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NEURO-APOCALYPSE 1:
THE MONKEY PUZZLE

I'm just going outside to smoke a fag.

Nicotine-deprived Englishman

You're going to **shoot a homosexual?!**

Outraged San Franciscan



One of my earliest memories is watching urine spread out around my chair and thinking 'Oh no, I've done it again!' I was a messy four-year old in a messy pair of shorts, one of an uncountable legion of children in a classroom like an aircraft hangar, with letters of the alphabet stretched in an endless freeze along the wall. The classroom shrank as I grew. Lessons were still long, but not endless epochs of delirium, and I can remember days beginning, specifically Wednesdays, because the teacher pronounced both 'd's in 'Wed-nesday'. I remember discreet events, such as learning to draw a joined-up letter 'y', asking what brackets do, and biting a tall boy on the chest at the height of my head when he was blocking my way out of the classroom.

Everything sped up as it started to make sense; it is still speeding up. Birthdays used to come by once an aeon, but now they slip by with alarming regularity. Space and time change as we explore the territory, and our minds run along well-worn paths rather than hack through uncharted jungle. A fully socialised adult can taxi along familiar mental boulevards more or less unconsciously; until he crashes into something that has moved.

I have often enjoyed running my perceptive system off-road. My most unpleasant drive went through an illegal reggae party in a field near Oxford. It was all chilled until a police helicopter passed overhead, cutting through the bass-line, illuminating hundreds of scowling faces and middle fingers with a spotlight. The DJ dropped *Sound of da Police*, and everyone started shouting '*whoop-whoop*'. The chopper passed soon enough, but then I noticed a stone in my boot. I took off my boot, shook it out, and put it back on again, and continued chatting to a Northern girl I had met, but the stone came back. As I took my boot off again, a thought flashed urgently into my mind: *These boots are ugly!* Then: *And my shirt too!*, quickly followed by: *Is my haircut wrong?*

I dismissed the ideas, but I was on a roll; *Why is this girl talking to me*, I thought, *with my silly haircut and ugly clothes?* I had bombed way too much amphetamine, and the games were beginning, but these were not the games I was used to. She was freaking me out. Apparently she was Mark Morrison's dealer, out on parole for some hideous act of violence, so I wandered off in my ugly, stony boots to look for someone less creepy; but strangers were looking at me askance. They were pointing at me and whispering my name; they were following me around the field and plotting against me. Within minutes I was cowering on the grass, surrounded by hostiles jeering at me.

My friends decided it was time to take me away, but they were not my friends anymore. I trusted only one of them enough to walk with him. The others walked a tactful distance ahead, but there were

footsteps behind me, clear and distinct. As the sun came up it cast sinister shadows amongst the trees, enemies waiting to ambush me who vanished when I looked straight at them. I had to go straight to work at Yellow Pages in Slough, typing endless puns into a computer: *'Sheds you could just DIY for!'* It was a bad enough job straight, but full of dirty drugs it was torture. At one stage, I looked up to see an advert on the screen detailing my many faults instead of what I had typed.

The hallucinations continued until the following day, the paranoia for over a week, and then it passed, thank God, because it is hellish. I emerged with two valuable insights. One is that speed is shit. The other is that the scene we see is tinted by what is going on inside our heads. The nervous system finds what it is primed to find. I was expecting ill fortune and found it everywhere, but no brain is free of expectations.

Take another look at the sign at the beginning of this chapter.

This fools even many who learn English as their second language.

Count the words.

We read between the lines and construct the lines themselves. We are all familiar with seeing something out of the corner of the eye, which disappears when we look at it. You don't have to be schizophrenic or on drugs to see things, as an American Medical Association textbook notes: 'transient hallucinatory experiences are common in individuals without mental disorder'.¹ Drivers swerve and crash for 'transient hallucinatory experiences'. Conmen live off them.

What we call a hallucination is a false interpretation of the data, but the normal interpretation is never correct. It is, at best, a better guess, a theory as yet unfalsified. Deprived of light, subjects start hallucinating within hours.² Overwhelmed with speed, we start hallucinating within seconds of the police passing overhead. Neurones fire constantly, messages from the retina merge with echoes of memory, and the brain creates the visual scene from a mass of maybes, a stew of neurotransmitters spiced with cortisone and caffeine, hopes and fears. The mind navigates through educated guesses. We jump from conclusion to conclusion, constantly mistaking our neurones for our wives and our hats, and we are taken in by the illusion - until it collapses.

As I edit my book, my brain is busy editing reality. Sometimes I type a word, and a split-second later the automatic spell-checker amends it with a flash as the letters switch, but I have no idea what the error was. It looked fine to me, a proper, meaningful set of letters, not a vague grey smudge, but the area was undefined by my brain. It was a patch of assumption with all the reality of 'reality'. Other times I can sit starting at a word like responsibility for ages, with no idea why it is underlined in

red. Back at the Hellish Yellowish Pages of Slough, my tormented brain edited the entire screen.

I stopped taking speed, but continued fiddling with my nervous system until I took the ultimate trip, by taking my brain to Japan. It is a terrible confession, but even after living there for six years, Japanese all look pretty much the same to me. It is almost impossible to find a Japanese friend in a sea of bodies a foot shorter than you, 90 percent of whom have straight black hair in a sensible cut. The funny thing is, Japanese think the same about us. Relaxing in a hot spring in a Japanese backwater, an old farmer waded over through the scalding water. He looked at the three of us in turn, a well-built and well-fed Anglo-Saxon with a wisp of sandy hair on his balding head, a lanky Australian with thick eyebrows and dark curly hair, and a freckly Jewish skinhead. He asked if we were brothers. We explained our diverse roots. 'Aah,' he said, shaking his generic head. 'You foreigners all look the same!'

Apparently we all sound the same too. My friend once phoned up a Japanese theatre to book tickets, and chatted to the receptionist about upcoming productions. When he arrived to pick up the tickets, presumably with a 'KONNICIHWAI!' every bit as camp as the tap-dancing, drag-wearing trapeze artist he is, the receptionist took one look at his black face and said 'sorry, no Engrish.' He is American, and he was speaking Japanese. He had lived there for decades, and like some other singers, his Japanese accent was near perfect. He had fooled her over the phone, but now the scene before her eyes blocked her ears. She couldn't understand a word he said, so he went to the phone box across the road and telephoned. She recognised his voice immediately and began chatting, so he asked her to look across the road at the foreigner waving at her. With her preconception dismantled, he was finally able to pick up his tickets.

We navigate through the visual cortex, and touch the world through the padded gloves of our nervous systems, which is why a kiss from a Thai princess tastes sweet as mango, until you realize this mango is a man. Our labels are not what they refer to; there are no smells to smell, no sights to see. What we perceive is not a copy of the environment but a dialogue between mind and environment, and different brains tell different stories. Elderly or unfit observers, for example, tend to overestimate the slope of a hill, as do people carrying heavy bags, whereas healthy young people underestimate. The world is warped by our expectations of how we might react to it,³ which is why victims of a hold-up usually overestimate by three to four times the calibre of the gun pointed at them, and they remember people who were nearby as have being further away.⁴

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Whatever looms large in the mind grows larger, so a zit dominating a teenager's thoughts also dominates the mirror, and an anorectic too weak to walk sees flab spilling out of her wheelchair in the mirror. A Japanese woman who looks pretty much the same as most others can morph into a figure of unsurpassable beauty as you discover her charms, but a few years on, when you are sleeping on the sofa at night and dodging crockery by day, other beauties emerge from hibernation. We might suppose that our decisions are rational, based on the evidence before us, but between the retina and the observer is the sea of the unconscious. We are much more likely, for example, to take the cable car if the hill seems like 25 degrees rather than 15. We might feel more disposed towards picking flowers if they are for the most beautiful woman in Japan.

The ideas of others also influence the picture. Subjects answering easy questions on the lengths of lines are extremely susceptible to peer-pressure. Control groups tested alone almost never make mistakes, but when actors pretending to be subjects answer incorrectly before the subject, her error rate climbs to 37 percent.⁵ Brain scans reveal that the false answers heard activate areas of the brain involved with spatial awareness, suggesting that what we hear directly influences what we see.

The scene is skewed, and it is also edited, as shown by experiments into inattentive blindness. In one, subjects watch a one-minute video of a basketball game, counting one team's passes.⁶ After 35 seconds, a woman in a gorilla suit walks onto court, turns towards the camera and thumps her chest as players pass the ball around her, before walking off again. Despite a nine second cameo, nearly half of the subjects fail to notice her. We see what we are paying attention to. All control subjects watching without counting notice the monkey business, but when engaged in the more difficult task of counting both team's passes, subjects are even more likely to miss it. In another study a man asks a pedestrian directions, and as the unwitting subject is replying, two men carrying a door pass between them. The second workman switches places with the questioner, and listens to the directions. 50 percent of subjects miss the switch.⁷

Nerve signals for unnoticed objects arrive at the visual cortex along with signals for noticed objects;⁸ the editing takes place at a higher level. Subjects concentrating on crosses flashing up on a screen often miss an unexpected circle, but a meaningful object is more easily noticed. The subject's name is noticed than a circle, but not if one letter is incorrect.⁹ Smiley faces are seen more often, but moody faces are missed as often as circles. Presumably patterns falling on the retina are coded and compared with templates in the memory, and more familiar

forms pass into the conscious mind. When it comes to smiley faces, you know the score.

A similar process doctors the information passing through our ears, accounting for the familiar experience of hearing one's name jump out from the noise of a crowd. At first, Japanese sounded to me like a stream of *ki*'s, *ta*'s and *so*'s, but the question *nani?* (eh?) and the compound *da-né* (isn't it) jumped out at me, because both sound like my name. In the Amazon, the sound that stood out was '*gringo*'. I could be daydreaming on the edge of a conversation, with no idea of the subject, and then someone would drop a '*gringo*', and I would become present. I could often remember the last few Portuguese words before '*gringo*' as well, and have a vague idea of the theme. Whilst daydreaming, the words were going into my ears and hanging around below radar for a few seconds, before being lost. As soon as the magick word focused my attention, however, my consciousness gathered together whatever information was in my brain, and made the best sense it could.

The sense filter is a survival mechanism, noting relevant details whilst screening out unlikely gorillas, and it is a major factor in the construction of a mind. The world we experience is skewed, and so are our memories. We preferentially remember what we would like to be true. This is why we overestimate our charitable donations, office attendance, and past salaries, but underestimate the amount of alcohol we bought.¹⁰ Why is this the case?

The short-term memory stores a large amount of information. Long-term memories are formed, however, under the influence of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, which are released when we are happy. This is why we can cram for an exam, and then forget everything about the periodic table within months, whilst remembering for decades every word Madonna ever sang. Forgetting is intrinsic to the brain, and serves an important function, making meaningful comparison and generalisation possible. For example, we might read fifteen stories of car thefts, and remember that about a third happened in Peckham, whilst forgetting that a third were makes ending with the letter A. We would probably take care parking in Peckham, but not worry too much about buying an Astra, a Mazda, or a Toyota.

What is important to one person may be insignificant to another. I had a friend at school who was pretty stupid by most indexes, but he knew the scores and scorers of every World Cup final, semi-final, and quarter-final ever played, as well as most of the team members. Personally, I have never been able to remember numbers unless they are related to something I am passionate about. I can remember what years various comets passed, but exchange rates and appointment

times go in one ear and out the other, and I know neither my sisters' birthdays nor my waist size. My father, by contrast, is a die-hard accountant whose brain soaks up numbers like a sponge, but he failed to learn even the simplest Japanese phrase when he visited me, because he will run a mile rather than communicate with a stranger. I had to shout at him for days to make him remember *'itadakimasu'* (I humbly receive), without which one cannot receive even a biscuit without insulting the host. Both father and son are, of course, extremely conceited, but there is more to it. Information that slots comfortably into the brain passes into the long-term memory and becomes part of your reality map. That which bores us, confuses us, or makes us feel uncomfortable, however, is lost.

Our minds are climbing frames, and we manoeuvre around them along monkey bars built according to the categories in which we think. The shape of the frame is partly environmentally determined, and different cultures are drawn to different bits of the scene. When spotting differences between computer-generated airport scenes, Americans are drawn to the colour of the helicopter's rotor and other foreground differences. Japanese, however, notice more background details, such as the shape of the control tower, and spatial relationships between aircraft.¹¹ With scenes of moving fish, Americans usually begin with the movements of the biggest or fastest fish, whereas Japanese describe the location first ('it looks like a pond') and go on to describe 60 percent more background features. Afterwards, when shown still shots, Japanese take longer to, and are less likely to recognise a fish against a novel background rather than the original background from the clip, but it makes no difference to Americans.¹² It appears that the Japanese mind codes items along with their background, whilst Americans tend to isolate objects.

The degree to which an object is bound to its background is called field-dependence, and psychologists have found differences between Easterners and Westerners, and also between urbanites, farmers, and hunter-gatherers. Field-dependent people behave differently as well as see differently. They sit closer together, socialise more, recognise faces better, and remember more social words from a list, such as 'party' and 'visit'.¹³

The Japanese eye focuses through a broader lens, and this is reflected in the culture. *Haiku* poems always include a reference to the season, to put the splashing frog in context, and a letter typically begins with a reference to mounting snow or the scorching Tokyo summer. In *sui-boku-ga* landscape art, there is always an object painted in high definition, a traveller or lonely temple juxtaposed against softly rendered

mountains and waterfalls. There is no tradition of still life in Japan, where things do not make sense in isolation.

Field-dependence also finds its way into school. Japanese history teachers typically begin with the context and chronology leading to the war or revolution, whereas American teachers usually state the outcome and work backwards through causal relationships: 'The Thirty Years War occurred for three major reasons...' Whereas American students are asked 'why' questions twice as often as Japanese, Japanese are asked 'how' twice as often, encouraging them to think about how politicians and peasants felt about the situations they were in.¹⁴

The tight bond between individual and group also manifests in the workplace. On the only Sunday I went to my desk at City Hall (to pick up a forgotten key), several of my colleagues were in their ties, at their computers, playing solitaire. Japanese habitually sacrifice their time without receiving overtime pay; they arrive early, stay late, and usually take only half of their paid leave. Anyone so presumptuous to take all of it might be ostracised, and would hijack any prospects of promotion, but no one flinches at giving up several precious days to attend the annual section outing, which is optional in theory only.

The regular company parties are also practically obligatory, and the same field-dependent mind goes drinking, along with the entire taxation section, for example. No one brings their spouses, who are not part of the group, and the feast begins with everyone sitting on the floor, each member behind a knee-high table laden with little dishes of prawns' heads, mushy seaweed, gooey mountain potatoes, raw jelly fish salad, and various other slimy things. The Western equivalent would be a buffet, where everyone chooses what they want, but in Japan everyone eats the same meal, and if they don't want the raw squid, they keep quiet about it. This puts everyone in the same boat, and also avoids the problem of shared plates. A Japanese would rather starve than do something so outstandingly selfish as eat the last slice of pizza.

Before the festivities begin, everyone sits in stony silence as highly formal speeches are made, invariably beginning with falling autumn leaves or spring cherry blossoms. The superintendent praises his staff, the new recruits express their enthusiasm to fit in, and then the drinking begins with a chorus of *kampai!* Everyone fills their neighbours' glasses, which are tiny, so everyone is constantly checking and refilling the glasses around them. Only an alcoholic or a foreign barbarian would fill his own.

Within an hour, nearly everyone is trashed, partly because workmates constantly encourage each other to drink, but also because Japanese livers lack an enzyme that breaks down alcohol. With red

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faces, trouser legs rolled up, and ties around heads like the warriors of old, the section chief is tossing soy beans high in the air and catching them in his mouth, the quiet code-writer is professing undying love for a married secretary, the vice-section chief is jabbing his fingers into the foreigner's bum and shouting '*kanchou!*' (enema!). The norms of polite Japanese society dissolve in alcohol, and everyone gets silly together. For foreigners cursed with alcohol dehydrogenase, it can be a constant effort to direct the attention of one's rapidly sliding peers towards one's empty glass, in order to be at least a little tipsy by karaoke time. Someone will almost certainly sing *Oh Danny Boy* if that is your name, and if it is Christmas you can bet it will be a white one. The other English sing-along favourites are *The Beatles* and *The Carpenters*, as they have always been and will always be. The party ends with a ritual of synchronised rhythmical clapping:

Clap-clap-clap...clap-clap-clap... clap-clap-clap... clap.
Clap-clap-clap...clap-clap-clap... clap-clap-clap... clap.
Clap-clap-clap...clap-clap-clap...clap-clap-clap ... CLAP!

The final clap is exquisitely synchronised, and then the hardcore move on to a hostess bar. By the following morning, all is forgotten, including whatever happened at the hostess bar or the seedy Chinese massage parlour afterwards. The shared secrets of the previous evening are never mentioned again, save an oblique reference to Suzuki-san's likely headache. Boundaries dissolve and coagulate again, all Japanese together in the alchemy of union.

There are various reasons why the individual melts into to the background in Japan. Life was hard in a land with almost no natural resources besides the sea, where the snow reaches to the roof in winter, and rivers of sweat run in summer, where earthquakes, volcanoes, typhoons and tsunamis periodically wrecked villages. Japanese were repeatedly forced together to save themselves and rebuild their lives. There is just not enough space for millions of individuals, where the workable land forms a thin steep strip between the sea and sharp mountains, and the samurai at the top of the slope controlled the water pump. An argument between neighbours could end with one cutting off the irrigation to the other's rice fields. The culture is geared towards reducing friction in this tight space. Doors slide open, everything is miniaturised, and Japanese arrange their belongings and bodies with exquisite neatness. Space consciousness is learned early. My Japanese friend would chastise his young daughter for letting her leg protrude from the cross-legged position at dinnertime, but he laughed at her noisy burps.

The uprights of the linguistic frame go in first. Japanese mothers tend to model social routines with their babies, exchanging toys, greeting and thanking twice as often as American mothers, who name 'the piggie' and 'the car' twice as often.¹⁵ The consequences can soon be measured. In one study, subjects were shown a cork pyramid, and told 'look at this *dax*.' They were then asked which of two trays contained the *dax*, and the answers were different, even before the age of two. Americans tended to choose the tray with a plastic pyramid, assuming that *dax* was the name of the shape. Japanese, however, usually understood it to be the material, and chose the tray containing a cork object.¹⁶ Western toddlers learn nouns (referring to objects) much faster than verbs (denoting relationships between objects). East Asian kids learn verbs and nouns at the same rate, even though the noun is a simpler concept.¹⁷ This is partly due to how they are taught, but also due to the architecture of the languages.

As a child learns how to climb around the conceptual world, she is laying down neuronal networks reflecting the structure of the language. The laws of grammar guide monkey bars into place, dictating how a noun works with a verb, and just what can be done with the universe. In Indo-European languages, the noun is much more prominent and contains more information, so the object is more accurately defined. In English or Spanish, 'an egg' is different to 'eggs', but in Japanese a plural modifier (like -s) is rarely used, and there are no articles like 'a', 'an', and 'the'. A Japanese noun is generally the same whether singular, plural, or general. The same phrase can mean 'there is a dog here', 'there are dogs here', and 'dogs exist', depending on the context. Possessive pronouns are also left out most of the time, so 'my job' can also mean 'our job', or work generally.

'*Okusan ga imasu ka?*' means essentially 'wife-existence-question?' Face to face, therefore, it usually means 'are you married?', but when someone phoned me up and asked, I replied '*hai*' (yes), which was followed by a long pause. Eventually the speaker asked if she could speak to her. She had meant 'is your wife there?', but I had stupidly missed the contextual cues. Had I been an Arab, I might have understood 'do you have any wives?'

These people are incorrigibly contextual. '*Inu ga suki*' means 'dogs-likeable', and therefore 'I like the dog / the dogs / and dogs (generally)' but the 'I' is implied. An 'I' word can be included: '*Watashi wa inu ga suki*', but it is usually only used to make a point, perhaps defending your canine friends after someone had been rude about them: 'Well I, however, like dogs!' But only an ill-mannered Japanese would be so rude as to directly contradict what has been just been said. A contradiction is used almost exclusively for denying praise.

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When I' does appear, the word changes according to the context, according to where you are, how drunk you are, and to whom you are speaking. *Watakushi* is very polite, and generally reserved for public address. *Watashi* is also polite, used by men speaking to superiors or customers, and by women most of the time, unless they are with their friends or want to sound young and ripe and delicious, in which case they might say *atashi*. A love letter written by *atashi* is about a million times more fun than one from *watashi*. Children often use *boku*, and men sometimes use it as well, but *oré* is more common when speaking on a level. I once heard a drunk woman saying *oré* to her boss at a party, implying proximity, but it would have been an outright insult in the office. *Ora* is used by very drunk men, angry men, and men who were born in barns. Old men use *waré*, *washi*, or *ashi* depending on the part of the country, and there used to be many other I's, including *sessha* for samurai, and a *chin* used exclusively by the emperor. A farmer so insolent as to address a noble with *sessha* might be cut down in the street. Etiquette was serious business in Japan, and samurai could reward infractions with the blade.

'You' is equally variable, from the formal *anata*, through *kimi* to *omaé*, which schoolboys call each other, but might get you fired if you said it to your boss. Japanese prefer to use someone's name or a title such as vice-superintendent, even when speaking directly to them. The context also modifies the verb. 'To eat', for example is *meshiagaru* when offering politely, *itadaku* when receiving politely, *taberu* normally, and *ku* informally.

A Japanese is put in her place several times per sentence, and generally that is where she stays, making for some fascinating psychology. Etiquette stalemates are not uncommon, where all four cars grind to a polite halt at a crossroads, for example, or two Japanese each spend so long trying to allow the other to leave the elevator first that the doors close. The Japanese I' melts into the background, but I' am so important in the west that I' merit a capital letter. Japanese are certainly not into I' enough to fight about it. In northwest Brazil, where the people may be the most egotistical on the planet, there was a ruck almost every night I went out, and at carnival in Rio Branco, I saw six within an hour. Besides sumo, I saw only three fights in six years in Japan, two of which were drunken brawls amongst Irish and Americans. The other began quietly at 3am, when a teenager approached my friends and I as we sat on park swings. Whereas most Japanese wear blue jeans and T-shirts to relax, members of various subcultures nearly all conform to an internal norm, whether rockabilly fiends in winkle pickers or Goths wrapped in bloody bandages. This guy's bandana and big black trousers identified him as a motorbike

gang-member. He apologised with a slight bow, and asked for our cooperation in vacating the park, which was about to be used. Shortly afterwards two gangs appeared. The daddies exchanged insults and punches, and then the reds and blues piled into each other for a scuffle. No one was seriously hurt, and the winners spent the rest of the night marching around town, waving wooden swords and displaying their scratches.

On the rare occasions where Japanese fight, it is a collective affair, the extremity being in war, when the I' is completely consumed by the collective. *Kamikaze* dive-bombers were by no means exceptional in Japanese culture. There is a festival in Aizu-Wakamatsu commemorating the young samurai who looked back from afar to see their castle burning, and all committed suicide together in shame. As it turned out, it was a granary that had caught fire, not an act of war, but these rather stupid romantics passed into folklore all the same, and are remembered today with full honours and grilled squid on sticks.

Japanese grammar hides and protects the agent, as when a party hostess sees broken crockery and asks what happened. The Japanese answer would usually be '*sara ga ochita*' ('the plate fell'), whereas the English equivalent either suggests a question ('someone dropped a plate') or singles out the denizen ('Dom dropped the plate... the fuckwit'). Forcing Dom into the Japanese answer would sound malicious or childish, and few Japanese would be so nosy as to enquire after the guilty party. Japanese fuzziness also goes beyond the subject. They prefer to leave undefined and open as little as possible. The most common word heard in Japan is *sumimasen*, used for 'excuse me', 'sorry', and 'thank you'. It literally means 'does not finish', implying there is something remaining to be done, some debt to be repaid, some development of the story. '*Shimatta!*' (literally 'it is closed!') is the equivalent of a curse word. It is exclaimed when someone spills his noodles, and is tagged onto a verb when something goes wrong, as in '*okusan ga kaete-shimatta!*' (Oh shit, my wife's back!).¹

A Japanese sentence is not so much a statement of the speaker's opinion but part of a joint effort to form a consensus. English dialogue (and to a degree, Western thinking) is a game of point and counterpoint. We begin with a pronoun (I), so we know immediately about whom we are talking. Next comes the verb (want), so by the time we get to the noun (curry), we already know who, how, and what. Japanese works

¹ There are almost no words like 'arsehole', that are vulgar regardless of context. Japanese invectives are words like 'dust!' and 'bad smell!' said in an angry way, and disrespect is indicated by speaking without the usual polite grammar and honorifics.

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the other way round. The noun (*karé* - curry) comes first, followed by the grammar in a particle (*o*, in this case making *karé* the object), and the verb comes at the end. The sense may be only loosely planned out when the speaker begins, and as his words emerge, listeners make encouraging nods and noises to push the meaning in the right direction, and frown or suck their teeth to skirt round an etiquette abyss, such as having to disagree with a suggestion. As the sense crystallises, the speaker can gauge how popular a curry would be, and choose a different verb, or begin the verb and modify the grammar, which follows the verb root. 'To eat' begins *tabé*, but the meaning is unclear until the final syllables. The speaker could state his mind with '*tabé-tai*' or '*tabé-takunai*' (I want / don't want to eat), or soften his position to '*tabé-té mo ii*' (curry is fine with me). '*Tabé-ru ki ga aru*' (I feel like curry) can be switched at the last minute for '*tabé-ru ki ga nai*' (I'm not in the mood for curry). If it is all nods and *hai*'s, he might go for '*karé o tabé-yô*' (let's eat curry), but he could also back out by adding '*...to wa omowanai*' (I'm **not** thinking about eating curry). Whereas English questions begin with something like 'how...' or 'what...', a Japanese phrase becomes a question right at the last syllable, and the intonation changes almost as an afterthought: '*tabé-masen ka?*' (how about curry?). The endings are theoretically endless. '*Karé o tabé-yô... to wa omoté...inakata ga... yappari tabé-tai to omô... nya ke do... karai mono o tabesugiru... to tsumé ga yoku yû... ma, tsumé ga iro-iro yû nen na, karé ga suki ya shi, karada ni ii shi...*' (Curry, well, I was...n't thinking about eating curry ... but then again, I feel like curry but, well, I eat too much spicy food... according to my wife, but my wife [or wives in general] say all kinds of things, don't they, and besides, I like curry, and it's good for you...)

This whole circus is often avoided, however, because one Japanese may start a sentence, another continue, leaving the end and the sense to a third, who may be male, older, of higher status, or just more decisive:

Miyuki: *Konya*, ... (tonight)

Everyone: *Hai*... (yes, go on)

Miyuki: ... *karé o* ...

Kentaro: *aah, eh hh yan, karé* ... (oh goody, curry)

Sanaé: *ii desu né*... (good)

Rié: *Ameeto-san no tanjobi ya shi*... (and it's Ameet's birthday)

Kato-san: *Soshitara, karé ni shimashyo* (Right then, curry it is)

It is much simpler in England, and the curry is better, but a Japanese would never complain about the food, especially if the honourable Kato had chosen it. The nature of the curry is less important than how we all eat it together.

Many conversations begin with either *'Ito-san...'* or *'Sumimasen ga...'* the equivalent of 'Mr. Ito...' or 'Well...', and then enter a silent phase, where both parties nod and suck their teeth as they come to a psychic agreement as to the subject. There is also a huge amount that is not said, and should not be said; a direct question can be as impolite as a direct contradiction. Asking for water in someone's house may embarrass the hostess, who should already know that you are thirsty. I unwittingly sent dinner guests home on several occasions by asking about their plans for the following day. It took a few abruptly snuffed out parties to crack the code, but once cracked, it is an extremely efficient way to clear your house. Misreading Japanese code, however, can be dangerous. I once asked my ex if I could eat the last two bits of sushi in the fridge, and then foolishly took her affirmative answer at face value. A three-day argument ensued, ending with tranquiliser-induced catatonia.

This enormously complex paralinguistic machine is geared towards preserving harmony, the most exalted Japanese virtue, and it works. Japan is the calmest, most stable country in the world, the only country that has never been through a revolution, where the same imperial family stretches back to legendary times. It also means that foreigners are hard pressed to get through a day without making some blunder. For their part, Japanese find it frustrating having to explain to foreigners, word for word, exactly what they mean. For them, the system does not appear to be a code. It is just the way they climb around the monkey bars, but all communication is code, whether words, gestures, or significant silences. We code our imagination to send it, and the sounds and symbols push touch-pads on the receiver's brain, setting off a cascade of connections, which are determined, to a great extent, by the culture the brain was incubated in (hence the outraged San Franciscan quoted at the beginning of the chapter). As the explosive sushi shows, the Japanese psyche is more attuned to sentiment than specifics. Objects, nouns, and individuals melt into the background in Japanese language, culture, and the subjective perception of reality.

Language guides the mind, but although the frame is also a cage, the bars can easily be bent. Japanese who have spent a few years in the US score lower on tests of field-dependence, and Americans become more field-dependent after a few months in Japan.¹⁸ Minds can be

primed one way or the other. If Asian Americans describe an experience that made them aware of their Asian identities and then watch a clip, they are drawn to background details, and if they recall an event that called to mind their American identities, they notice more foreground objects.¹⁹ A bilingual brain can be steered towards either English or Chinese cultural biases with different sets of pictures, either Mickey Mouse, cowboys, and the US House of Representatives, or dragons, temples and Chinese calligraphy.¹ Afterwards, when asked why one fish moved in front of another in a computer generated clip, the Mickey Mouse subjects tend to describe the fish's motivation, whereas contextual factors are more important to the dragon subjects. A third group shown neutral landscapes give answers between the two.

The relationship between language and thought, however, is not simple. When shown the words 'monkey', 'panda' and 'banana' in their own languages, most English people group the animals together, whereas most mainland Chinese put 'monkey' with 'banana', focussing on the relationship and the verb (to eat) rather than the category and the noun (animal).²⁰ Bilingual groups are more complex. Taiwanese lean towards the relationship when tested in Chinese, and the category when tested in English. For Hong Kong Chinese, however, the language makes no difference. In either Chinese or English, they are more drawn towards the category than are mainland Chinese.²¹ This is thought to be because Taiwanese learn English later in life and use it in limited contexts, so the world is represented differently in the two languages. Hong Kong Chinese, on the other hand, are bilingual from a young age, and assimilate the Western object-focussed perspective more thoroughly.

So are they Westernised by virtue of their culture or their language, or by both? In fact, the question itself derives from a distinctly Western viewpoint. Indo-European languages pull items out of the background where they can be categorised, analysed logically, and argued over, all of which leads naturally to scientific inquiry. In East Asian languages, it makes less sense to dissect the world and seek causes, and East Asian cultures are consequently much less scientific than Indo-European cultures. The theoretical sciences (working out what does what, why, and what else might be going on) are Western pursuits, and they have been since ancient times. Centuries before Christ, Hellenistic biologists correctly proposed the relationship between brain and nerves, and discerned the functions of both sensory and motor neurones.

¹ Chinese language is much like Japanese in terms of the fading noun and prominent contextual factors

Cosmologists had placed the sun at the centre of the solar system, had a highly accurate measurement of the circumference of the earth, and proposed the existence of the continent we now call America.²² By contrast, ancient Chinese innovations, such as planting crops in rows, papermaking, steel production, and the magnet, show a gift for observation and practical application. Perhaps a Chinese came up with the wheel whilst watching rocks tumble down a slope, and muddy footprints inspired the printing press centuries before Europeans invented it. Chinese theory revolves around relationships, between yin and yang and the five elements. It is descriptive in a metaphorical rather than analytical sense (although this does not mean it is less accurate - it may be better suited to more complex fields, such as medicine).

Japanese, for all their technical skill, invented almost nothing in the last 2000 years. A Japanese brilliantly compacted the hi-fi into a Walkman, but the vinyl record, the cassette, the CD, the minidisk, and the iPod were all invented by Westerners. Japanese show an imitative genius, using, for example, technology based on the owl's wing for noise reduction on the bullet train. The Japanese also produced most of the first walking robots, and part of this is down to careful observation of the human body, and diligence in applying, miniaturizing, and perfecting, technology to emulate it. A friend working for a Japanese electronics company told me his firm buys foreign machines and pulls them apart to find better ways to put them back together.²³ When Japanese do discover things, the bias is often different. It was Japanese primatologists who first recognised the complex social network amongst chimpanzees, whereas Westerners had focussed only on the mother-child bond. Original Japanese research, however, is rare. Despite generous science funding, Japan produced only one Nobel laureate in the nineties, whilst the US produced 44.²⁴

There are also very few lawyers in Japan. Suing for uneven paving stones, chasing ambulances for compensation, and divorcing parents is unthinkable in Japan. The Western gaze leads naturally to litigation, isolating guilty parties and establishing motive and blame, but nothing is so simple in Japan, and nor is it predictable. Surveys reveal that Japanese expect changes of fortune and adapt better to them, whereas Westerners generally expect their lives to become progressively better or worse in a linear fashion.²⁵ The world a Japanese sees is complex, and they dislike being in control, whereas Westerners enjoy being in control, and dislike having to adapt.²⁶

Japanese also mistrust logic. 'Don't you use that logic with me!' parents warn their children, and Japanese rarely justify themselves if they are late. My co-teacher stood quietly and hung her head one

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morning as the principle railed at her for arriving after 8.30am, even though she had no classes until 10. She never mentioned that she had been organising her father's funeral. There is no 'good excuse' in Japan; the word *iwwaké* (excuse) has absolutely negative connotations. What matters is us now, not late trains and sick cats, and forgiveness depends on making an apology with the right sentiment and the correct stoop.

Words do not command the same faith in East Asia, and they interfere with East Asian thinking. East Asians solve problems slower if they are asked to describe their thinking as they do so, but it makes no difference to Americans. It appears that something like the words themselves are the objects manipulated in Western brains, whereas Asian brains work with something else, and consequently, the world is a more fluid place.²⁷

Change is fundamental to both Confucian and Taoist philosophy. Perhaps the most important Chinese classical text is the *I Ching* (The Book of Changes), which describes the constantly changing relationship between yin and yang, reflected throughout the microcosm and macrocosm in the fortunes of empires and the lives of men. Another classic, *The Tao Te Ching*, opens with a poem about language, noting that understanding begins with words, but also that words limit something more fundamental:

Tao is beyond words
and beyond understanding.
Words may be used to speak of it,
but they cannot contain it.
Tao existed before words and names,
before heaven and earth,
before the ten thousand things.
It is the unlimited father and mother
of all limited things.
Therefore, to see beyond boundaries
to the subtle heart of things,
dispense with names,
with concepts,
with expectations and ambitions and differences²⁸

Chiang-Tzu describes language as a fraught tool:

The snare is the means to get the rabbit where you want it, catch the rabbit and forget the snare. Words are the means to get the idea where you want it, catch on to the idea and you forget about the words. Where shall I find a man who forgets about words, and have a word with him?²⁹

Chinese culture spread to Japan, where Zen riddles express the same sentiment:

'Words reach from edge to edge' - how about it? [asks the abbot]
'Shut up!' the pupil says and slaps his master's face.³⁰

The Word is completely different in *The Bible*. It is both divine and creative. Compare the opening of *The Gospel of John* (below) with the first chapter of *The Tao Te Ching* (above):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.³¹

The two approaches are completely different, and produce fundamentally different worlds.

In Australian aboriginal mythology, the gods dream, and then sing the land and the animals into existence. The word is formative, but as an intermediary between the dreaming and the manifest, the formless and the formed. Aboriginal tongues have no words for abstract categories, such as 'animal' or 'tree'; something is either a gum tree or a eucalypt.³² Items are defined, but not categorised into families (when they are categorised, it is often according to use, not resemblance - as certain foodstuffs, for example). A wallaby looks like a little kangaroo, but neither is 'a marsupial'. A world made up of individual elements is very different to a world of sets. Without sets, one cannot make generalisations about the behaviour of all people of a tribe, for example, or all six-legged bugs, and perhaps this is why antipodean cultures remained stable for tens of thousands of years, with almost no evidence of either invention or tribal war. Indigenous Amazonian languages and culture are similar in this respect. 'The Indian sees a forest as a collection of individual trees,' noted an explorer. 'He has a special name for each individual species of palm tree; but any generic term to denote the palm family is entirely lacking in his vocabulary'.³³

Genesis begins with a God solo, and in the next chapter, man comes in, naming things. He soon loses his innocence, and spends the rest of the symphony struggling to reunite with his Creator. 'Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!' cries Moses, but union is denied all but a few until the final chapters of *Revelation*. *The Tao Te Ching* is quite different, and anyone can be a Taoist sage as long as she 'remains sensitive, avoiding

extremes'.³⁴ For Lao-Tzu 'the best leader is one whose existence is barely known'. Whereas Biblical heroes part waters, build arks to float above waters, walk on water or turn it into blood or wine, in *The Tao Te Ching*, water is an example to be followed, not an obstacle to be overcome:

The highest good is like water
which benefits all things
and contends with none...
The sea is the king of the valleys and streams
because it is willing to be beneath them.
One who wishes to lead the people
must learn the art of following them.³⁵

Whereas *The Bible* is an action-packed saga beginning with the loss of innocence and guided all the way by the Almighty agent in the sky, *The Tao Te Ching* has no agent, and no story. It is a meditation on non-action, where innocence comes at the end, along with perfect ignorance.

East Asian languages do not isolate the agent, so it is rarely clear what is doing what. Hebrew draws the agent out of its context, though in an ambiguous manner, as we shall see shortly. In East Asian thought, it seems like things are happening, whereas in Judaism God makes things happen, though his various names have different natures, and act antagonistically towards each other. Indo-European tongues carried the story forward, with more fixed grammars constructing more rigid worlds. In contrast to Judaism, the Christian religion made much more of the antagonism between God and the devil, and dualism has been the salient feature of Western thought ever since. The forked tongue, and a forked tongued serpent are discussed in the following sermons, as well as the worlds they whispered into being.

In the beginning was the Word.

And at the end comes *The Apocalypse*.

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