brhadāranyaka* Upanishad in which the sage Yajnavalkya is asked, “How many are the *devas* (deities)?” Yajnavalkya answers, “Three hundred and three and three thousand and three.” When pressed further, he changes the number to thirty-three, then six, three, two, one-and-a-half, and ultimately, One. When asked, “Which is the one *deva*?” he replies, “The *prana* (breath, life). The Brahman. He is called *tyat* (that).” According to the Upanishads, Brahman’s ultimate form is “without qualities (*nirguna*), formless, nameless, indefinable, and grammatically a neuter noun” (Lochtefeld 122). This description suggests an ineffable experience rather than an object or single god.

The idea of Brahman as transcendent experience receives further support from the way in which Brahman is realized. The Upanishads explain that the goal of religious practice in Hinduism is to discover the *atman* – one’s true identity. The *atman* is part of the *brahman* and thus uncovering the *atman* does not aim towards the discovery of a true soul or self-conceptualized as an object, but rather moves the individual towards the transcendent experience of *brahman* (Rinehart 19). Hinduism, though often considered polytheistic, distinguishes itself from the Abrahamic religions in its recognition of the ultimate transcendence, not as a god object, but as an ineffable experience to be realized.

Transcendence as Object

Abrahamic Religions: Unlike the major Eastern religions, the Abrahamic religions have traditionally conceptualized transcendence as an object (God) as opposed to the experiences of Nirvana and of *brahman* in Buddhism and Hinduism respectively. Joseph Campbell (1988) describes this God as a “materialistic way of talking about the transcendent” (62) and indeed, the God of the Abrahamic religions fits Laden’s model of transcendence as object, existing beyond human reality and having power beyond human ability. This God is fixedly anthropomorphic and is understood as Father, not Force. He has ascribed characteristics such as omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence, and he has a history told by the holy texts-- the Bible, the Torah, and the Qur’an. This understanding of God leads to the critical problem: Anthropomorphic figures have histories unlike those of experiences. God as a figure and Father depends on and is known by his history. Norbert Samuelson (2006) explains, “What God is and what God does are the same thing...hence anything attributed to God constitutes who God is” (43). Thus, scientific

findings that contradict the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish texts challenge the religious presentation of what the Abrahamic God does and thus challenge God himself. Here, the transcendent God of the Abrahamic religions comes into conflict with modern science. In contrast, though the Buddhist and Hindu texts describe the experiences of Nirvana and of union with *brahman*, these experiences do not depend on their own history as they are not defined by what they do.

Further Conflict: Atheist Richard Dawkins (2006), a prominent figure whose work challenges God as object in the Abrahamic faiths, presents evidence for why God, the “interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible” does not exist (19). Significantly, Dawkins builds the core of his argument not by focusing on specific examples of scriptural problems or impossibilities, but rather by offering a scientific alternative. Drawing on Darwin’s theory of natural selection, he explains the diversity of life and expounds a planetary anthropic principle to explain the origin of life on earth and earth’s existence in a “friendly” universe whose physical and chemical composition made life possible. Dawkins, thus, does not merely prove the historical mythology of the Abrahamic religions false; he offers an alternative, a different story. In Dawkins’ work, we observe not simply scientific rejection of scripture, but rather the purloining of the historical mythology of the Abrahamic religions for a contingently truthful one offered by modern science.

The phrase “historical mythology” emphasizes that not *all* aspects of the Abrahamic religions are at odds with science; it is the historical account that comes into conflict with scientific findings. Specifically, religious history clashes with the contingent scientific truths, and here, “contingent” emphasizes that scientific findings do not reveal absolute truths. Rather,

they are contingent upon the information known at the time a scientific statement is accepted. Though some scientific discoveries such as the theory of gravity maintain impressive durability over time, other scientific “truths” change. For example, when first discovered, Brachiosaurs and other Sauropods were believed to be water-dwelling dinosaurs. Current science calls them terrestrial. These dinosaurs did not change their habitat; rather, our understanding of the fossil record and of animal morphology changed. This simple example illustrates the fact that science, like religion, tells stories. These stories must be in line with the information and rationality of their time, but they are nonetheless stories. Thus, instead of viewing the conflict between science and religion as one of faith against fact, we can understand the clash as the struggle of alternate stories or myths.

The Significance of Myths

Myth proves a dangerous word because of its association with falsity. Common understanding restricts myth to specific kinds of stories—either supernatural stories such as those of Greek mythology or stories that prove untruthful and require debunking such as the myth of racial supremacy or the American achievement ideology. Robert Segal (2004) presents us with a simple definition that seeks to remove our biases: myth is simply a story. In order to understand the role of myth replacement in religion and science, we must approach myth as Segal does—as story.

Stories, or narratives, are important and powerful features that inform our lives. Christian Smith (2003) explains, “Narrative is a form of communication that arranges human actions and events into organized wholes in a way that bestows meaning on the actions and events by specifying the interactive or cause-and-effect relations to the whole” (56). He claims that “narrative is our most elemental human genre of communication and meaning-making, an

essential way of framing order and purpose of reality...” (81). Religious and scientific myths inform these narratives and thus exist as indispensable stories that serve important purpose in our lives.

Campbell (2004) more specifically explains that myth serves four functions: the mystical, the cosmological, the sociological, and the pedagogical. Myth opens us to the mystery and wonder of our own existence. It maintains the awe we experience in the face of such mystery. It supports a social order, and, finally, myth shows us how to live from birth to death under any set of circumstances. It is the failure to fulfill this final function of myth—the pedagogical role that guides the growing process that prevents science from becoming a comfortable narrative to live by and renders it no more than an informational account of the physical world.

Religion as Myth

Gregory Peterson (2001) emphasizes that religion provides more than just an account. It is an orienting worldview that guides individuals’ decision-making and actions (6). The stories of the Bible guide and orient us in addition to explaining how our being in the world came about. Peterson provides an example: the Biblical story of Eden gives an account of the creation of the world, but additionally instructs us on the perils of temptation and directs us back towards a reunion with God.

This kind of mythic guidance and the way in which it is acted out are reflective of religion’s function as a binding process. Religion stems from the Latin word *religare* meaning “to bind together.” The word itself thus invokes the idea of a community, of cohesion, of wholeness. Religion creates a human ecology that connects us to each other and to our environment, and it does so by giving us a way of being in the world.

Science as Myth

The scientific myth, in contrast, appears to provide nothing more than an account of the natural world. The scientific myth of creation provides an explanation for our existence and outlines the process by which it happened through the Big Bang Theory and Darwin's theory of natural selection, but it does not direct this existence. This idea of scientific myth as merely informational also may be reflective of its etymological roots. Science comes from the Latin word *scientia* meaning "knowledge," and science understood as a body of knowledge appears to lack pedagogical meaning in Campbell's sense of the word.

Certainly, not all knowledge science provides significantly impacts the lived human experience. This kind of scientific knowledge amounts to mental furniture; we place it in our minds, and we have to move around it, but it does not meaningfully affect our daily lives. For example, knowing that a door consists of atoms that are largely empty space does not give us a meaningful way to interact with the door, and breaking the atom down to its subatomic particles, down again to quarks and even to strings, does not give us a good way of being in the world. Quarks and strings are no way to live. However, not all scientific knowledge is subatomic. Science does direct us—we get vaccines, choose to eat certain foods and not others, and make important lifestyle choices in areas ranging from child-rearing to career choices all in line with what scientific findings present. Science does have a profound effect on our lives, and it brings people together through common practices and beliefs. Science perhaps is also binding, not by directing life as an authoritative text, but by providing an understanding of how the world works and by extension how we can be in it.

Thus, science is beginning to replace the established myth of religion with a myth that has yet to be fully developed in Campbell's fourth pedagogical sense. Perhaps the myth of science can bind by providing us with an understanding of how to be in the world. This understanding can guide us in our interactions with each other and with our environment and thus it has the potential to create a meaningful human ecology just as the religious myths have. For this myth to be effective, we must expound such an understanding of how science binds. This task will require interdisciplinary work that draws from fields such as anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and science, and the key task will be to look at how science binds large communities.

Binding at a Global Level

Clearly, science could be binding for the individuals who practice it. Science clearly directs the thoughts, goals, and actions of scientists themselves and binds them intimately to a scientific community and to an environment as it gives them directive purpose in life. However, the true development of a pedagogical scientific myth could also bind the larger lay community by providing a meaningful understanding of how to be in the world.

This task becomes significantly difficult when science addresses a global community. For those in first world nations, science more clearly offers meaning, hope, and an orienting story.

However, for young mothers in third world nations whose children die of diseases science could cure with a simple vaccine, the gap between the scientific myth and the religious myth widens.

In this case, science bleakly offers only information, while religion can provide a comforting explanation. Clearly, the pedagogical function of science must be developed with a deep understanding of the economic and political challenges it will face. Although the task of

analyzing science as binding may prove difficult, ultimately the development of a cogent theory addressing the pedagogical role of science could make the scientific myth comfortable, which Campbell argues is the primary criterion necessary for myth to aid us in life.

One final question remains: If science purloins the Abrahamic historical mythology, where does this leave religion and the religious myth? I believe that it will ultimately return the Abrahamic faiths to a sense of religion as transcendent process, just as Kvasz originally described it. The religious narrative of the Abrahamic faiths will move from denotation to connotation as the myth loses its basis in historical fact. The Abrahamic religious myth thus becomes symbol and transcends its own dependence on the historical references that science has called into question. Ultimately, this alteration of religious myth, combined with the development of the scientific myth allows for reconciliation between the two fields that can be lived out in a meaningful way.

Conclusion—Navigating the Eschatological Questions

I do not propose that scientific myth replace religious symbols, stories, or their meanings. Rather, I argue that the explicit development of the pedagogical role of scientific myth will allow us to better answer eschatological questions and to navigate real issues in a way that is both progressive and productive. In very real terms, a view of religion and science that recognizes the limits of religious historical mythology and accepts the pedagogical role of science could help us better direct public policy on a number of important issues such as warfare and suicide. In *Moral, Believing Animals*, Smith states,

Religious orders answer recurrently pressuring, core existential questions better than non-religious ones do. How should we meet death? What is the meaning of tragedy? What is the significance of love? What is the

basis of obligation? The empirically grounded moral orders of science and socialism and procedural democracy seem limited in their ability to speak profoundly and reassuringly to these questions (104).

Smith believes that religion provides better answers to the eschatological questions because science lacks the ability to “speak profoundly and reassuringly” (104). However, if we develop the scientific myth in its pedagogical role, we may find that not only can science help to provide profound and reassuring answers, but it can allow us to ask even deeper questions.

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