Worldviews

The pianist in Wittgenstein put it well: the most important things in life lie beyond words. So let us begin by throwing away the ladder of language that we are used to standing on.¹

Wittgenstein’s other life — as an architect, engineer, and musician — conditioned him to do what philosophers often do not bother to do: which is to take seriously what is not put into words, or what lies beneath words. Wittgenstein struggled for a way of understanding the silent shape of things. Things that cannot be put into words, he remarked, manifest themselves. Wittgenstein called this process “mystical.”² Indeed, there is a long tradition of thinking mystically about those things that we cannot put into words. There is also another, equally strong, tradition of thinking about such things. This is to render them in geometric, musical, and architectural forms. There is no obligation on us to choose between these ways of thinking. Indeed, at certain times, these traditions have cut across each other.

Let us call both traditions architectonic. In the pre-modern age, the most important attempts at developing an architectonic view of the world were those of Taoism in China, Jainism in India, the succession of Presocraticism, Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Stoicism, and Skepticism in the Greco-Roman world, and Sufism in the Islamic world. The Pythagoreans were the ones who most effortlessly glided between the mystical and the rational — almost as if there was no difference between them.

² Ibid., especially 6.522.
rather than a set of commandments. All of these worldviews contributed to a universal sense of "leaving home" — to a new kind of spiritual independence from one's place of origin. This was expressed not just in the content of classical literature and prophetic religion but in their media as well.

Literary and prophetic worldviews were transmitted through types of "mobile writing." The principal media used for setting down the accounts of the hero, the prophet or the sage were not the clay tablets or the stone of archaic civilization, but the portable media of papyrus, parchment, paper, textiles, or palm leaf. Correspondingly, "mobile writing" suited very well the development of both large-scale historic

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3 The Buddha, "the Enlightened One" (c. 563-483 B.C.), was born Prince Siddhattha in northeastern India, on the border of what today is Nepal. The seers predicted that he would either remain at home and become a universal monarch or would leave and become a Buddha. He did the latter. He gave up the life of princely comfort to become a wandering ascetic on a search for truth. This search involved him in renunciation, austerity, self-mortification, emaciation, battles with demons, desertion by his companions, and progress toward enlightenment and the truth (dhamma) that everything is relative, interdependent, and impermanent, and that the person who leaves home and goes forth should avoid the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. Steering the middle path leads to knowledge, calmness, and nirvana. The story of the Buddha is filled with images of rejection of the household. He gives up his wife; he upsets his father, King Suddhodana, by begging in his own home city; he ordains his son without his father's permission; his principal followers were monks and nuns. His call to carry the truth abroad, and his own traveling through towns, villages, and cities match the rejection of the household. This is paralleled philosophically with the notion that life is a stream of becoming, and the human being is a non-self that is constantly becoming different, an ever-changing non-identical identity. This is so because the self suffers limitation. Limits give rise to desire. Desire causes suffering. What is desired is transitory, changing, and perishing. The impermanence of the object of desire causes disappointment and sorrow. Enlightenment is the extinction of passion and cravings. The overcoming of desire is indicated by cool feelings — self-control, cheerfulness, and evenhandedness. Coolness is symbolized by images of a harbor of refuge, a cool cave, and a farther shore. As Buddhism develops into an institutionalized religion, the traveling aspect declines. Organization moves from loose groups of mendicant monks to monks living in permanent monasteries with rules and a mix of hierarchic structure and democratic assembly.

4 Henri-Jean Martin, The History and Power of Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1988]), pp. 43-52. Paper was a Chinese invention. Shreds of paper, made from various fibres (hemp, ramie), have been found in China dating from the first century (p. 52). Paper superseded the use of bamboo and textiles as materials to write on. Papyrus, a swamp plant largely cultivated in the Nile Delta, produced a

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empires and long-distance portal societies. Both of these were types of society whose members developed extensive lateral or peer networks for coordinating administrative, economic, and cultural activity. Councils, assemblies, monasteries, guilds, military corps, scholarly bureaucracies, schools of religious jurists and the like, massively supplemented the old social forms of kingship and household. For this to happen, an appropriate ethos and psychology was required. Hero, prophet, and sage provided suitable models of mobile characters that moved across localized, communal boundaries.

In the spectrum that runs from tribe to patrimonial state, face-to-face communications and emotions regulate social conduct. Body language and verbal commands, honor and shame are paramount. Communication between heaven and earth is organized through the rituals of temples and palaces, and is illustrated in pictograms of cosmic events set in clay or in stone relief. The “books” of ethical prophecy and classical literature in contrast are highly transportable. Their effect takes place outside the realm of face-to-face communications. They regulate social conduct in the first case through the emotions of conscience (when the commandments of the prophet are internalized in the human psyche). In the second case, they regulate social conduct through the sense of prudence (that is, when the lessons of the sage and the calculating hero are internalized in the human soul). The pangs of moral conscience or the promptings of wisdom make it possible for persons to travel widely without bringing their society with them — in contrast to the case of the nomadic or marauding band.

writing material that dates from the first dynasty, ca 3100- ca 2700 B.C. (p. 46). Writing on animal skins is time immemorial. The specific technique of producing parchment made from animal skins (skins of sheep, goats or calves) possibly dates to the founding of the library of Pergamum by King Eumenes II (197-158 B.C.), and the efforts to circumvent the quasi-monopoly of the Nile Delta, and thus the Ptolemites, on papyrus production (p. 51). Parchment became a major competitor to papyrus between the first and fourth centuries. Papermaking reached Arab world in the early eighth century. The technique was adopted by the Byzantines in the same century (p. 52).

Ethical religion and literary classics provide an alternative to the principal integrative force of face-to-face societies. Before the appearance of this alternative, the commonest social form was hierarchy. Hierarchy is a kind of integrative force that operates through local, personal connections of great strength — through ties of loyalty, service, obedience, honor, and affection. The ethical religions and the literary classics did not so much brush aside conceptions of hierarchy, as they did introduce — side-by-side with them — a new dimension of social action. The wandering Odysseus, for all his calculating conscience, is still a king who treats his crew imperiously. Jesus is a personal savior and a lord. Yet these figures are not tied to a specific place or a specific community. Among the ethical religions, Judaism was an exception in the sense that it remained tied to a specific community, though this community was highly mobile.

The significance of all of this can be understood if we think of social behavior as a kind of geometry. Hierarchy operates in one dimension — up and down. The ethical religions and the literary classics added a second, lateral dimension to human conduct.

Lateral relationships were made possible by the emergence of stories of wandering heroes, saviors, or sages who, in principle, could be adopted as a model by anyone. Their conduct, and the values that they embodied, had the effect of reducing the traditional power of personal hierarchic relations. This had the further effect of enabling social action over longer distances and on larger scales. The stories of heroes, sages, and saviors became the basis for forging relations with persons who were neither kin nor were hierarchical superiors or subordinates. They were the basis for creating new kinds of collegiate and contractual relations, for the use of non-kin or non-household agents in transactions, and for developing non-tributary relations between states. These stories facilitated the partial substitution of hierarchic relations with the lateral relations of the guild, college, council, senate, corps, assembly, company, agency, and committee. They provided the imaginary basis for "networks" of relations between persons of equivalent status. Such "networks" bridged much larger distances than face-to-face hierarchic relations could ever do efficiently. Ethical religions and literary classics did not put an end to hierarchic conceptions of the world. Rather they renovated such conceptions. Crucially, various devices of councils, colleges, guilds,
and bureaucratic or military corps allowed empires and cities to function over a much larger territorial scale, and for a much longer period of time. We can think of this as the difference between a “feudal” scale and an “imperial” scale.

Guilds, councils, corps, and companies provided a basis for interaction that was not modeled on the household and its “natural” hierarchies. Universalistic religious camaraderie, the story-lessons of classical literatures, and virtue-ethics provided the tacit bonds that tied status groups in networks across distance. These kinds of ethos prepared the way for councils to replace tribal chiefs in the Greek poleis, or for later Greek cities to form federated leagues. The Buddhist dhamma officers of the fourth century B.C. Indian Mauryan Empire, or the Buddhist university monastic centers associated with the later Gupta dynasty (320-600), provide spiritualized corps that both extended and countervailed the power of monarchy. The Roman Senate, the Confucian and Byzantine bureaucracies, the Ottoman Janissaries are examples of where network corps complemented hierarchic power. Where this happened, we have what is conventionally called “civilizations.”

Spiritualized bureaucracies, though, were not the only effect of the impetus provided by ethical religions and classical literatures. What also followed from greater possibilities for action at a distance were greater possibilities for long-distance administrative, cultural, and economic traffic. Traffic is not the same as the transactions of spiritualized corps. To visualize the nature of spiritualized bureaucratic transactions, imagine a map-like social space. As the force of ethical religions and literary classics began to be felt, activity across this space increases. It increases as groups find common bonds rooted in “mobile writing”, and its concomitant psychology. This is a condition of the existence of large-scale or long-distance societies. Side-by-side with this, and deeply influenced by it, emerges the phenomenon of “traffickers.” These also act on a large-scale but without the controlling structure of council, monastery, or bureaucracy.

To be a merchant from the Persian Gulf living in Canton in the ninth century, or a Black Sea Greek artisan or sophist living in Athens in the third century B.C., or a trader in Islamic Sumatra in the fourteenth century of the Common Era required “literacy” — both in the sense of the correspondence and account-keeping necessary in
long-distance business and political transactions, and in the sense of the structures of thought that scriptural religion and literary classics encourage. Even if most people in pre-modern settings still memorized religious sayings or literary episodes, rather than read them, both the textual form and the literary content of these worldviews had powerful effects. Mobile script helped turn secular stories into universal classics, and sacred wisdom into transportable holy “books.” Reciprocally, images of wandering heroes, sages, and saviors encouraged movement across space into foreign places. The form and content of “mobile writing” provided the fortification necessary to leave behind the local society of household, tribe, village, court, and patrimonial kingdom.

The “traffickers” though, as we shall see, took an even more adventurous step.

The Clash of Civilizations

The appearance of ethical religions and literary classics had a staggering effect on human possibilities. Preparedness to venture beyond local social boundaries became much more common place. Scriptural religions and literary classics became the basis for new political forms — the great post-archaic empires (the Athenian Empire, the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Empires, the Chinese imperial dynasties, and the Abbasid Empire). Venturesome attitudes emerged within the boundaries of these states, encouraged by status groups with strong lateral connections. Persons also began to strike out with ever-increasing frequency to trade with, visit and live in other city-states and bureaucratic empires. They did this for practical reasons, usually related to trade. However, the venturesome

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encountered political problems specific to their mobility. Ethical religions and literary classics spurred movement across space. But how did these worldviews gel with the folk and patrimonial cultures that they encountered? Were such cultures properly the object of conversion, assimilation, elimination, or coexistence? And even more perplexing: How did ethical worldviews relate to each other when they come into contact?

These questions were most strongly felt in portal cities — because these cities are the most palpable points of intersection between civilizations. The Islamic Janissary corps or Confucian literati administrators might run an empire, but what happened when they encountered one another? The Buddhist monk and the Catholic scholar-priest might train imperial officials, but when their spiritualized bureaucracies had to deal with each other, how was such traffic possible? Spiritualized bureaucracies have never really effectively directly answered this. We see this today when the graduate schooled patrician administrators of the United States meet with their Chinese Communist Party schooled counterparts — there is always of moment of incomprehension, no matter how friendly the proceedings.

This is why for every Athens there is a Piraeus, for every Rome, an Ostia, for Constantinople, a Pera; and for every Washington, there is a New York, and for every Beijing, there is a Shanghai. The denizens of portal cities are masters of trafficking.

One of the great challenges for the portal city has been to answer the question of how can different prophetic and literary civilizations coexist with each other in the same place — and alongside locals with tribal or patrimonial loyalties? Portals have always been a potential touch point for the clash of civilizations. Scriptural and literary worldviews give rise to civilizations and their component states. The difference between the archaic Chinese feudal state and the Chinese imperial dynasties was Confucianism. The Chinese Empire both produced and was the product of a civilization. This is so in the very straightforward sense that literary bonds and spiritualized bureaucracy were central to its long existence.

In contrast, portals are places where different civilizations come into contact. There is an advantage, sometimes a reluctant advantage,
Architectonics implies a world held together by ties that are neither linguistic nor like linguistic ties. These ties are not names or identities. They are not descriptions, words, narrations, imperatives, instructions, utterances, grammars, or syntaxes. This does not mean that such ties are nameless or unidentifiable. Here we should part company with Wittgenstein. We do not have to remain literally silent about such matters. Language can be used perfectly well to name things that are not linguistic objects. After all, the world about which we speak is not just made up of the elements of language. All the same, an architectonic worldview is paradoxical. It names and describes something whose nature is not linguistic, and thus is always in some fundamental way indescribable and inexpressible. Some aspect of that nature — the thing-in-itself — will always point beyond words — towards that which is indefinable, unutterable, and unspeakable.

Architectonic worldviews come — in historical sequence — after the appearance of two other kinds of worldview, viz. ethical religion and classical literature. Both ethical religion and classical literature distinguished themselves by producing an ethics of distance. They provided the linguistic means that allowed human beings to detach themselves from the territorial confines of tribes and patrimonial kingdoms, enabling them to travel across the face of the earth, and to found the typical political orders of post-archaic civilizations — city-states and bureaucratic empires. The first of these mobile worldviews was revealed religion. This produced religious ethics based on the revelation of divine truth — the utterance of an ethical god. This was truth revealed through the agency of a prophet — the prophets of Israel, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Muhammad. Revealed religion gave rise to the idea of a free-floating moral law that was independent of a specific geographical locale, and that was “world transforming”.

The second kind of mobile worldview was that of literature — exemplified by the epic stories of Homer and of the Hindu gods, and the Confucian classics. Just like the commands of prophetic religion and the associated stories of wandering prophets, these literary stories gave rise to social communication and political bonds that were independent of a specific locale. Buddhism was a hybrid kind of worldview. The exemplary actions of the wandering prophet constituted a kind of revealed truth, but in the form of a story line
for civilizations and their component states to trade with each other. If they do so, they need portals. Portals provide the entropic services and ecumenical intelligence to drive inter-civilizational trade and traffic. Even victory in war does not get rid of this question. The spread of Islam by the Arabs did not reduce the imperatives for inter-civilizational contact. The Abbasid triumph did not reduce the necessity of dealing with Franks or Jews or Greeks or Indians or Chinese for commercial reasons. Indeed, such was the power of this necessity, the Ottoman Empire internalized inter-civilizational contact, turning the social basis of what was notionally a Muslim state into a set of elaborate relations between Christian Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, Armenian, and European law communities. It is also notable that once this inter-civilizational arrangement collapsed — as it finally did in 1922, after long decades of decline — the result was bitter civilizational conflict that continues to this day. The Ottoman Empire devolved into a series of nation-states with different civilizational substrata and a mutual genocidal hatred of each other. Serbs and Croats, Greeks and Turks, Algerian Arabs and the French, Israeli Jews and Palestinians in ex-Ottoman territories provided examples of some of the bitterest civilizational clashes of the twentieth century. The attempt to construct nation-states on the tacit basis of scriptural religions or literary classics, in replacement for empire, was an unmitigated failure — measured simply by the violence it generated. On the surface of things, the Ottoman Empire was pre-modern; the nation-state was modern. But, for all of its modernity, the nation-state did almost nothing to answer the question of how, and whether, inter-civilizational relations could be conducted?

There is clear evidence that if inter-civilizational relations are internalized within a state, this is only possible in two cases. The first case is that of empire. We need not think of empire only as a pre-modern political form. Federations provide the model for modern empires. The United States has successfully pioneered this form. The European Union is gradually learning to imitate it. There were a number of interesting ideas for federation proposed in the last century of the Ottoman Empire. Had they been adopted, the present dismal

politics of the Middle East might well have been avoided. The second model for internalizing inter-civilizational relations is that of the portal city, or city-state. Actually, models of portal city and empire are not strictly separable. In the case of empires, portal cities still play the principal role in inter-civilizational relations. Constantinople did this for the Ottoman Empire, and Chicago and New York City have done the same for the United States. Contrawise, the most successful portal cities develop their own empires — as Venice and Amsterdam did.

From the history of the twentieth century, it is clear that where inter-civilizational relations fail, portal cities become the targets for extreme communal violence. We see this in the sack of Smyrna by the Turkish armies in 1922, or the assault on Dubrovnik by the Serbo-Montenegrin army in 1991, or the civil warring in Beirut in the 1970s.

The very function of portal cities — as inter-civilizational hubs — causes them to grapple intimately with questions about the coexistence of ethical religions and literate cultures. We are all familiar with crusading or fundamentalist forms of ethical religions. But national literati, and advocates of literary canons and ideals, have often proved to be just as violent in their prosecution of cultural wars. Portal cities and regions are traditionally major centers of religious and literary publishing. Throughout much of Chinese history, for example, the premier center for printing was in the Canton province. For the very same reasons that portals achieve this kind of print-centric status, they also can end up as a type of prism that concentrates the fierce attitudes of competing literary or religious ethics. In crisscrossing so many worldviews, and local views as well, it is clear that the portal city must be based on something else aside from just prophetic or literary stories. It is here that the attitude of cosmopolitanism comes into its own.⁸

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The Anti-Ethics of Distance

China is a case in point. As early as the eighth century of the Common Era, Muslim traders were crossing the Indian Ocean to South Asia and China.\(^9\) The impetus provided by religion in the forging of this long-distance relationship is very evident. The drive of Gulf traders (from Basra, Siraf, and Hormuz) to leapfrog across long sea distances to establish direct maritime links with China comes immediately in the wake of Muhammad’s life (d. 632) and the Abbasid revolution (749-750). Such was the scale of this that by the ninth century well in excess of 100,000 Muslims, Christians, Jews and old faith Iranians were living in Canton.\(^10\) Quanzhou just a little further up the coast in Fujian province domiciled up to 10,000 Persians, Syrians, and South East Asians.\(^11\)

Historically, China was less adventurous in its maritime activity. It was not until the late T’ang period that Chinese vessels sailed to South East Asia, and even more belatedly, it was not till the Sung dynasty that the Chinese reached the Malabar Coast of India.\(^12\) The dominant Chinese literary culture (Confucianism) was anti-commercial and uninterested in explorations overseas. Its major achievement was in the large-scale political unification of China. Beyond that, it was not especially curious. Thus, relations with other states like Viet Nam and Thailand, including official trading relations, were organized on a tributary model.

Tributary relations constitute a form of loose hierarchy between a stronger and a weaker state. Tributary arrangements are an attempt to model relations at a distance on face-to-face hierarchical relations. In the case of the Chinese state, the one very peculiar exception to the tributary model occurred very briefly in the Ming dynasty during the heterodox reign of the third emperor Yung-lo (1402-1424). Yung-lo

\(^9\) Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, p. 44.

\(^10\) We know this because in 878, the rebel bandit leader Huang Ch’ao captured Canton and "slaughtered 120,000 Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Iranians of the ancient faith. This was a period in the history of the T’ang dynasty when southern China witnessed intermittent rebellions, military movements, and banditry." [Ibid., p. 51.]

\(^11\) Today we still see the marks of this: a little further still up the coast, at Fuzhou also in Fujian province, the city still harbors a large Christian population.

\(^12\) T’ang period (618-906); Sung period (960-1279); Ming period (1386-1644).
organized a series of state-sponsored sea born expeditions between 1404 and 1433, to ports as far afield as Western India and East Africa, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. This was quite evidently an attempt to duplicate the pattern of Muslim traders. (It also had certain parallels with Venetian state sponsorship of trade.) But it was a short-lived policy. Subsequent Ming emperors, responding to Mandarin opposition to this kind of seaward venturing, sharply reversed the policy, and closed China’s seacoasts to foreigners and placed an embargo on Chinese merchants trading overseas.\footnote{Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, pp. 60-61.} This did not kill Chinese overseas trade, though — it just made it unofficial. After 1433, Chinese merchants were never seen again in Indian, African or Arabian ports, but they still ventured (without state sponsorship) to Malacca, the Java Sea and Manila.\footnote{Ibid., p. 100.} The China Seas, from Japan to Malacca, became the extra-territorial province of heterodox Chinese willing to ignore official prohibition.

What was it that allowed the opening of Canton to foreigners, or later the tenacious pursuit by Fujian Chinese of overseas destinations?\footnote{In Taiwan today, for example, Mandarin may be the official language but Taiwanese, which is a variant of the Fujian dialect, is widely spoken, especially in the southern and rural areas of the island state.} There are undoubtedly many causes but one stands out immediately — topography. Fujian province followed the pattern typical of many leading port city regions throughout the world. They emerge in places where terrain is difficult or confined or unattractive — such as for instance Manhattan Island, Amsterdam’s marshland rivers, Chicago’s swampy portage, or Venice’s marshes. “Fujian had a long history of evil reputation as a fatally inhospitable land: a narrow malarial shore backed by mountains of savages.”\footnote{Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature, p. 104.} Often in origin portals are almost “extra-territorial,” and their subsequent prosperity is tacitly built upon this fact. A place that is not territorial in the conventional sense, and that lacks the conventional resources of territory, can survive only by turning extra-territoriality into an asset. Such places rely heavily on intelligence instead of conventional resources or factors of production.

Extra-territorial places become an asset by virtue of the fact that they provide attractive gateways for trading, exchanges, and contacts.
Such intermediation, however, is fraught with difficulty. Canton illustrates the difficulties. To act as a gateway between Muslim Arabia and China, Canton of necessity was an intermediary between the predominately Confucian bureaucracy of territorial China and an Islam that also legitimated rule over vast territories. The prophetic ethic of an Islamic empire and the literary ethic of a Confucian empire shared little in common, either in form or content. Because of such incommensurability, the attitude of the portal city had to be premised on something else apart from either salvationist or literary ethics. If not, then the “city of strangers” — those who come from all over the world and who live in the portal — becomes difficult or impossible to sustain. What is required is another kind of “ethics” — an “ethics of distance”.

This is an “ethics of non-intervention” — an “anti-ethics of let it be”. For the maritime mercantile Chinese of Canton and Fujian Provinces, Taoism provided such an “ethic”. Taoism in effect was the “religion” of Chinese merchants. Taoism is interesting because it exhibits in nuce many of the key characteristics of something that is found repeatedly in portal cities. The basic proposition of Taoism is that there is an inherent but a-literate order to the world — the “Tao” or the nameless order of the cosmos. This order is immanent in the world. There is no transcendent God who has created this order. What is important is not just that the Taoists had no conception of a “saving” God (in this they agreed with Confucians), or that Taoism drew no distinction between a transcendent heaven and a mundane earth, but that their ethic was a-linguistic. It was nameless (wu-ming). The order of the world was not commanded or scripted. It was not revealed through prophecy or through the incipient moral law of literary characters. It

17 Taoism originated in the period of the Warring States [403-221 BCE]. Its classical teachings were those of the Tao-te ching, attributed to Lao-tzu, and the Chuang tsu, named after its putative author.

18 The majority of the overseas Chinese in the Dutch East Indies and Malaysia came from southern Fujian. Taoism was significant amongst this group, reflective of the fact that there was a great concentration of Taoists in the Fujian and Canton Provinces. In the twentieth century, the principal concentration of Taoists is to be found on Taiwan. This is a result of the fact that Taiwan was sinized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with a great emigration of persons from nearby Fujian Province. Most Taiwanese speak the dialect of the Fujian Province.
had no narrative structure. It was a contrapuntal collection of paradoxes. It did not encourage social activism. It did not attempt to transform the world in the image of "the word" of a personal ethical God, or through "the quotation" of literary wisdom. In short, Taoism reacted skeptically to discursive knowledge. In the place of discursive knowledge, Taoism emphasized meditation on the yuan-ch'i, the primordial "breath" of the universe.

The Skeptical Conscience

What is interesting about all of this, from the point of view of the cosmopolitan city, is not the paraphernalia of Taoism — its techniques for contemplation or for the gymnastic and respiratory control of the micro-cosmos of body rhythms — or even the spiritual voyage of the Taoist adept to achieve symbiosis with the universe. What is interesting is the underlying assumption that all social norms, be they traditional or discursive, are contingent, not absolute. In the face of the "nameless", all linguistic distinctions including those of good and evil, truth and falsity, are relative. In the Taoist view, in the greatest action, nothing is named; in the greatest disputation, nothing is said.

A similar attitude prevailed amongst the Jains of maritime Gujarat India. The philosophy and religion of the Jains had developed in the sixth century BCE as a protest against orthodox Vedic (early Hindu) beliefs. The attitude of the Jains to every discursive doctrine was that "it might be" — all discursive knowledge was contingent. The attitude of Jainism to other religions and philosophies was one of non-criticism. It had no proselytizing aspect. While Jainism had its own discursive and canonical literature and body of commentaries, this was a complement rather the determinant of the Jain imagination. This Jain imagination rested on, and was stimulated by, what might be called "the power of the non-discursive." Such power took on meditational and ascetical and mystical forms, but also architectonic

20 Its oral traditions were written down in the fourth century B.C.
21 Other skeptical movements of the time included the Sanjaya Belatthroputta and the antinomian Purana Kassapa.
forms. Plastic beauty was central in Jain life. Jain architecture and stone carving was of exceptional quality. The non-discursive imagination was also expressed in exquisite paintings on palm leaf and paper manuscripts in Jain monastic libraries.

The relation between the discursive and non-discursive imagination is not one of either/or. A non-discursive imagination does not indicate the absence of discursive faculties — just as (in reverse) discursive themes (literary and prophetic themes) can be rendered in non-discursive media (architecture, painting, and sculpture). Rather, what is of interest to us here is that, under certain circumstances, the non-discursive imagination can take a leading role. This is especially true of portals. Portals present an interesting paradox. They are places where “mobile writing” is typically very popular, and, for various purposes, highly valued. Yet they are places where non-discursive media are also very prominent. Great portals are distinguished by great architecture.

Plastic media provide a powerful counterpoint to the scriptorium and the document. “Mobile writings” are easily copied and transported, and spread rapidly across the face of the earth. “Plastic beauty” is relatively immobile, and not easily reproduced. In the mercantile emporium, these two phenomena go hand-in-hand. The paradox of the portal is that long-distance “entrepôt” societies, the most freewheeling of all societies, also produce the most spectacular of all plastic civic art. These societies have a profoundly skeptical attitude to norms and rules — no matter whether it is the case of the naked monks of the Jain tradition, the mercurial merchant patricians of Renaissance Florence, or the unregulated capitalists of nineteenth-century Chicago. At the same time, their “building arts” produce monuments of contemplative architectonics that are amongst the most evocative possible intimations of permanence, stillness, and reason imaginable.

Indeed, in some respects, the architectonics of stone (or modernity’s iron) replaces norms and rules. Long-distance trading societies place great pressure on norms and rules, whether these are of a traditional or a discursive kind. Portal societies coagulate many traditions, and thereby “loosen” all norms and rules. Under these circumstances, images of world/kosmos tend to replace norms and rules.
Such images lay the foundation for a skeptical rational character.\textsuperscript{22} Skeptical rational character is little concerned with either concrete rules or abstract norms. It sets itself apart from ethics understood in either a traditional or discursive sense. It is impatient with social rules, revealed truths, or literary heroes. Its ethic — or in some ways its anti-ethic — derives from its sense of the orderliness and continuity (the “harmony”) of the \textit{kosmos}. In the soul this translates into a kind of inner navigational sense. This “pilot sense” is what makes human beings good at orientating themselves (finding their “way,” their \textit{tao}) amongst social and natural contingencies.\textsuperscript{23}

Fundamental to a skeptical rational character is a detached relation to the world. Detachment is the corollary of a non-discursive orientation to the world. Skeptical reason is “cool.” Even when over-determined by magical or mystical techniques, it serves the interest of detachment. Take the case of the Jain religious ideal of a perfect nature achieved through an austere, ascetical monastic life. On first glance, the renunciation of the monk seems difficult to reconcile with the fact that the Jain laity were in the main merchants and professionals from coastal Gujarat and Maharashtra. This seeming paradox makes more sense if we think of renunciation as a religious correlate of rational “coolness.” Renunciation was aimed not at property but at “attachment.” Attachment, the Jains reasoned (much like the Greek Stoics), was grounded in the passions, and the passions give rise to irrational violence and militancy. Detachment, with its skeptical view of violent passions, made it an attractive worldview for a merchant society for whom the warrior ethos of battling Hindu gods had little to offer. The Taoist “ ethic” of “non-intervention” is similar in nature. It allowed the Chinese merchant to hold at an arms’ length the strong literate social ethic of the Confucians (an ethic that favored the bureaucratic and agrarian life over the traveling and mercantile life).

Of course, for all of the very considerable appetite of ethical religions to intervene in the world, those same religions have

\textsuperscript{22} For a discussion of rational character and its relationship to skeptical conscience, see “The Power of Shame.”

\textsuperscript{23} The car and bus drivers who artfully weave their way through contemporary Manila traffic are a good practical example of the pilot sense at work in a society consumed by traffic flows.
engendered their own non-discursive counter-currents. The Cabballist
tradition in Judaism and Stoic currents in Christianity endowed what
have been at times militant ethic religions with overtones of pantheistic
quietism. In Catholicism, great church architecture and church music
have long been a counterpoint to a purely scriptural religion, as have
been certain mystical currents as well. The same kind of dual face can
also be seen in Islam, the militant religion par excellence. The leading
force in Islamic colonization of Western India, Java and Sumatra —
and also of the Ottoman Empire — were the Sufis. Like Taoists or
Stoic Christians, or indeed Neoplatonist-influenced Greek Orthodoxy,
the Sufis possessed a heterodox, pantheistic, a-literate sense of world
order.

Such an a-literate sense of order tends to flourish in portal cities. It
makes possible the cohabitation of scriptive worldviews. We see
intimations of this in Manila in the sixteenth century. The city served
as a crux of China Seas’ unofficial traffic linking a putatively closed
China with the Malacca Straits passage to the Indo-Islamic world of
the Arabian Sea. Manila’s ability to function as a cosmopolitan city of
strangers—where Spanish Catholics, Filipino converts, Javanese and
Arabian Muslims, and Confucian and Taoist Chinese needed to
coexist—depended on a strong sense of immanent (non-prescriptive)
order. Spanish Manila in the sixteenth century had a huge population
of overseas (Fujian) Chinese who perforce had to negotiate trade not
only with mainland Confucian China that officially banned overseas
trade, but also with local Spanish Catholic officials, indigenous
Filipinos, and with Islamic Sumatra and Java. In this portal, nodal
world, the Taoist skeptic doubtlessly would have encountered the
architectonics of the church builders from Mexico and Spain. Even if
the Taoist merchant and the Catholic mason did not recognize
themselves in the other, they in fact shared a lot in common — in


particular a powerful sense of the world as the product of a-literate design.

**Order By Design**

Let us dwell for a moment on this word, "design." Order by design is a fundamental alternative to order by commands and order by rules. When skeptics insist on the suspension of judgment, they are not inviting anarchy but rather an order of a musical or architectonic kind. The Taoist skeptic observed that naming, or the name (*ming*), in ancient Chinese thought implied an evaluation that assigned an object a place in a hierarchical universe. If we dispense with names, then how else do we assign objects their places? One answer to this is the Stoic's injunction to "live according to nature." But is nature nameless? For the Greek Stoic who thought of the universe as "breath", yes it is; for the Stoic in the Roman tradition who represented nature as a kind of "law," then no it is not.

If nature in a negative sense is nameless, if its stuff is non-discursive, what is it in a positive sense? Most often, the Taoists referred to it as rhythmic. What was nameless was the pulse of the universe. It was like the Greek Stoics imagined — a rhythm of eternal return. It was a complex multi-layered rhythm of night and day, life and death, summer and winter, virtue and not-virtue, action and inaction. In short, the universe had a characteristically rhythmic structure of periodicity and transformation. In the skeptical view, then, nature was not law. It was an order of rhythm.

Such a conception of nature is immensely important to long-distance portal societies. Think of the movement of the denizens of these societies across space. They travel — outward-bound, inward-bound, stopping, re-starting, returning home, going-away. Their mode of life is kinetic. Great energies are expended in this kinetic motion — think of Shanghai or New York, ancient Alexandria or modern Marseilles. But, in order for this kinetic motion not to be chaotic, it must have an order. The natural order of kinesis is rhythm. The most elementary form of rhythm, as the Taoists were aware, is breathing. As we move around the world, breathing is one of the things that set the rhythm for our motion. The in-out, fast-slow, deep-shallow patterns of breath are simple examples of the repetition-
difference structure of rhythms. Human beings, of course, create all
different kinds of rhythms, including the rhythms that regulate how
we breathe. Many of those rhythmic structures are very complex.
Complex rhythms become the basis of art.

The formal characteristics of art works define species of rhythm.
Balance, proportionality, scale, ratio, color relations, tempo, accent,
and so forth allow us to create different rhythmic units. The rhythms
of art works structure the movement of eye, hand, foot, and body. On
a larger scale — on the scale of the city or the humanized landscape —
they structure movement through space in time. Where there is a
high premium placed on kinetic activity — as in portal cities and
long-distance societies — rhythmic structure replaces some, even
many, of the functions of law and command.

A large-scale rhythmic structure, like that of a city, is not a
deliberate creation. It happens of its own accord, as the Taoists would
say. It is self-organizing, as the social theorist would say. The thought
that immediately runs through everyone’s mind is that this sounds
like nineteenth-century laissez-faire. The Taoist advice to “let it be,”
their paean to inaction, could be taken in that sense. To which the
classic reply is Karl Marx’s. Do we allow things to happen “behind the
backs” of social actors? However, a word of warning: most of what the
Taoists said was a kind of paradox. Our Victorians, in contrast, had
little feel for paradox. What the nineteenth-century mind most
certainly had no feel for was the paradoxical nature of creation.

Chuang-tzu’s model of creation, like Plato’s model of creation,
was the artisan. The tao was compared with the activity of the potter
or the bronze caster. It shaped and transformed the universe out of
primordial chaos. But there was something deeply paradoxical about
the act of creation. It was more like the in-act of creation. Even more
paradoxically than Plato’s demiurge who creates according to pre-
existing forms, the Taoist ideal was the carver who does not carve.

This ideal of creative inactivity, and the representation of superior
virtue of doing nothing over and above po-faced Confucian active
virtue, actually tells us something quite important about the nature
of creation. We know that all creation involves acts of design, in the
sense that what is created has form (or intentional departures from
form, for the clever amongst us). But great design is not deliberate. As
Kant put it, you do not create great artworks by following rules. Yet
mostly what human beings do is to create by following rules. The contrary Taoist advice was to ditch all rites and rules of society, laws and virtue. The anarchism of the Taoists was deep going.

Even golden-age artisan culture heroes, they thought, were at fault. These heroes had fashioned implements (utilities) and cunning contrivances. In doing so, their carving had blighted the nameless unwrought substance of the universe. True nature lay in uncarved simplicity. At first blush this sounds like Rousseau’s romanticism. But only if we forget that this is a philosophical paradox. It is meant to get us to think about what carving or creation would look like if we did not rely on discursive rules — on the rules of guild, bureaucracy, and corporation? To answer this, we need to return in our imagination to the uncarved block (p’u) of nature. If the demiurge does not act according to rules, then how does it in-act? It in-acts according to the rhythm, the pulse, of the universe. Think of this as a bit like the strains of music. We can suddenly be aware that our foot has been tapping away to the music’s beat while we have been concentrating on other things. Something like this happens when we are at our most creative. The highest kinds of creation, as with the best, most virtuous deeds, are like great musical or athletic performances that are pulled out of nowhere. Too much planning, and deliberation, and willfulness destroys them.

Rules and norms like other human creations can contribute to maintaining the order of nature, but should not be confused with it. The skeptic is skeptical of law, indeed of all discursive formations — commands as well as laws, stories as well as catechisms. Such skepticism is not irrational. On the contrary, it is highly rational. What is at work here is a particular kind of reason — a very abstract kind. There are rationalities of societies with thick cultures based on intensive face-to-face relations between client and patron, master and servant, boss and worker, landlord and tenant. Then, there are rationalities of larger-scale societies that encourage much more lateral movement across space. These rationalities are based on discursive formations — revealed truths, sagely advice, ethical commandments, literary stories, and on written law or legal principles. Finally, there are the rationalities of a natural or rhythmic order. These rhythms do not command or legislate. They are embodied in the intuitive timing and beautiful phrasing of the writer, not in the writers’ advice to the reader.
They are to be found in the grace of athlete, not in the rules of the game.

The reason of rhythmic order allows us to organize our movement into "significant" entities. One of the reasons why we like beautiful paintings or music so much is that they structure the movement of our eye, the wanderings of our auditory attention, or the tapings of our feet. They give shape to our motor activity. The skeptic is one who thinks that the power of rhythmic orders can in varying measures and degrees replace other kinds of rationality. The detachment of the skeptic is a detachment from social or discursive rationalities.

A Cognitive Ethics

Detachment (a precursor of "objectivity") is the kernel of a rational ethics of a cosmopolitan kind.26 The Taoist view that "one should let men and things go as they can"27 is the antithesis of a literate and prophetic ethics of "care." Detachment counsels against turning the world into an object of passionate "concern." Its maxim is "don't worry," its advice is "do nothing," and "let the world go its own way." Such detachment is rife in portal societies. A mildly skeptical atmosphere permeates these societies. The advice to "let the world go its own way" should not be taken literally. It is a paradox — formulated in the spirit of the carver who does not carve. It does not literally inunct us to do nothing, but rather to be skeptical of all passionate involvements, be they of an evangelical, fundamentalist, or utopian stripe.

The choice of thinking over passion has a palpable anthropological dimension. As human horizons expand, so does the palette of orientational feelings. These are the cognitive (yes/no) feelings that are crucial to human beings in navigating contingent topographies, social contacts, taste experiences, freely chosen loves and friendships, and vocations.28 The more cosmopolitan a society, the more human

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26 For a criticism of late twentieth-century, pragmatist-inspired attempts to remove objectivity from ethics, see Peter Murphy, Review of John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds., Post-Analytical Philosophy in Telos 68 (New York: Telos Press, 1986).


28 On orientational feelings, see Agnes Heller, A Theory of Feelings (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1979), chapter 2.
beings rely on orientational feelings of liking, love, interest, intuition, probability, doubt, certainty, caution, and risk-taking to find their bearings. Such cognitive feelings help human beings chart a "way" in situations where responses are not fixed by tradition, and where there is no clear "social map." Passion in contrast replaces the multiplicity of rational orientative feelings with a single (exclusive) focus on one object. Such "attachments" cause a loss of the ability to navigate contingencies. In place of a mix of interests, loves, tastes, doubts, and certainties, passion elevates one love or one certainty to the exclusion of everything else. For example, either faith (the religious "yes") or doubt (the scientific "no") is permitted to rule over all other cognitive feelings.

When "faith" in literature or religion turns passionate, a discursive ethics can elicit violent and destructive acts. Militant Islam, the crusades of the Christian, xenophobic Confucianism, and revolutionary Romanticism are cases in point. Involvement in an object of "concern" (an involvement stimulated by the authority of scribal truth or literary classic) is such that agents loose the capacity to orientate themselves in the world. They lose the internal sense of "navigation."

The Scottish school of philosophers of the eighteenth century called this internal sense the "moral sense." The "moral sense" was the sense of the skeptical rational character. Adam Smith was a typical product of this school. Anyone possessed by passions, he advised, should take a look at their feelings through the eyes of a stranger. This could be done either through the medium of the imagination or by actually joining an "assembly of strangers." Strangers have little sympathy for passions. Their company, Smith suggests, restores a mind disturbed by passion to some degree of tranquility and sedateness. The company of strangers encourages in us calmness and composure, and an abating of the violence of passions. Smith and his fellow philosophers knew much about the company of strangers. They saw it everyday in the port cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. In so many respects, Smith was

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simply representing the cosmopolitan skepticism of Glasgow, the portal for Irish Sea and Atlantic trade, and Edinburgh, the North Sea metaxu with connections across the world.\textsuperscript{31} In such places, all of the varieties of social and discursive passions cancel themselves out. Strangers may have their own passions, but they are not interested in other people’s passions, or other people in their passions. The “coldness” of strangers is a perfect foil to the heat of truth and conviction. Ultimately, the important thing for the stranger living in a strange place is to be able to navigate the contingencies of that place, and find a “way” through their complexities. This is only possible where the full palate of cognitive feelings remains at hand.

Skepticism is not simply “nay-saying,” or endless “doubt.” No less than the warrior of faith, the feelings of the perpetual doubter are one-dimensional. The skeptic rather is an epitome of a certain kind of reason. The skeptical character is not prepared to sacrifice any orientative feeling if it can help make “a way” through contingent terrain.

An “ethic of distance” that promotes the primacy of orientative feelings make lots of sense in portal cities and emporial states, where so much human activity is devoted to “trafficking” goods, services, and ideas. Orientation in such a world is difficult. “Finding a way” requires “finding a rhythm.” Rhythmic structures provide all sorts of clues for navigating through space in time. The thing about great portals is that they are filled with complex rhythms. Great portals are polyrhythmic entities. Rhythmic structure makes the difference between chaos and complex order. What is very difficult to achieve with personal relations or with rules can be achieved with abstract rhythmic order and its fascinating structure of repetition-difference, or beat-accent. Rhythmic units order the world that we navigate. Where these units are objectivated in stone or iron, or other media, we create a kinetic-plastic world that we can move through. The familiar architectonic devices of balance, equilibrium, proportionality, ratio, and scale measure the space of those units—

\textsuperscript{31} Adam Smith (1723-1790) was lecturer at Edinburgh University (1748-51), professor at Glasgow University (1751-1764), the Edinburgh-based Commissioner of Customs and Salt Duties for Scotland (1777-1786), and Lord Rector of Glasgow University (1787-1789).
the space that lies between the time-markers of accent and beat. These devices, in subtle but compelling ways, structure our movement through space in time. From the frame of the door to the edge of the pavement, from the outline of the building to the outline of the skyline, accents define a time that is also a space. This is the navigable space that we move through. It is plastic, three-dimensional space plus the fourth dimension of time. It is through this movement, and its rhythmical order, that the cognitive ethics of distance makes itself felt. 😞