

# *Anticipating China*

**THINKING THROUGH THE NARRATIVES  
OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE**

*David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames*

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of Chinese and Western Culture*

DAVID L. HALL  
*and*  
ROGER T. AMES

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*For Angus*

I settle my body like a rooted tree stump,  
I hold my arm like the branch of a withered tree;  
out of the vastness of heaven and earth,  
the multitude of the myriad things,  
it is only the wings of the cicada that I know.  
I don't let my gaze wander or waver,  
I would not take all the myriad things in exchange for the  
wings of a cicada.

*Zhuangzi*

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friends, recognizing that both parties to this collaboration may be said to own more than his share of *hubris*, often wonder how we manage to maintain such a harmonious working relationship. Sometimes, on reflection, we wonder about that ourselves. Perhaps the secret lies in the fact that, *hubris* aside, each of us also owns a profound appreciation of difference.

David L. Hall  
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at El Paso

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## *Introduction: Anticipating the Argument*

### 1. CLEARING A PATH TO CHINA

Some years ago, Karl Jaspers forwarded his concept of the “Axial Age”—the period between roughly 800 and 200 B.C.E. in which all major cultures presumably had their most creative development. This was an age, according to Jaspers, in which individuals began “to experience the absolute through the heights of transcendence and the depths of subjectivity.”<sup>1</sup>

If comparative philosophy has anything to say about Chinese culture during the so-called Axial Age, it is certainly this: notions of “absoluteness,” “transcendence,” and “subjectivity” were of doubtful significance. Absolute and transcendent Beings such as Aristotle’s God or Plato’s Forms, or absolute and transcendent principles such as the Principle of Sufficient Reason, would be difficult to find in China—as would the celebration of the autonomous, meditative, subjective individual who emerges as a principal character in developing Western cultures. Indeed, the philosopher of culture is likely to find that not only such ideas as “absoluteness,” “transcendence,” and “subjectivity,” but any number of other notions essential to the development of Western intellectual traditions, were broadly irrelevant to the origins and development of the Chinese cultural milieu.

In a most important sense, it does appear that divergent paths were taken at a number of crucial moments in the development of Chinese

and Western cultures. The consequence of this divergence is that the problematics of Anglo-European culture and that of China are really quite distinct. That is to say, the art, politics, and religion; the scientific and moral sensibilities; and the senses of chronology embodied in history are distinct enough between China and the West so as to make the task of translating issues and meanings from one culture to another extremely challenging.

One of the principal barriers precluding the Westerner from understanding China on its own terms involves the persistence in Western cultures of what Robert Solomon has so aptly termed the "transcendental pretense."<sup>2</sup> In part, this term refers to the paradoxical shape taken by Western ethnocentrism. Central to our beliefs as Anglo-European heirs of the Enlightenment is the conviction that the scientific rationality emergent at the beginnings of the sixteenth century names a universal norm for assessing the value of cultural activity everywhere on the planet. This expression of our provincialism has arguably been more harmful than those insular attitudes that harbor less evangelical motives.

Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century translations of classical Chinese texts, made by missionizing Christians, introduced terms such as "Heaven," "Truth," and "Self" as translations for terms which bear little resemblance to these concepts. More recently, there have been psychologists, both Western and Chinese, who have significantly distorted the Chinese world by presupposing that notions such as Freud's "Oedipal situation" or Jung's "archetypes" are relevant to the interpretation of Chinese sensibilities. Historians of science and political theorists have at times conspired to insure a misunderstanding of Chinese concepts of law by assuming the validity of transcendent forms of natural law, on the one hand, or positivist forms of imposed law, on the other. And there are both sociologists and political theorists who perpetuate flawed understandings of the Chinese political process by failing to note shifts in the meanings of power and authority as we move from West to East, or by presupposing the traditional Western distinction of private and public spheres of social existence where no such distinction obtains, or by assuming that the absence of a tradition of natural rights in China is necessarily a function of authoritarian or even totalitarian motivations. Some Western historians have insisted upon exporting to China irrelevant historiographical models that make the Chinese appear to be naive and irresponsible caretakers of their own past.



These distortions arise from a failure to give adequate notice to the contrasting assumptions that shape the cultural milieux of China and the West. This failing is itself encouraged by the universalist impulse associated with Western rationality and the “transcendental pretense.”

At least one miscalculation made in approaching China is more a consequence of insensitivity to the nuances of the Chinese tradition than to transcendental pretense. This is the questionable assumption that Karl Marx is more important than Confucius—or Zhuangzi—in understanding contemporary China. Doctrinaire Marxism is effectively moribund as a political philosophy. Indeed, for much of its life in China, as elsewhere, Marxism was reshaped by its proponents into a seedy, effete, ideology which rationalized elitist, top-down forms of revolution. In instance after instance in recent Chinese history, the rhetoric has been Marxist while the motivation and sentiment has, in the broadest sense, been more traditional and “Confucian.” And we, to our detriment, have been inclined to listen to China’s rhetoric, thus misconstruing its sentiment and motivation.

While attempting to maintain a real sensitivity to the nuances of the Chinese experience, we must not become lost in the details. As important as such details are when performing analyses of this or that aspect of a society or culture, comparativists will be prevented from making sense of a culture if they do not diligently avoid the Fallacy of the Counterexample. After all, generalizations concerning cultural importances are often vindicated, not falsified, by resort to counterexamples precisely to the extent that such examples suggest the relative absence of a particular belief or doctrine. For to determine whether a concept or theory or thematic is *in* a culture in the strong sense that assessments of cultural determinants require, we must ask: Is it *importantly* present? Has it contributed significantly to the shaping of a cultural milieu. Therefore, as a means of maintaining our focus upon the truly important ideas and issues, we will do our best to respect the following principle:

*The mere presence of an idea or doctrine in a particular cultural matrix does not permit us to claim that the doctrine or idea is importantly present—that is, present in such a way that it significantly qualifies, defines, or otherwise shapes the culture.<sup>3</sup>*

An employment of the Principle of Mere Presence, where relevant, allows the comparativist to remain focused upon what is truly important in shaping cultural sensibilities.

The difficulty of intercultural translation can be illustrated by recourse to Ludwig Wittgenstein's familiar figure of the Duck-Rabbit. The Chinese have drawn a duck in instances where we should expect to see a rabbit. The failure to appreciate this difference and its implications can lead us into some discomfiting confusions. Thus we may be led to ask: Are the cultural assumptions of mainstream Western culture *in* China if we are able to make out the outlines of a rabbit only over against the insistence of the artist that the figure is a duck?

The problem may become even more perplexing if our Chinese and Western interlocutors have learned of one another's worlds, as intellectuals most often do, principally through textual media. More often than not, the filter of one's own language serves to make otherwise alien ways of thinking seem almost familiar. For example, when Western students of Chinese culture see *tian* 天 translated as "Heaven," they may naturally assume that connotations of transcendence and spirituality attaching to the notion of "heaven" in their tradition apply to *tian*. And when Chinese students of Western culture see "God" translated as *tianzhu* 天主, "the Master of *tian*," or as *shangdi* 上帝, "the ancestral lord," they contextualize this term by appealing to an ancestral continuum analogous to our family structure. In instances such as this, the Westerner is inclined to believe that the Chinese, too, see a rabbit, just as the Chinese individual is persuaded that we are all looking at a duck.

In the process of completing our *Thinking Through Confucius*,<sup>4</sup> we realized the need for a sequel which would provide the broadest of contexts for the sorts of claims we were making there. Most of the comparative essays we have produced since 1987, both jointly and independently, have been written with that aim in mind. *Anticipating China*, and a second volume which will follow soon after the publication of this work,<sup>5</sup> are meant to realize that aim. We hope that this present work, and its sequel, will serve to clarify and develop many lines of argument we have heretofore only sketchily presented.

The argument of our essay may be summarized as follows: In chapter 1 we will defend the claim that the shape of our intellectual culture has been importantly determined by ideas invented or discovered in the period culminating with the work of Augustine in the fifth century of our Common Era. This defense will take the form of a narrative of the development of Western philosophical culture from its beginnings to the Augustinian age.

Our motivation in making such a broad claim is heuristic and pragmatic. The import of our claim is simply this: (a) the period we shall be detailing is a source of truly important interpretive constructs, (b) these constructs are contingent products of particular historical and cultural circumstances, and (c) they continue to qualify our cultural and intercultural understandings in significant manners.

If we can sustain these three assertions we shall be in a position to approach the ultimate aim of our study, which is to promote intercultural understanding between China and the West. For our argument will be that awareness of at least some of the important ideas and beliefs that have shaped us, and of their cultural contingency, will prevent us from too easily resorting to “transcendental pretense” in our approach to alternative cultures.

While the broad assumptions we shall outline have dominated our societies well into the Modern period, and remain obvious to most of us, every one of them is the consequence of the often tacit rejection of alternative beliefs. In the narrative of chapter 1, we shall provide a sense of the evolution of these commonly held notions from a context that includes some of their more controversial alternatives. Along the way we shall elaborate a contrast between *first* and *second problematic thinking* as a means of providing a language with which to articulate the relationship between the dominant and recessive modes of thinking within our Western tradition.<sup>6</sup>

*Second problematic thinking*, which we shall also term *causal thinking*, is the mode which comes to dominate the classical West. Its presuppositions are (1) the construal of the beginning of things in terms of “chaos” as either emptiness, separation, or confusion; (2) the understanding of “cosmos” as a single-ordered world; (3) the assertion of the priority of rest over change and motion (alternately expressed as the preference for “being” over “becoming”); (4) the belief that the order of the cosmos is a consequence of some agency of construal such as *Nous* (*Noûς*), the *Demourgos* (*Δημιουργός*), the Unmoved Mover, the Will of God, and so on; and, finally, (5) the tacit or explicit claim that the states of affairs comprising “the world” are grounded in, and ultimately determined by, these agencies of construal.

Alongside the development of rational, causal thinking we shall consider the importance of what we will term *first problematic*, or alternatively, *analogical* or *correlative* thinking. First problematic

thinking is neither strictly cosmogonical nor cosmological in the sense that there is the presumption neither of an initial beginning nor of the existence of a single-ordered world. This mode of thinking accepts the priority of change or process over rest and permanence, presumes no ultimate agency responsible for the general order of things, and seeks to account for states of affairs by appeal to correlative procedures rather than by determining agencies or principles.

Our comparative exercise would be philosophically empty were it not for the fact that, as we shall attempt to demonstrate, comparisons between classical Chinese and Western culture turn out to be comparisons of contexts shaped by alternative problematics *analogous* to the two just described: A form of first problematic thinking, while recessive in the West, dominates classical Chinese culture. Likewise, the cultural dominant of the West, which we are calling second problematic or causal thinking, is recessive within classical Chinese culture.

We shall argue that the respective values of analogical and causal thinking, as two contingent strategies human beings employ to accommodate themselves to their surroundings, should be assessed solely on pragmatic terms. Such a claim challenges the viability of the Enlightenment reading of cultural development, which argues that the movement from *mythos* to *logos* or “from religion to philosophy,”<sup>7</sup> or from analogical to causal thinking, ought to serve as the norm for the civilizing of human experience.

Our claim is hardly as controversial as it once might have been. “Postmodern” sensibilities, associated with individuals such as Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida, along with the new pragmatism of Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty, carry forward (in a variety of ways) the critique of the Enlightenment project begun by Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century. The relevance of this critique to the argument of our present work is that it constitutes a sustained assault upon the dominance of rational and casual thinking, and a stimulus to return to the analogical procedures of first problematic thought. And though our primary concern is to illumine the contrasting assumptions shaping classical Chinese and Western cultures, we shall not be disappointed if a side effect of our discussion is to add some plausibility to the various intellectual movements which are attempting to reformulate important aspects of our own cultural sensibility.

After rehearsing in the broadest of strokes what we take to be a plausible narrative of our cultural development, we move on in chapter 2 to a consideration of the value, for comparative understandings of Chinese and Western culture, of the existence of an interpretive strand alternative to that of the rational problematic. Our argument here is essentially that we set aside the inventory of interpretive concepts drawn from the rational problematic and interpret Chinese culture by appealing to the inspiration of the aesthetic problematic. Given our historicist assumptions, we cannot support any final dependence upon the specific content of ideas and doctrines developing from first problematic thinking in the West. Rather we shall argue that comparativists must, insofar as is possible, attempt to understand Chinese culture on its own terms. This means that we must take our cues from the manner in which the intellectual activity in classical China *most analagous* to our first problematic has been articulated.

Chapter 3 attempts to illustrate how this might be done by providing an account of the congealing of classical Chinese culture in the Han dynasty. Having identified and set aside the dominant, but extraneous, interpretive notions from the Western inventory, we attempt to provide a less freighted understanding of “the people of the Han.” This understanding is informed by the dominance of notions of process and particularity, and the preference for “correlative” over “causal” thinking.

The main title of our work is purposefully ambiguous. The locution “anticipating China” carries a number of allied meanings. In the first sense, we shall anticipate an understanding of China by reconstituting the elements of classical Western culture in a manner that will provide us a better set of tools for assaying the Chinese sensibility. In a second sense, aided by these new tools, we shall attempt at least to *adumbrate* a fresh account of the development of Chinese culture. This account, in turn, is meant to anticipate a more elaborate interpretation in a second book to follow. Thus, both in this volume and its sequel, we wish to argue for a “deferred understanding.” An immediate consequence of surrendering the transcendental pretense is that ambitious, globalizing assertions which essentialize cultural experience and interpretation must give way to more modest and localized understandings. Theoretical structures must ultimately be replaced by more tentative and provisional narratives. Our project is

not at all to *tell it like it is*; we merely wish to present a narrative which is interesting enough and plausible enough to engage those inclined to join the conversation.

A third use of the term “anticipation” is specifically relevant to the admittedly unusual organization of our work. A reader, anticipating a book about China, may wonder why we have begun our work with a lengthy narrative of the development of classical Western culture. The answer to this question lies in the fact that we believe comparative discussions cannot usefully depend upon dialectical argumentation. The most fruitful method for the comparative philosopher is one which provides accounts that contextualize alternative arguments in such a manner as to highlight their practical strengths and weaknesses as interpretive devices. This is done, not through logical analysis, but through a simple juxtaposition which seeks to identify those contexts within which one’s arguments, as well as the proposed alternatives, are relevant. Our construction of a narrative of the development of classical Western culture as a means of contextualizing our subsequent discussion of classical China is a consequence of having chosen this method.

Our comparative method, which we have in other contexts termed *ars contextualis*,<sup>8</sup> presumes that it is often impossible to clarify what something is without saying a great deal about what it is not. This is particularly true when, as in the present situation, the otherwise most useful interpretive ideas turn out to be real barriers to understanding. In his efforts at reconstructing philosophy, John Dewey asserted his aim to be that of “removing the useless lumber blocking our highways of thought.” This well defines the task we have set for ourselves. We wish primarily to clear away the useless lumber blocking the path to China. Paradoxically, that useless lumber turns out to include many of the concepts and doctrines that came to comprise the dominant intellectual inventory of Western culture.

Our account of the rise of the Western cultural dominant during the classical period is meant to raise to consciousness those assumptions which hinder members of Western culture from understanding China on its own terms, and to provide those alternative categories more likely to allow access to Chinese culture. To the extent that we are successful, we hope not only to convince some individuals of the irrelevance of interpretive notions to which they may have formerly appealed in their accounts of Chinese culture, but also to persuade



other more empirically minded thinkers who believed themselves to have avoided resort to philosophical interpretation, that they too are burdened by these same assumptions.

In fact we are less concerned with the tender-minded theoreticians than with the tough-minded social scientists. For the turn toward pragmatism and historicism endorsed by this work has as a basic implication an ultimate devaluation of the cultural role of philosophy. An underlying assumption of this work is that, in the area of comparative studies, philosophical theorizing should be replaced by more concrete, praxis-oriented endeavors. But, though we do believe that anthropologists, ethnographers, and others will *eventually* be prepared to tell us more of what we need to know about alternative cultural sensibilities, this will not come about until they are first persuaded that they, too, are unknowing carriers of extraneous interpretive constructs.

A further word concerning the rationale behind including a detailed account of the development of classical Western culture in a book about China: This book has been self-consciously written for both Chinese and Western audiences. The narrative of the development of the Western cultural sensibility from the Greeks to Augustine will offer our Chinese readers a foothold for further comparative reflection, if only by offering an account of that development that highlights an alternative to the exclusionary Enlightenment narrative, one which is much better disposed toward those elements in Western culture which resonate with the Chinese sensibilities. It is also the case that those Western sinologists trained primarily in Chinese language and culture, and less so in Greek philosophy, might find our account of the beginnings of Western culture useful. Finally, by virtue of its concern to parallel two distinct cultural developments, our work might serve as a useful introduction to comparative philosophy.

## 2. CIRCLES AND SQUARES

One manner of evoking a sense of the differences between China and the West is through a meditation on the figures of the circle and the square.

For example, the primordial importance of the image of “circularity” in both cultures may belie the distinct manners in which the two cultures have dealt with this image. In the Western world,

defined ultimately in terms of Being and Permanence, the perfection of circularity has been used to challenge the imperfections of motion and change. That which exists was seen as "the body of a well-rounded sphere." The bounded cosmos was itself most often construed as spherical.

But the acknowledged perfection of the circle has not prevented certain modern heirs of Pythagoras from lamenting the incommensurability of mathematical expressions (such as that irrational  $\pi$ ) that try to express its nature. Thus, we in the West have tended to rationalize the circle, rendering it in some formulaic manner that more closely approximates the demands of exactness and certitude. In fact, one of the romantic ideals of Western thinkers was for a long time "squaring the circle."

The theme of squaring the circle found in the West has its functional counterpart in China in the effort to envision the square, like the circle, as ultimately unbounded and incomplete. The Han dynasty tables which provide ordered columns of correlations, matching the various seasons with the principal directions, the processes of nature, classes of animals, and so forth, offer no suggestion of exhaustiveness. Like the circle, these modes of organization are open and indefinitely extensible.

Among the Chinese, circles and squares have been dominated not by their peripheries but by their centers. It is not the bounded circle or square one is apt to meet in Chinese art, literature, or philosophy, but the "radial" circle and the "nested" square which extend themselves ever outward from their centers.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese claim that the world is but "the ten thousand things" bears little suggestion that it is a bounded or a boundable whole. Such a world is a set of foci from which relatedness to what at the moment is deemed "center" may be negotiated.

The differing understandings of circles and squares in Chinese and Western cultures is more suggestive than might first appear to be the case. The importance of the development of formal concepts in the Western tradition, born with the Socratic quest for "definitions," illustrates the significance of knowledge as a function of *enclosure*. To "de-fine" is to set finite boundaries. On the other hand, the Chinese depend, for the most part, upon exemplary models or instances rather than strict definitions to evoke understanding. Knowledge under these conditions has an element of rich, unbounded vagueness which contrasts rather starkly with the Western "quest for certainty."



We shall elaborate upon these contrasting interpretations of circles and squares in the latter part of this work specifically with respect to the question of the acquisition and organization of knowledge. We mention this contrast here as a means of offering a set of guiding metaphors which will allow our readers to anticipate the most general features of our argument.

Our book is really about the activity of intercultural philosophy, and its ultimate aim is to encourage strategic and tactical reflections that serve to abet intercultural conversations. We hope, as well, that our work will help to recover novel elements within our own cultural resources that resonate with aspects of the classical Chinese sensibility. For it is only when we become sensitive to indigenous elements that resonate with the important Chinese values and doctrines that we will be able to appropriate elements of that alien culture to enrich our own experience. Alternatively, we would hope that our work will facilitate the complementary operations on the part of Chinese translators of Western concepts.

In sum: the path we are endeavoring to clear to China should encourage traffic in both directions.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### — *Squaring the Circle* —

There is reason to believe that human genius reached its culmination in the twelve hundred years preceding and including the initiation of the Christian Epoch. . . . Of course, since then there has been progress in knowledge and technique. But it has been along lines laid down by the activities of that golden age.

A.N. Whitehead

A chief task of those who call themselves philosophers is to help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future.

John Dewey

Western culture in its broadest, most effective sense was formed in two separate phases: first, in the period prior to the collapse of the Athenian city-states in the fourth century before the Common Era; and second, in that period characterized by the convergence of Hellenic, Hebraic, and Roman values and institutions. This latter phase effectively culminated in the fifth century in the work of St. Augustine. By that time we had come to hold as self-evident a number of significant propositions that have shaped and continue to shape our cultural reasonings and practice with respect to our aesthetic, moral, religious, scientific, philosophic, and historical sensibilities.

Such a stark assertion as the above, which does in fact entail the claim that the present status of our culture is in some sense a projection of its temporal origins, may suggest to some that we have con-

fused the logical and temporal orders and have fallen into the “genetic fallacy.” But such a suggestion would be plausible only if we were to claim that the present status of our intellectual culture is either *exhaustively* isomorphic with its beginnings, or in some important senses *inevitably* so. The dominant features of our culture, expressed in the form of broad doctrinal traditions which contextualize the most important meanings for our concepts and beliefs, exist alongside an inexhaustibly complex set of alternative ideas and practices the attenuation of which is, though partly the result of limitations of creativity and imagination, largely a function of the rise to dominance of an objectivist bias which leads us, above all, to search out “the truth of the matter,” and to exclude what does not conform to that truth.

Thus, the lack of subtlety and nuance characterizing our inventory of interpretive tools, and the heavy-handedness with which they have so often been employed, is little more than the ideological consequence of that intellectual inertia which so often accompanies objectivist and dogmatic sensibilities. Far from supporting this consequence by seeking any transcendental rationale for our cultural development, we shall be arguing that this objectivist bias is in the truest sense a product of our peculiar history.

In what follows we shall dismiss any attempt to tell the story of classical Western culture *als zwar gewesen ist*, believing that to be the most fanciful of projects. A chief purpose of historical narratives is, after all, to make some sense of one’s presented locus by responsible appeals to the past. In providing a narrative of the development of our classical cultural sensibility which is a distinct alternative to that offered by the familiar Enlightenment account of the movement from *mythos* to *logos*, we are, of course, claiming that our present is a post-Enlightenment present, one which is no longer informed by the assumptions that characterize our so-called modern age.<sup>1</sup>

Our claim is that there are as many distinctive and important accounts of the past as there are significant perspectives offered by the present. That we shall be offering a story of the rise and fall of second problematic, causal thinking is solely due to the fact that one of the most important perspectives currently offered us is that of a present characterized by a powerful, sustained, and thus far largely successful critique of second problematic assumptions.

## 1. FROM CHAOS TO COSMOS

In characterizing the shape of our intellectual culture we should like to begin at the beginning. But if our discussion must presuppose a world—that is, a cosmos as an ordered whole—we are hardly able to do so. As reasoning creatures, we seem forced to cut short any return to the origins and “begin” *in medias res*. Celebrating the truth of Virgil’s advice in the words of Robert Frost, we feel constrained to say:

Ends and beginnings—there are no such things.  
There are only middles.<sup>2</sup>

Reasonable words, certainly: the end hasn’t come, and the beginning is lost in the obscurity of chaos. Were we to stalk the time of beginnings before there was order or harmony, we could find only irrationality, since reason as the means by which we grasp first principles would take us only as far as that moment after the illumining of chaos. Reason and reasoning are tied to the notion of primordial beginnings. Cosmologies are the groundworks of rational order. Cosmogonies, by presupposing a “time” characterized by a basic irrationality, or nonrationality, remind us that beyond the conception of an ordered and harmonious universe lies emptiness, alienation, confusion. Pursued to their ground, therefore, all theories, principles, laws, and valuations characteristic of our Anglo-European culture dissolve into the yawning gap, the emptiness, the confusion, of our chaotic beginnings.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that “beginning” refers to “the action or process of entering upon existence,” “that out of which anything has its rise.” The source of this arising is chaos (χάος)—“the elemental,” “the first state of the universe,” “the great deep or abyss.” Further: “principle” (*arche* ἀρχή) is directly related to *archon* (ἄρχων), one authorized to *give orders*. Principles are beginning points of thought and action. But “beginning” itself is a richly poetic term carrying, through primary associations with the Old English *gínan*, the meaning of “the yawning gap,” or “gaping void” of chaos. Principles and beginnings dissolve, at their roots, into arbitrariness and confusion.

Thus, *arche*, *principium*, beginning, all refer to the *origin*, “the first state of the universe”—namely, chaos. We contrast chaos with

“cosmos” as the ordered or harmonious world. The idea of bringing cosmos out of chaos is at the very root of our conception of beginnings. But “cosmos” as applied to the external surround is a relatively late notion. The presumption of a single-ordered world was by no means authorized by empirical or logical generative criteria. “Cosmos” comes from the verb *kosmeo* (κοσμέω), which means “to set in order.” This word carries primary associations of housekeeping, military organization, or cosmetic adornment. Thus *kosmos* describes a state of being ordered, arranged, or adorned. The term was long in such ordinary use before it came to be applied, ostensibly by Pythagoras (?582–?500), as a means of describing the external surround:

Pythagoras was the first to call what surrounds us a cosmos, because of the order in it.<sup>3</sup>

Anaximander (?611–?547) believed that all things arose out of “the boundless (τὸ ἄπειρον).” He thus replaced the more materialistic sounding imagery of Thales (“Everything is water”) with something without qualities or shape or structure, but from out of which all things with qualities, shape, and structure arose. For Anaximander, qualities were conceived to exist in pairs, as contraries, “hot and cold,” “moist and dry.” The indeterminate “boundless” could thus be determined in relation to a balance or conflict of opposite qualities:

And the source of coming to be for existing things is that into which destruction, too, happens, “according to necessity”; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time.<sup>4</sup>

What is striking about this citation from Anaximander is that the world-order is analogized from the order of the law court.<sup>5</sup> Since, as we have seen, the ordering function associated with the Greek *kosmeo* was originally used to designate man-made orders, the analogy suggested here supports the notion that the very idea of cosmos was an invention.<sup>6</sup>

Not only is the status of the notion of cosmos as an ordered whole called into question; of equal significance is the fact that the singularity of world-order is itself controversial. Xenophanes believed that

there are innumerable world-orders, but that they do not overlap.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, it was commonly accepted by the early chroniclers of philosophy that Anaximander believed in an infinite number of worlds which succeeded one another in time. This is an implication of his vision of the harmony of opposites. All things that come into being from the boundless must return to it. This includes any given world-order:

These world-orders, Anaximander supposed, are dissolved and born again according to the age which each is capable of attaining.<sup>8</sup>

Democritus, too, believed in the existence of a plurality of worlds:

In some worlds there is no sun and moon, in others they are larger than in our world, and in others more numerous. The intervals between the worlds are unequal; in some parts there are more worlds, in others fewer; some are increasing, some at their height, some decreasing; in some parts they are arising, in others failing. They are destroyed by collision one with another. There are some worlds devoid of living creatures or plants or any moisture.<sup>9</sup>

Democritus' view that a plurality of world-orders coexist in space is a consequence of his assumption of an infinite number of eternally existing atoms randomly colliding in infinite space. The likely combinations of atoms into elements, compounds, planets, star systems, and so forth would be infinite, and over an infinite amount of time these combinations would be realized, but it is also true that in infinite space an indefinitely large number of world-orders would coexist.

One of the valuable lessons of returning to the origins of philosophic speculation is we thereby discover that many of our more obvious commonsense beliefs are the result of choices made at the beginning of reflective thought. Order is not presupposed, but constructed by analogy to the artificial order of human society. That there is a single world is not a given but is something that comes to be believed.<sup>10</sup>

One interesting bit of evidence about the early controversy concerning the question of one or many worlds comes from Plato's writings. In the *Philebus*, Plato has Socrates enjoin censure against the "blasphemy" that "the sum of things or what we call this universe is controlled by a power that is irrational and blind," and is "devoid of order."<sup>11</sup> And in the *Timaeus* there is the claim that "the creator made

not two worlds or an infinite number of them, but there is and ever will be one only-begotten and created heaven.”<sup>12</sup> That the order of the world, particularly in its character as a single-ordered universe, should be in question might seem rather odd to us moderns, but the struggle suggested by the discussions of order in Plato was a real one. Many of the earliest thinkers believed in a plurality of worlds. These worlds were thought either to succeed one another in time, or to coexist in the vastness of unlimited space.<sup>13</sup>

Plato’s struggle with “blasphemy” and “impiety” throughout his writings culminates in the *Laws*, wherein the penalties for those who assert that the world is “devoid of order”—that it is not ordered according to “what is best”—are set out as five years imprisonment for an initial offense, followed by execution and burial outside the gates of the city for a second act of impiety.<sup>14</sup>

On the principle that it is unlikely that such a fuss would be made over an issue unless the issue were of practical importance, we can plausibly speculate that the debate over the existence of a unitary cosmos was one of the significant debates in the ancient world. And, as we shall see, the fact that proponents of a single-ordered world won the argument in the West is truly a consequence of this view being more “reasonable.” The irony, of course, is that this fact in turn is a consequence of the interdependence of the notions of “reason” and the belief in a single-ordered world. Thus, it is not just the contingency of the latter belief we are focusing upon; we mean to call attention to the contingency of the notion of rationality as well.

“Cosmos” is a metaphor, applied analogically to the world about us. Our ambience was thought to be a complex manyness before it was held to be “one, single, and unitary.” Indeed, quite apart from the explicitly Greek context, the Germanic-based English word, “world” (*wer + ald*, Ger. *Welt*) means the “age or life of man.” Any association of orderedness besides that relevant to the arbitrary, contingent, human order is absent from this notion. In the beginning was chaos.

Three primitive conceptions of chaos have taken on importance in our cultural self-understanding. The Semitic myth of *Genesis*, related to the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma elish*, tells us:

In the beginning the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the waters.<sup>15</sup>



The description of the source or origin as a formless, dark, void is similar to the characterizations of chaos in terms of the “primordial waters” in Egyptian and Mesopotamian creation myths. Such a cosmogonic process tells of a victory over the forces of chaos. God’s command in *Genesis*, “Let there be light,” establishes order by a command.

Besides the vision of chaos as formless nonbeing,<sup>16</sup> there is the position of the Orphic cosmologies of the fifth- and sixth-century B.C.E. which interprets chaos as “separation,” reflecting one of the root meanings of chaos—namely, “yawning gap.” In these myths, chaos is often associated with the gap between heaven and earth. Eros, as specifically sexual or procreative love, serves as the means of unifying the two and overcoming chaos.

Hesiod’s *Theogony* tells of the coming into being of earth and sky and of the region in between. The union of earth and sky achieves unity at the cosmological level.<sup>17</sup> This myth may have been influenced by the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma elish*, with its division of Tiamat into sky and earth, as well as by *Genesis*, which tells of God’s division of the waters below and above the firmament. Of course, the specific senses of chaos in the two myths are distinct.

The sexual imagery in Hesiod (Earth = Female, Heaven = Male) suggests that opposition is at the root of generation but that differentiation of this sort entails distance, a gap, chaos. Aristophanes’ myth of the round men in Plato’s *Symposium* rings a variation on this theme. Individuals, split in two by Zeus, seek through the agency of eros to reestablish their original wholeness. The separation, the chaos, that came into being with sexual differentiation is to be overcome by love.

A third type of cosmogonic myth is illustrated by Plato’s *Timaeus*. Here the imposition of order through persuasion leads to the creation of an ordered cosmos:

Desiring, then, that all things should be good and, so far as might be, nothing imperfect, the god took over all that is visible—not at rest but in discordant and unordered motion—and brought it from disorder into order. . . . Reason overruled Necessity by persuading her to guide *the greatest part of things that become* towards what is best; in that way and on that principle this universe was fashioned in the beginning by the victory of reasonable persuasion over Necessity.<sup>18</sup>

There is no concern in Plato's myth for supporting a preexistent chaos; the only important consideration is that the divine persuasive agency reduces the threat of chaotic disorder (though, as the text suggests, not completely).

The reference to "rest" is interesting in that it advertises the view of the majority of the Greeks (Plato and Aristotle were chief protagonists of such a vision) that rest is the more perfect state, and that motion, therefore, requires explanation. Plato's version of this belief is, as we have seen, connected with the view that chaos is disordered motion, and any explanation of such motion must take into account that its origin is to be found in the disordered and the irrational.

In the *Genesis* myth, the origin of light from darkness, and the consequent creation of an ordered universe, consequences of *creatio ex nihilo*, are accomplished by a command, an *order*. Plato's cosmogony promotes an alternative explanation: Whereas power creates something from nothing, reason brings order from discord. Hesiod's *Theogony* describes the conquest of chaos by eros as a drive toward primordial unity. Thus, in all the senses of chaos rehearsed so far, the beginning of things involves an act of construal. Whether as non-being, as disorder, or as a separating gap, chaos is *overcome*.

There are certain Gnostic cosmogonies of the early Christian era which provide a radical alternative to the dominant cosmogonic myths. Many of the gnostics believed that the world is the product of a demiurge identified with the Old Testament God who is evil, not good:

Whoever has created the world, man does not owe him allegiance. . . . Since not the true God can be the creator of that to which selfhood feels so utterly a stranger, nature merely manifests its lowly demiurge: as a power deep beneath the Supreme God, upon which every man can look down from the height of his god-kindred spirit, this perversion of the Divine has retained of it only the power to act, but to act blindly, without knowledge and benevolence.<sup>19</sup>

In the three types of myth rehearsed above, the ordering element was described as thought, action, or passion. Gnostic cosmogonies merely invert these alternatives by claiming that the creator's power is the blind and reckless power of an ignorant being with distorted emotion. Chaos is the consequence of an abortive attempt at creation.

As regards the question of origins, Gnostic myths share the same attitude toward chaos.

We do find interpretations of chaos which are not wholly negative. According to Werner Jaeger,

The common idea of chaos as something in which all things are wildly confused is quite mistaken; and the antithesis between Chaos and Cosmos, which rests on this incorrect view, is a purely modern invention. Possibly the idea of *tohu wa bohu* has inadvertently been read into the Greek conception from the biblical account of creation in *Genesis*.<sup>20</sup>

It is true that, for Aristotle, chaos meant merely "empty space."<sup>21</sup> But then Aristotle's use of the term was itself quite modern compared to that of the Orphics and Hesiod. Already Aristotle has demythologized the concept of beginnings by employing the notion of "principle" (*ἀρχή*) in a nontheological context. Aristotle is part of a tradition that has begun to forget the presence of the chaotic that lies directly beneath the surface of a no-longer-mythologized language.

The effect of the cosmogonic tradition, nonetheless, remains powerful. Jaeger is doubtless correct, as well, when he notes that the Semitic *tohu wa bohu* has been read into the Greek meanings of chaos. But it was not only the Semitic, but the Orphic and Platonic versions of chaos as well, that have reinforced the negative sense of the term.

As the etymology of "chaos" suggests, the construal of reason in terms of *arche* or *principium* is dependent upon mythical sources. Aristotle's avoidance of mythopoetic language and his rejection of the need to posit any initial creative act did not prevent him from serving as the primary source of our understanding of principles as determining sources of order.

According to Aristotle, a principle, is "that from which a thing can be known, that from which a thing first comes to be, or that at whose will that which is moved is moved and that which changes changes."<sup>22</sup> As such, principles of knowledge and of being are the origins of thought and sources of origination per se. In the political realm, an *archon* or *princeps* is one who gives orders.

Any who doubt the negative characteristic of chaos have only to reflect upon the traditional Western attitudes toward political anarchy. Anarchy is feared as much as it is because, at the most general

philosophical level, anarchy denotes the absence of principles as determining sources. In other words, anarchy bespeaks the absence of a cosmos, the denial of a cosmogonic act.

Chaos is nonrational, unprincipled, anarchic; it is the indefinite in need of definition; it is the lawless, the anomic; it is the unlimited begging limitation. Though we have secularized and demythologized the mythic themes that hide us from direct contact with the awe-ful character of chaos, we have only to look to our poets to recognize the fundamental attitude toward confusion, separation, and emptiness which we variously describe by the term "chaos."

For Ovid, Chaos is "all rude and lumpy matter."<sup>23</sup> Milton calls it a "wild Abyss, the Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave."<sup>24</sup> He explicitly identifies chaos as evil by making it subject to Satan's will:

Chaos Umpire sits,  
And by decision more embroils  
the fray by which he Reigns.<sup>25</sup>

We celebrate "the great morning of the world when first God dawned on Chaos,"<sup>26</sup> but nonetheless cannot but fear that chaos may return:

Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restor'd  
Light dies before thy uncreating word  
Thy hand, great Anarch, lets the curtain fall,  
And universal darkness buries all.<sup>27</sup>

Cosmogonic myths all seem to share a negative appraisal of chaos, either as "yawning gap," "confusion," or "formlessness." The importance of this fact in shaping our cultural consciousness can only be assessed after we have traced at greater length the cultural developments beyond the strictly mythopoetic age.

The most important conclusion one may wish to draw from this brief meditation upon mythopoetic language relates to the special character of cosmogonic myths. Mircea Eliade, one of our century's most prolific mythographers and philosophers of religion, thought all myths to be ultimately cosmogonic. Myths, according to Eliade are "etiological tales," "stories of origins."<sup>28</sup>

One can certainly challenge such an interpretation of myth, but, nonetheless, it is cosmogonic myths which are deemed most impor-

tant in our tradition. Further, if stories of the origin are stories of the overcoming of chaos, one can immediately see how the sense of *agency* creeps into these early myths. It is from this sense of agency directed toward the construal of order that both the notions of rationality and causality emerge. To reason is to construe or uncover order; it is to think *causally*.

It is important to make this point now since the account of our cultural development found in the following pages will articulate the persistence of a tradition of thinking alternative to that of the rational and the causal. This tradition, associated with what we are calling “first problematic thinking,” seeks understanding through the employment of informal analogies based upon meanings associated with images and image clusters. What we shall call “second problematic thinking,” on the other hand, is privileged in our tradition in large measure because of the sense of chaos as the absence of order which must be somehow brought into an ordered state.

#### —— FIRST ANTICIPATION ——

Cosmogonic speculation of the kind described above was a fundamental element in the process of cultural self-articulation in the West. Notions of “Being” and “Not-Being,” of “Cosmos” as a single-ordered whole, of “principles” as the origins of order and, specifically, of “causal agency” as an important explanatory principle—in short the central components of the concept of “rationality”—are grounded in the myths of origins to which the founders of the Hellenic and Hebraic traditions appealed. The account of the development of the classical Chinese cultural sensibilities in chapter 3 will demonstrate that the sort of cosmogonic speculations central to the Western tradition were of no great importance to the Chinese. When accounts of the origins of things do appear with regularity in the Chinese tradition in the Han dynasty, they are genealogical narratives which tell, not of the creation of a “cosmos,” but of the emergence of the “ten thousand things.” The Chinese tradition, therefore, is “acosmotic” in the sense that it does not depend upon the belief that the totality of things constitutes