

Yet, this is the key to the lesson, Kass says. "God's dispersion of the nations is the political analog to the creation of woman: instituting otherness and opposition, it is the

necessary condition for national self-awareness and the possibility of a politics that will . . . hearken to the voice of what is eternal, true, and good."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The Iron Planet

"Mercury's Heart of Iron" by Clark R. Chapman, in *Astronomy* (Nov. 1988), 1027 N. 7th St., Milwaukee, Wisc. 53233.

More than a decade after America's unmanned Mariner 10 flew near the planet Mercury during 1974-75, scientists have finally digested all of the data from the flight. And they are starting to ask some big questions, reports Chapman, of Tucson's Planetary Science Institute.

Located about midway between the Earth and the Sun, Mercury is a "truly bizarre" planet. Its rock crust is unusually thin; a "metallic iron core" accounts for 70 percent of the planet's weight.

The most surprising discovery made by Mariner 10 was that the tiny planet has a magnetic field, like Earth's but much weaker. Until then, scientists had believed that the core was solid and relatively cool, and thus lacked the moving currents of molten metal needed to generate a magnetic field. But the presence of a magnetic field suggests that the core must be at least partially molten. And that means that the core may contain chemical "impurities," such as sulfur, which serve as a kind of "planetary antifreeze."

Does this matter?

Mercury's make-up, Chapman explains,

plays a vital role in the two leading theories of the origins of the solar system. According to one theory, formulated by cosmochemist John Lewis during the 1970s, the solar system was created in a more or less orderly fashion. Lewis believes that the planets formed out of gases that cooled and condensed. At some point, billions of years ago, the sun flared up briefly, blasting away many gases. According to Lewis's theory, there should not be any sulfur, or anything like it, on Mercury.

A more recent theory, propounded by George Wetherill of the Carnegie Institution, is that the solar system emerged from "chaos." Mercury, in particular, bounced around the solar system like a billiard ball, colliding with large asteroids and other planets. According to Wetherill's scenario, sulfur and other materials should be randomly distributed around the solar system.

Until recently, Chapman says, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had ruled out a second Mercury probe. But now, partly because of Mercury's new importance, another visit to the "metal planet" may be planned.

Sex and Skin Color

"Human Skin Color: A Possible Relationship Between Its Sexual Dimorphism And Its Social Perception" by Peter Frost, in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (Autumn 1988), Univ. of Chicago Press, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

From medieval England to Aztec Mexico and contemporary Nigeria, men generally have found the lightest skinned women of their society the most desirable. To a lesser extent, women have preferred darker-colored men.

Why should this be so? asks Frost, an anthropologist at Quebec's Université Laval.

The male preference for light-skinned women is not a result of white racism or European colonialism. Modern spectrophotometry shows that women in every so-

ciety do indeed tend to have lighter skin than men do. Long before they ever laid eyes on Caucasians, the men of China, Japan, and ancient Sumer praised the fairest-skinned women among them in verse and song. Later, they did not admire all Caucasian traits. A Japanese diplomat visiting the United States in 1860 wrote home: "The women's skin was white and they were charming . . . but their hair was red and their eyes looked like dog eyes." Frost also

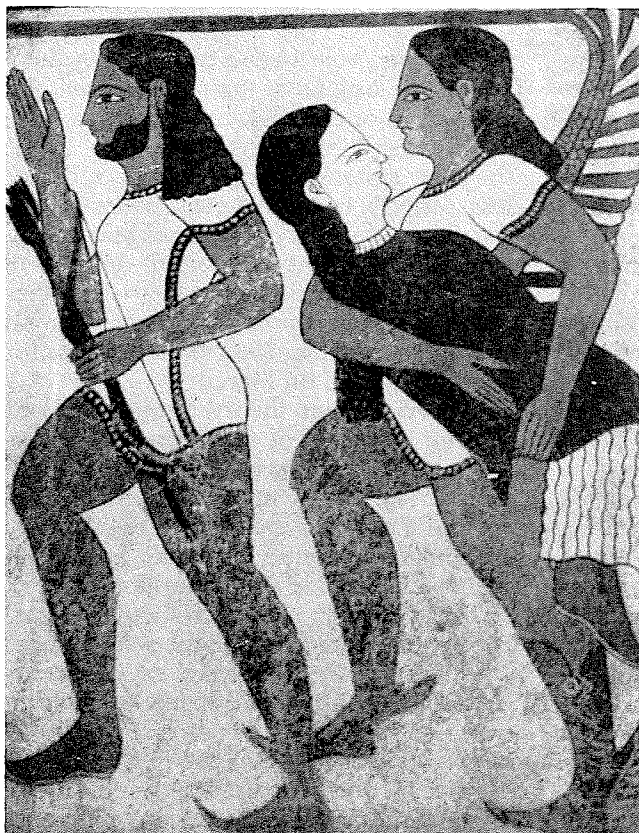
dismisses the possibility that paler skin is a badge of high status. The preference for lighter colored women persists even among hunter-gatherers, where status distinctions are few.

The best explanation, Frost suggests, may be "infantile mimicry."

Among humans and many species of apes and monkeys, the young of both sexes have abnormally light skin or fur, along with other distinctive traits such as "soft"

facial features. Anthropologists and others believe that these traits arouse protective instincts among male (and female) adults. Females of all primate species genetically "mimic" these traits to some extent (e.g., women have little facial hair). But gender differences in fur color are particularly linked to *monogamy*. Only 18 percent of all primate species are monogamous, but the proportion rises to 63 percent among "dichromatic" species. Apparently, lighter fur color among females diminishes the male instinct for aggression or abandonment—the greatest threats to monogamy. Although it has not been proved, Frost says, the same explanation probably holds true for the lighter skin color of human females.

Why, then, do 20th century whites favor suntanned skin? Not because darker skin is a sign of membership in the "leisure class," Frost says, but because it signals a freer approach to sexuality, "with less importance given to the formation of long-lasting relationships."



The artists of ancient civilizations often depicted women as fairer-skinned than men. In this Etruscan painting (circa 525 B.C.), the men were colored brick-red, the women white.

Neural Darwinism

"Survival of the Synapses" by Daniel S. Levine, in *The Sciences* (Nov./Dec. 1988), 2 E. 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10131-0191.

Only 34 years have passed since a pathologist performing an autopsy on Albert Einstein removed his brain to search for the secret to the great scientist's genius.

Scientists have long since agreed that all human brains are virtually identical. Except in one crucial respect: the arrangement and number of connections between