Is There Life on the Other Worlds? 1

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So long as the earth was believed to be the center of the universe the question of life on other worlds could hardly arise; there were no other worlds in the astronomical sense, although a heaven above and a hell beneath might form adjuncts to this world. The cosmology of the Divina Commedia is typical of its period. In 1440 we find Nicholas of Cusa comparing our earth, as Pythagoras had done before him, to the other stars, although without expressing any opinion as to whether these other stars were inhabited or not. At the end of the next century Giordano Bruno wrote that “there are endless particular worlds similar to this of the earth.” He plainly supposed these other worlds—“the moon, planets and other stars, which are infinite in number”—to be inhabited, since he regarded their creation as evidence of the Divine goodness. He was burned at the stake in 1600; had he lived only ten years longer, his convictions would have been strengthened by Galileo’s discovery of mountains and supposed seas on the moon.

The arguments of Kepler and Newton led to a general recognition that the stars were not other worlds like our earth but other suns like our sun. When once this was accepted it became natural to imagine that they also were surrounded by planets and to picture each sun as showering life-sustaining light and heat on inhabitants more or less like ourselves. In 1829 a New York newspaper scored a great journalistic hit by giving a vivid, but wholly fictitious, account of the activities of the inhabitants of the moon as seen

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Editor's Summary

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