Supernatural, social, and self-monitoring in the scaling up of Chinese civilization[1]

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In Book II of Plato's *Republic*, there is an extended dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon on the nature of justice. In the course of this dialogue, Glaucon recounts to Socrates the legend of the ring of Gyges. As the legend has it, generations prior, in the land of Lydia, a shepherd was tending his herd when a sudden violent earthquake split the earth around him. Climbing down into the newly formed chasm, the shepherd discovers a bronze horse containing within its hollow core the corpse of a large, humanlike figure wearing nothing save a ring on one hand. The shepherd pockets the ring. Later, he puts it on and sets on his way to meet with his friends, only to discover that, once in their midst, they do not seem to notice his presence. He is invisible to them. He realizes that the ring has granted him the power of invisibility—of anonymity. Soon, this otherwise unassuming and unremarkable shepherd, with no prior history of wickedness, sets off for the royal palace of Lydia, seduces the queen, contrives to murder the king, and assumes royal power for himself.

As a philosopher, I was reminded of this ancient tale while reading Ara Norenzayan's *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, for it contains the seed of the idea that anchors the book: monitoring spurs prosocial behavior, and in the absence of monitoring prosociality is compromised. In the legend, the ring cloaks the shepherd of Lydia in anonymity, and once free from the fear of reprisal his behavior devolves into depraved pursuit of self-interest.

What has kept any of us, after all, behaving in prosocial ways? Norenzyan's account posits different answers depending on the size of one's social group. In small-scale societies, where individuals can keep track of one another, where reputations count and anonymity is scarce, social pressures are sufficient to ensure that individuals cooperate with one another and act in prosocial ways. Transparency abounds. The gaze (and thus the potential repercussions) of others is hard to evade. Social monitoring, kin bonds, reciprocal altruism, and related cultural norms and practices are enough to ensure that individuals are able to build trust in one another, which in turn allows for cooperative projects to get off the ground

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(124-126). Without such trust, the costs involved in undertaking cooperative endeavors, coupled with the risks of being exploited by anonymous, unrelated others, would be prohibitive. Groups risk losing stability in proportion to their size. What, then, allows for large-scale cooperation? How did our ancestors scale up from smaller groups to large societies? Norenzayan focuses on one prominent solution that serves to both remove anonymity and raise the stakes for defection—namely, supernatural monitoring.

Supernatural monitoring has its roots in the older, earthly notion of social-monitoring. Yet supernatural watchers fill in gaps where social monitoring falls short; big gods are always watching, and they have vast powers to enforce prosociality. Social monitoring is limited, after all, because "it depends on the actual or implied presence of others; it also depends on keeping track of others' reputations, which is severely limited by group size. As the number of interactions increase, anonymity creeps back into the situation and reputational mechanisms break down" (23). Social surveillance is a powerful and reliable mechanism to promote prosocial behavior for small groups; however, when societies scale up and interactions among strangers become commonplace, supernatural observation can arise to induce cooperation and render individuals trustful of one another.

Norenzayan's account is compelling. But there is an elephant in this room, and it is from China—one of the largest and most enduring civilizations on the planet, yet one also lacking a rich tradition of belief in big gods or supernatural monitoring. Does the scaling up of Chinese civilization mark a counterexample to the book's main thesis? Norenzayan is careful in presenting his theory, noting in several places that belief in supernatural monitoring is not a necessary (nor perhaps sufficient) feature for societies to successfully scale up (e.g. 9, 134-135). He also notes that supernatural monitoring can work in concert with other factors to promote cooperation among strangers. Nonetheless, I would like to make some brief comments about Norenzayan's own brief comments concerning the question of China. For while I agree with him that supernatural monitoring exists at the outset of ancient Chinese civilization, I believe it plays a very small role in explaining how it scales up. Monitoring itself is central, but it is of the more mundane kind.

What should we expect to find when assessing whether a group or society has struck upon supernatural monitors as a solution to large-scale cooperation? Norenzayan claims that in scaling up from small groups to large and complex societies, certain general patterns emerge, which can be summarized in four points (124):

1) Big gods go from rare to common

2) Morality and religion become more intertwined
3) Rituals and faith displays become more organized, uniform, and regular
4) Supernatural punishment a) centers on violations of group norms, and b) increases in potency (e.g. salvation, eternal damnation, eons of karma, hell)

Do we find these patterns in early China? In making his case that China falls under the rubric of his theory, Norenzayan focuses largely on the first point—that is, he focuses on the question of whether we find evidence of big gods in early China. Here, he is correct in claiming that Shang Di (Lord on High) plays the role of a supernatural monitor during the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE), the earliest dynasty for which we have significant historical records. Shang Di is depicted as approving or disapproving, supporting or abandoning, and otherwise rewarding or punishing sovereigns for excelling in royal virtue on the one hand, or failing on the other. (This theme is found, for example, in the *Book of Odes*—the earliest extant collection of folk songs and poems ca. 1000 to 600 BCE.) So early China has big gods in its earliest records. The evidence concerning Shang Di also suggests a positive answer to Norenzayan's second point. Moral considerations are indeed intertwined with Shang Di's approval and disapproval (e.g. Thote 2009). The head of the Shang royal clan, for example, receives Shang Di's approval or disapproval to the extent that he carries out his duties of protecting the people and allowing them to flourish.

However, after the conquest of the Shang by the Zhou (1045 BCE), Shang Di is replaced by the notion of Tian (or Heaven). Tian appears, at the outset, as the progenitor or chief ancestral deity of the Zhou royal line, and is identified as the same entity as the former Shang Di. Yet with Tian we have a mitigation in monitoring and punishment. Tian loses its anthropomorphic characteristics and becomes less interested in human affairs. Eventually, Tian is significantly naturalized, taken to refer as much to the patterns and propensities inherent in the natural world as to any deity. A similar general pattern emerges with regards to Norenzayan's third point. Rituals do become more organized, uniform, and regular. However they are also increasingly neglected. Moreover, there is a growing theory of ritual itself in the classical period recognizing its *instrumental* value: participation in ritual is important because it tames selfish tendencies and strengthens interpersonal ties, thus promoting beneficial consequences (e.g. Puett 2013). With Norenzayan's second and third points, then, there are questions as to how large a role they play in scaling up Chinese society.

What about the fourth point? Norenzayan discusses the Mohists (p.206), who constitute a prominent example of a manifestly religious movement railing against the cultural elites of their time (ca. 5th-3rd centuries BCE) for rejecting supernatural monitoring and punishment, for

neglecting the will of heaven (Tian), and for denying the efficacy of ghosts. The Mohists emerged during a time when old, kinship-based political structures were becoming more open and meritocratic, and when the various kingdoms and fiefdoms comprising the classical Chinese world were scaling up through alliances and warfare. The Mohists attributed much of the chaos and immorality of their time to the waning of religious beliefs. (They found disbelief among the political and cultural elite to be especially pernicious, as their attitudes would infect the masses.) The way to restore order is to demonstrate the existence of ghosts with the power to punish and reward. There can be no misreading the following Mohist passage: "If the ability of ghosts and spirits to reward the worthy and punish the wicked could be firmly established as fact throughout the empire and among the common people, it would surely bring order to the state and great benefit to the people" (Ivanhoe & Van Norden 2005, 104).

Here we do have explicit discussion of supernatural monitoring as a phenomenon. Yet the Mohists' protestations signal its demise rather than its vigor. The Mohists, after all, found it difficult to convince others of the efficacy of ghosts and spirits and Tian. Furthermore, the type of punishing invoked throughout the Mohist corpus isn't quite everlasting or hellish. (A prominent example of the kind of supernatural punishment the Mohists had in mind is the ghost of a slain person coming back to exact justice by slaying the person who had brought about his demise.) The Mohists have no concept of salvation in the hereafter, nor do they believe that there is some other realm to which we go after earthly demise (Fraser 2007). The rewards and punishments, such as they are, are meant to accrue to one during one's lifetime. In this light, it is not difficult to see why this belief would strike others as entirely lacking credibility; after all, there is abundant virtue that goes unrewarded, and vice unpunished, to have serious doubts as to whether supernatural punishment was credible.

We can speculate that the lack of eternal damnation on the one hand, and salvation on the other, might help to explain why belief in big gods stalled. Supernatural punishment and reward of the type discussed by the Mohists seem insufficient to induce cooperation beyond what is available through more mundane measures. Heaven is described as observing, rewarding, and punishing, but the rewards and punishments are left unspecified. Ghosts and spirits are invoked with greater detail and with stories of revenge after death, but these anecdotes fail to convince. So we don't find anything like Norenzayan's fourth point among the Mohists. Nor do we find it in the earlier Shang period.

When supernatural monitoring falls short, social monitoring steps in. And we do indeed find it to be a prevalent aspect of the Mohists' program of promoting prosocial behavior. The Mohists maintained that heaven (Tian) provided the ultimate ethical standard (a cluster of notions

including order, abundance, and care), and that everyone ought to conform to this standard. Doing so, however, required constant social monitoring. Heaven itself cannot induce cooperation to its own ethical standard. Instead, individuals must 'conform upwards' by evaluating one another and report any defections away or deviations from the ultimate ethical standard. Good old social monitoring, then, was a key cog to prosocial behavior—even for the Mohists.

The sense of being monitored and of conforming one's behavior to others' expectations is itself an old idea in China—older and more widespread than the Mohists. As Norenzayan himself has pointed out, the rice agriculture found in ancient China (particularly in the south) required much extensive coordination and cooperation in order to succeed (Nisbett 2003; Nisbett et al. 2001). Hierarchical, centralized organization arrives early in China for this reason, and along with it comes a commitment to acting in ways conducive to communal flourishing. This leads to harmony being a central moral value in the classical period (e.g. Li 2006). Maintaining harmony requires being attuned not only to one's responsibilities and relationships to others, but also to how one's actions might be impacting the group. This requires a sense of self-awareness, including sensitivity to oneself as a social actor, to what others' expectations are, and to how one's behavior may be interpreted by others (Sarkissian 2010).

This brings us to a final form of monitoring in early China—self-monitoring. Supernatural monitors fill an important gap by making sure that one does not defect or violate group norms when no one else is around. Big gods are there "to watch even when no one is watching, to care when no one cares, to threaten when no one can threaten" (27). But, of course, even when there is no one *else* present (supernatural or otherwise), one can monitor oneself. This notion is central to early Confucian ethical practice. For example, a famous passage from the first chapter of the "Doctrine of the Mean", a section of the *Record of Ritual*, claims that "There is nothing more visible than what is secret, and nothing more manifest than what is minute. Therefore the superior man is watchful over himself, (even) when he is alone". The idea is simple enough: one can be habituated into taking an external viewpoint on one's own behavior—that is, to being a self-monitor. One could then serve as a role model to others, especially those below one in the social hierarchy (Munro 1969). This tendency to monitor oneself, to be aware of others' expectations, and to mind one's impact on others is not only found in a number of classical texts but also persists today in societies that inherit Confucian cultural values (Heine et al. 2008; Sarkissian 2014).

So I believe Norenzayan is correct in claiming that there are supernatural monitors in ancient China. However, they likely play a minor role in explaining the scaling up of classical Chinese civilization. Supernatural monitoring is parasitic upon social monitoring, and the latter seems a more prominent theme in the classical texts themselves. "Perhaps," Norenzayan writes, "the Chinese managed to create secular alternatives to religion earlier and more successfully than Western civilization" (135). This seems closer to the truth. As the classical period approaches the founding of the Qin Dynasty and the unification of the Chinese world (221 BCE), there is widespread emphasis on building efficient and reliable institutions, of promulgating clear laws backed with punishment, and of centralizing governing structures based on meritocratic criteria, all as ways to incentivize cooperative and prosocial behavior within rapidly expanding societies. As China scales up, big gods get left behind.

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