

The Nature of the Gods

by Karl Donaldsson (Copyright 1999 CE)

Why is it that we spend a lot of time discussing the nature of the gods? We generally have little to no knowledge of how they act or what they think, with the sole exception of lore (ancient UPG) and beliefs (current UPG)*. I'm sure most conflicts starts with different beliefs about the same thing. What I don't get is why we've spent centuries discussing the nature of the gods (any peoples, and religions), when the real effect of the religion is, indeed, on ourselves.

It would seem to me that the most profitable and relevant discussions are not those of the "this god does that sort of thing," etc. While these may be interesting from a trivial standpoint, it's about as useful as the discussions of a person you know with another about their character, etc. If I'm standing at the water cooler chatting with a co-worker about a person who's not there, what effect does that have on my ability to do my job? My family life? My spirituality? By the same token, what effect does discussing the nature of deities have on one's spirituality?

I'm not saying the discussion is irrelevant, I'm just wondering what effect it has. Most of our posting on any list or newsgroup includes some discussion of the nature of some deity or other supernatural being. I know the gods and wights exist just as much as the guy we're talking about at the water cooler. Is all of this just idle chit-chat, or would we like to see some more "value-added" discussions about things we do know, and do have control over, such as ourselves and our own actions?

People's discussion of the nature of gods has started things like the Crusades, which is a good indication that we think it is very important, but I have yet to see any enlightening effect it has on us a whole. If it's not a positive step forward, why do it? Is it a positive step forward? How far? What does it mean? Is there a purpose for it, other than for trivia's sake?

I think it's partly about having something concrete to talk about. Talking about squishy stuff makes most people uncomfortable, and since few people have much squishy stuff in common, there's no common ground. Since most people begin conversation with common ground, we talk about the weather and the nature of the gods and other small talk. Discussions of nature of things are generally debatable, which might be the attraction, because it's too hard for someone to argue about how someone else feels about something. This is the difference, in my humble opinion, between listening to answer and listening to understand. Listening to answer teaches us little, but listening to understand teaches us much more. It's the difference between knowing and understanding, the difference between sympathizing and empathizing.

I think that as time goes on, we will grow to develop "modern lore." This is happening already, with the advent of the Nine Noble Virtues, and the Hammer Rite, both of which are modern inventions. However, they seem to "work," for whatever reason, and through the collective personal gnoses of the group, it becomes lore. Steering back to the topic at hand, this means that the nature of the gods will change, as our observations, our perceptions, will change, and therefore, the nature of the gods will change. Not that we cause them to change, but our perceptions of them change.

I think we discuss the nature of the gods because we want to develop common ground with them among ourselves. Perhaps this is the validation of UPG by the group, which, in turn, can become modern lore. We want to understand the nature of the common elements of the gods, so we can discern where the modern lore ends and UPG picks up. We have the desire to find common elements with each other, but we also want to find the line where personal insights begin. It's a common element to help folks new to Asatru to understand what we mean, as well as a mechanism for current Ásatrúar to refine their beliefs and opinions on the nature of the gods.

**UPG is an acronym for Unusual Personal Gnosis. This acronym is commonly used on many Asatru listservs and newsgroups, and was originally coined by JS Periera.*