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The present article is intended as an Apologia for the publication of the *Acta Via Serica*, a journal devoted to studies of the Silk Road as a conduit for diverse systems of thought, expressions of art, and means of trade, all coming together in a juxtaposition of different cultural modes of human existence. It also begins with a confession that the writer is an ignorant wanderer in the discipline of Islamic, let alone Silk Road studies. Nonetheless, the article attempts to illuminate the extraordinary human condition portrayed in this region, and thereby to suggest a route for documenting this unique character in terms of the entirety of human civilization, in accordance with the rationale behind the publication of the new journal. To these ends, this article begins with a cursory look at the Western cultural tradition, in order to contextualize the Islamic heritage.

This tradition begins with Greek Classicism and the Aristotelian dictum that “All men by nature desire to know” (*Metaphysics*, 350 BCE). Curiosity dwells in the hearts of all men, perhaps most strongly in the search for self-knowledge – the desire to know if he exists at all, and if he does, how that existence might be proved. In order to address this issue, we might turn to Constantine the Great, the presumed cultural founder of the remarkable city that bore his name and that functioned as a pivotal city along the Road. As a warrior, Constantine marched from Britain and Gaul to Rome, having conquered and executed his chief opponents Maxentius and Licinius. On the way, the legendary cross that appeared to him when he looked up to the sun and that was explained to him by Christ in a dream, bore the inscription *In hoc signo vinces*, testifying to the idea that one either conquers and exists, or is conquered and ceases to exist. In this case, to exist (*esse*) is to conquer (*vincere*). Accordingly, one becomes certain of existence through conquest, as encapsulated in the aphorism *vinco ergo sum*.

The supreme role of conquest in the awareness and security of existence continues not only with Charlemagne (crowned in 800 CE), but also in the Islamic world, following the

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Muslim conquests of the 7th and early 8th centuries. In less than half a century after the death of Muhammad (632 CE), Muslims conquered the entire Persian and much of the Byzantine Empires, after which the idea of conquest, whether Carolingian or Abbasid, slowly transformed from physical and military victory into intellectual and spiritual ascendancy. From this perspective, the conquering man transcends the means of conquest; having achieved external victory, he turns to his own inner landscape, becomes introspective, and arrives at faith in God as justification and explanation for his existence.

This quest for existence through faith brings us to early 12th century Europe and St. Anselm, for whom man's perception of existence is conditioned by his faith. Anselm of Canterbury became a representative figure of the age through his maxim, *Credo ut intellegam*, "I believe, so that I may understand." Faith serves here as a sovereign guide for human progress; having overcome material force through the power of faith, the man of introspection comes to the realization that existence is a corollary of faith and infers the concept, *credo ergo sum*. This confession takes man to the second stage of his anthropological and cultural development with respect to his view of existence.

Even the Middle Ages of the sovereign fides, faith that was the sole guide for life and thought, however, seemed to anticipate an alternative, scientific way of thinking. In fact it was the very fides that engendered a new outlook, as expressed in Gothic cathedrals built to the glorification to and veneration of God. Although these huge and intricate edifices of stone and glass relied mainly on experience and intuition in their construction, the need for mathematical insight and systemic measurement was already present. While building these beautiful cathedrals, the scholars of the age were immersed in classical philosophies, where they encountered Protagoras, and his epoch-shattering axiom: "Man is the measure of all things." The idea of man as the compass and ruler of all things presaged a new age of analytic and differential reasoning beyond that of faith. From this point, the devout man began to question the ex cathedra authority that was by definition above and beyond questioning, with serious repercussions for the Western cultural tradition. The man of faith now began to reform his beliefs, making them no longer subject to absolute canonical authority. In other words, he turned to reason in order to reform and defend his faith. At this point, Martin Luther enters with his theses, in 1516 CE. The man of belief now used his critical faculties to explore a mode of being as a thinking man of reason, this reasoning being still subservient to faith.

About a century after the faith-reforming Luther, *credo ergo sum* became *cogito ergo sum* (René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, 1637), heralding the third stage in man's intellectual growth. This postulate, that "as long as I think, I cannot but exist," offered a new approach to the quest for the meaning of existence. It is interesting to note here that Ibn-Sina (Avicenna, 980-1037), who was an intellectual predecessor of St. Anselm, wrote "A man is necessarily a rational body" (Isharat, I, 310). This Islamic philosopher, who wrote several centuries before Descartes, seems to be voicing the same thoughts: wherever man exists, there is a rational, thinking being. However, Descartes and philosopher-scientists of his age believed that all

truths, both physical and metaphysical, emanated from the Divine, though they placed great importance on “scientific” reason (ratio) as a comprehensive instrument of human knowledge for interpreting the Divine, thus prescribing meaning and value to human existence.

Brilliant minds like Galileo, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Newton, Halley and others of the so-called “Century of Geniuses” used this newly discovered tool as a measuring rod, assigning a new order and structure to the cosmos by means of scientific experimentation, logical distillation, and mathematical algorithms. Viewing man as the measure of all things, they constructed a pedestal of reason from which to survey the universe, thereby placing man in a precarious position, supported only by the recent, largely untested tool of ratio.

Reason and logical intellect as measures of reality naturally and unavoidably progress from one system of thinking to another. The thinking man gradually takes on different modes of thinking and different value systems, leading inevitably to displacement from the original concept. Such can be seen as the legacy of Descartes; the man of disjointed thinking is a man of disillusionment and discontent, eventually becoming a rebel, who says “No” to the accepted reality, and seeks other, better realities. As with Camus in later times, he replaces “what is,” with for “what should be.” This is the fourth stage in the development of human existential awareness, and can be described as a rebellion against the accepted reality of things. The angry man of discontent says *rebello ergo sum*, as *rebello* (rebellion) follows on from *cogito* (thinking), in a natural and logical progression.

In order to transform the given reality to what it should be, the rebel has to exist more consciously, that is, at a greater intellectual depth and social intensity than before. Nevertheless, the human condition in which the rebel finds himself can prove a heap of contradictions and absurdities, commingled with ignorance, hunger, disease, cruelty, and violence. In short, the rebel, a man of intense dedication to his cause, can find it impossible to transform existing reality to what he feels it should be, his positive dreams of forming a more rational reality experiencing a rude awakening. Being forced to reframe his world view to fit his disillusionment and discontent, sometimes to an extreme level, the rebel becomes a revolutionary.

Furthermore, when “I rebel, therefore I exist” is driven by political or romantic ideologies, such as unbridled freedom for the masses, or by religious and puristic fanaticism, leading to holy wars and rejection of diverse creeds and ethnicities, then rebellion takes the form of destruction. *Rebello ergo sum* now becomes *destruo ergo sum*, “I destroy, therefore I exist,” as man arrives at the Nietzschean solution of destroying the old sanctuary prior to constructing the new. Indeed, it might be said that *destruo ergo sum* produced the American and French Revolutions in the late 18th century and the Russian Revolution a little over a century later, in illustration of the fifth stage in the development of man’s awareness of his own existence.

The *destruo ergo sum*, formula for destruction does not stop here, however. It leads further to a logical and unavoidable conclusion. The rebel’s act of destruction confirms and validates his most meaningful and ultimate existence, which he certainly desires, requiring intense and ultimate destruction, including the destruction of the rebel himself. *Destruo ergo sum*

therefore leads to self-destruction and the inconsistency that if the rebel is to exist, then he must not exist. Man has now arrived at a self-contradictory state of being.

The destroyer who propounds “I destroy, therefore I exist” now has to concede to “I destroy myself, therefore I exist” (*destruo me ipsum ergo sum*). If the rebel with a cause is to exist, he must destroy himself for the cause, providing a direct path to suicidal terrorism. The destruction of the New York Trade Center and other numerous cases of suicide bombings are horrendous examples. The destruction of nature, of which humanity is part, through environmental mismanagement, is another form of long-term self-destruction. Both politico-religious and environmental self-destruction have been brought about by scientific, rational progress and technological application of the ratio-principle. The existential Big Bang that triumphantly began as *cogito ergo sum*, heralding in the belief that ratio is the most indispensable and dependable part of human nature and dignity, finally evolves into the Black Hole of the self-destruction of man himself, for the sake of his own existence. Man has now reached tragic self-destruction, logical self-contradiction, and existential self-nullification.

The human intellect, with reason as a constant and dependable measure, has produced through many millennia many brilliant ideas and research results, including kitchen robots, cellular phones, intelligent cars, interstellar exploration, and so forth. However, it has also spawned innumerable nuclear war heads, bio-chemical weapons, and other horrors of mass destruction. In the absence of a unified field theory for the well-being of man, these products of ratio and its logical descendants have converged into mutually exclusive, conflicting ideologies and values. The featherless biped called *homo sapiens sapiens*, after 200,000 years of fairly successful evolution, is now faced with the future prospect of a vast wasteland of evolutionary and ontological meaninglessness.

Having reached this point of no return and no potential progress, humanity must now look for a tenable egress from its self-contradictory quagmire, although it seems highly improbable that such an answer can be found in the Western tradition, since it was the Western ratio that initiated the whole process leading. To be more precise, it was the Western “I” that was the primary cause, from the “I” that conquers, to the “I” that thinks, and on to the “I” that destroys itself and everyone else. The primacy of the “I” of ratio, the first person singular, is a rotten apple in the progress of man.

We can now shift our line of thought to the world of Islamic and Silk Road cultures. Here, nearly a century before the time of Charlemagne, the Muslims of the 7th and 8th centuries subsumed many cultural regions, ranging from Jerusalem to Toledo, and Palermo to Tashkent, along with their separate intellectual and artistic traditions. While doing so, they adopted the philosophies, arts, and scientific knowledge of the conquered countries and cross-fertilized them with their own. Through such cross-pollination, Muslims were able to build a golden age of learning. It is interesting to note here that the Arabic word *futuh*, which translates as “conquest,” literally means “openings.” The Islamic association of military conquest with cultural opening implies the sharing and integration of non-Islamic intellectual and artistic

traditions.

As a result of such cross-breeding of diverse modes of life and thought, an Islamic Golden Age began to bloom during the reign of Al-Mansur in the middle of the 8th century, when studies of Greek classicism began to take root, and reached new heights under Al-Mamun, in the first half of the 9th century. This learned Caliph opened a hospital and founded The House of Wisdom (830 CE) which is thought to have functioned as an international institution of higher learning. In Europe during this era, Peter of Pisa was teaching Latin grammar to the Roman Emperor Charlemagne, Carolus Magnus. Although Charlemagne took a serious interest in education and scholarship, he never established an institution of studies and research. In addition, the first universities in Paris and Oxford were only established by the end of the 12th century, after European scholars visited Moorish Spain.

By the 9th century, Baghdad, the center of Islamic civilization at that time, had become the largest metropolis in the world and Arabic had replaced Greek as the language of philosophic inquiry, scientific investigation, and divine revelation. Centuries later, the philosophers and theologians of the Christian Middle Ages and Renaissance could only access the writings of Plato, Aristotle et al. through the lens of the *Lingua Arabica*. The Islamic Golden Age, despite its slow decline, lasted for about half a millennium, until the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258 CE, destroying everything, including the library of the House of Wisdom.

The Islamic Golden Age provided an important foundation for the European Renaissance that began to bloom in the 14th century. Without the transmission of Islamic science and arts, of Greek classicism through Islamic translations, and also of Islamic-Indian advances in arithmetic and astronomy, the European Renaissance would probably have flowered much later. These transmissions were achieved through three main routes, the first two being the “opening” conquests mentioned above and “the Frankish Invasions” unleashed by Pope Urban II in the 11th century. The third and most important means, however, was the trading route now known as the Silk Road.

Long before the Islamic “openings” that led to the Golden Age, and the Frankish Invasions that “opened” Islamic civilization to Europe, the Silk Road had been functioning as an international market for all types of goods. China imported jade from Khotan well before 2,000 BCE, and Afghanistan began importing Chinese silk before 1,500 BCE. Eventually, horses, jewels, drugs, metals and glass travelled to the eastern regions, while paper, art work, gunpowder, silk, and citrus fruits were transported to the Islamic regions. At its height, in the 8th century, the trans-urasian trade route extended more than 6,500 km from east to west, from Gyeongju in Korea to Chang’an (Xi’an) in China, and farther to Antioch, Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, to Constantinople and Rome, crossing two deserts and several countries.

Far more important for civilization than trading and the inevitable transference of communicable diseases along the Silk Road, were two unintended but very significant byproducts: an intellectual, scientific, medical, and artistic intermixing of diverse cultural achievements and a moral sense of commonality among the traders. While the first of these

needs no further explanation, the second emerged through trade. It can be assumed that the mutual exchange of goods and ideas must have given birth to a recognition of cultural differences and, to some extent, respect for those differences among the traders. If they were to trade successfully, traders had to be aware of and accept their differences, despite any residual distrust and suspicion. Here the main element of concern was not the Western “I” of ratio, the absolute singular, that started with the conquering *vinco*, but rather the unstated “We,” the common plural of “You” and “I,” giving birth to a palpable, if tenuous, “moral” sense of commonality.

Borrowing a modern phrase, it was the win-win paradigm of the “We” that led to relative peace and prosperity along the Silk Road, supplanting the Western, dead-end ratio of the “I.” It is therefore unfortunate that the Ottoman Empire closed the Silk Road in 1453 CE. Had it not been for this, Turkic and other Islamic peoples might well have launched a second Golden Age, in which the “We” of exchange would have been the main driving force, epitomizing the spirit of the Silk Road. Such a golden age would have equaled, if not surpassed, the European Renaissance in its geo-political scope, cultural values and moral substance.

However, the Byzantine Empire fell all too quickly and easily, after a 50-day siege, thanks to the gun barrels of a mere 70 odd ships that “walked” over the hills. This fact in itself made the Ottoman Empire over-confident and self-satisfied, eager to conquer other civilizations that could enrich and strengthen its own. Subsequently, Europe began to look westward in terms of commercial trade, scientific exploration and/or territorial expansion. Less than 40 years after the fall of Byzantine, Columbus set sail for the East Indies, only to discover the new world; the closing of land routes opened up new sea routes, marking the beginning of the Age of Discovery.

While the old Silk Road is long gone (although currently in the process of being revived as a strategic and vital trading route), the exploratory spirit and pioneering will of the original entrepreneurs and participants is still very much alive in the cultural DNA of Silk Road peoples. That spirit and will are fundamental elements of the “We” that was present from the outset. It is therefore proposed that the same nature and content can become a catalyst for a new age in human development, upholding a new value of existence.

Mutamus ergo sumus (we change, therefore we are; we exchange, therefore we exist), the principle of exchanging views and values, must be the next guidepost in the cultural ascent of man. The new cultural spirit of *mutatio* (exchange) will encourage Silk Road countries to form a common and mutually beneficial “We.” In this way, *mutamus ergo sumus* will usher in a new age of mutual acceptance; the “We” of the old Silk Road will become a model for readjustment, modifying the present “I” course of supreme reason, and jettisoning self-interested motives of self-preservation, domination over others, and nationalism.

A reevaluation of the Silk Road in the light of *mutatio* has the potential to provide a way out from the crises created by the ratio of the West. Reinstatement of the *via serica* as what might be termed the “Middle Hemisphere,” between the Eastern and Western, as well as

the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, promises to enable them all to mingle, reflect, and integrate with each other. In this case, the *via serica* would establish a new mode of existence, based on the *tolerant mutatio*, rather than the *inexorable ratio*.

The need for further research and inquiry into the ancient achievements and future possibilities of the Silk Road is the *sine qua non* of this Apologia for Acta Via Serica. It is inevitable that there will be teething problems in terms of format and presentation in the early volumes, in common with many such ventures. Acta takes its first hesitant steps in the hope that the journal will become a commendable caravanserai in which the silken commodities of intellect, culture and the arts will be exchanged, intermingled and fermented.