Astrophysics and Creation

Arnold Benz

Prologue (Introduction)

My decision to become an astronomer took shape in Africa. Three of us were underway in an old Fiat Topolino, south of Ouarzazate in southern Morocco, traveling in the direction of the Sahara. Hour after hour a black asphalt track wound its way, seemingly without aim, across the undulating stony desert. It was high summer and school was out. One year from finishing high school my two companions and I were faced with the choice of vocation. Endlessly we talked, argued, and discussed our aims and chances and our views of the world, God, and the whole business. Do we have a mandate in life? What objectives are meaningful? What's the purpose of our lives, of mankind, and of the universe? The future lay spread out before us like the southern foothills of the Atlas mountains, which we drove through in the glaring light of the blazing sun. The road appeared endless.

On the side of the road unadorned adobe huts occasionally appeared. The hostels seemed to derive from the time of the caravans. What we were offered as lodging turned out to be an empty room without beds. So we decided to spend the night under the open sky. We drove further into the uninhabited landscape until the sun disappeared behind the horizon and the night surprised us. We stopped on a rise, and each of us looked for a sandy spot between the stones to curl up in our sleeping bags.

I was lying somewhat distant from my friends. It was refreshingly cool; the oppressiveness of the heat, which reduced life during the day to a muggy-type of suffering, had retreated. An unbelievable peace enveloped us. It was quiet: no din of civilization, no animals, no rustling in the air, nothing. The night opened the skies for us to reveal an unusual and overpowering splendor of the stars. The Milky Way traversed the sky from north to south. Because the air was totally clear, the stars hardly glittered and yet shone intensely. I know that one is able to count with one's eyes only a few thousand stars. The countless weak stars, which form groups and heap together into nebulous clusters, allow one to realize, without too much difficulty, that there must be a million times more of them.

The sky was alive. It no longer looked to me like the inside of a ball. The bright stars gave the appearance of being closer, while the diffuse stellar nebulae seemed farther away. Interstellar space achieved a dimension of depth. The band of stars constituting the Milky Way became separated through mysterious dark patches. These permitted the stars in front of them and beside them to glow even more splendidly. The darker the veil, the brighter the stars appeared. Everything seemed to be linked, and to constitute an impenetrable totality.

Does the unfathomable depth of the universe contain a secret that somehow relates to the secrets of my consciousness and my life? It's the big question of our existence, one that touches the core of the material and spiritual world. I noticed how the universe attracts me. The way to the Sahara lead to another, fascinating trip into the unexplored portions of the universe. But just as the Sahara is difficult to decipher, so is the universe.

Even before this high school experience, the idea of exploring nature through the laws of physics had begun to interest me. Until then, however, the dry reality of school courses had made me hesitate. That night in the Sahara stimulated my thirst for more knowledge, and assured me, too, that this knowledge needn't stifle the sensation of amazement. With a sense of wonder, I had encountered a totally different reality, which was not in competition with physics. On the contrary, my fascination with the quiet and mysteriously glowing stars, and the prospect of pursuing new methods of scientific investigation, had both captured me with their spell.

During this night in the desert, I decided to study astrophysics.