



Pi in the Sky: Counting, Thinking, and Being

By John D. Barrow

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Whether one studies the farthest reaches of outer space or the inner space of elementary particles of matter, our understanding of the physical world is built on mathematics. But what exactly is mathematics? A game played on pieces of paper? A human invention? An austere religion? Part of the mind of God? And equally important, why do we believe it can reveal to us the nature of the universe?

John D. Barrow explores these tantalizing questions in *Pi in the Sky*, a lively and illuminating study of the origins and nature of mathematics. His tour takes us from primitive counting to the latest scientific ideas about the physical world, from the notched animal bones of the hunter-gatherers to the visions of Galileo and Descartes, and from the intricate mathematical systems of Egypt, Sumeria, and other early civilizations, to the work of such modern giants as Einstein, Kurt Godel, Alfred Tarski, and Bertrand Russell. We meet Pythagoras and his mystical "cult of numbers" as well as an eighteenth-century Swiss mathematician who proved to his colleagues--through an algebraic formula--the existence of God. Barrow examines ancient Chinese counting rods colored black and red for negative and positive numbers; the Botocoudo Indians of Brazil, who indicate any number over four by pointing to the hairs on their head; and the dethroning of Euclidian geometry in the nineteenth century with the rise of Darwin and cultural relativism. And in an eye-opening last chapter, Barrow discusses how the traditional picture of the universe as a vast mechanism is currently being replaced by a new paradigm--one that sees the universe, in essence, as a cosmic computer program.

Bristling with riddles and paradoxes, and quoting everyone from Lao-Tse and Robert Pirsig, to Charles Darwin and G.K. Chesterton, to Roger Bacon, Baron de Montesquieu, and Umberto Eco, *Pi in the Sky* is a profound--and profoundly edifying--journey into the world of mathematics. It illuminates the way that numbers shape how we see the world and how we see ourselves.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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John D. Barrow is Professor in the Astronomy Centre of the University of Sussex. His is the author of several highly acclaimed volumes on the philosophy of science, including most recently *Theories of Everything*, which *Publishers Weekly* hailed as "a mind-boggling intellectual adventure."

From Publishers Weekly

British mathematician Barrow (*Theories of Everything*) here commands an elegant modern style in describing a more classical, structured grammar: that of numbers. This broad history of--and reflection upon--the role of mathematics in the human enterprise of figuring reality spans recorded civilization. Barrow examines hash marks made on bones that date from 9000 B.C., delves into numerology, observes mathematics in the depths of philosophy and the far reaches of cosmology, often utilizing playful headings to introduce substantive material (the section on early mathematics in the Near East is titled "The Counter Culture"). General readers who doubt that "numeracy" is as civilizing a pursuit as literacy will note how utterly human are some of the early-20th-century intuitionists' debates Barrow recounts in "Intuitionism: The Immaculate Construction." He does not justify the culture of mathematics as "fun" or as a separate, mystical realm but characterizes it as the modern manifestation of the oldest and most compelling human instinct. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Users Review

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Carol Berry:

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