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Humans, Hydrogen Atoms, and Frogs

Hydrogen atoms are inconceivably small.

If a single hydrogen atom were scaled to the size of a marble, that marble would then be approximately the size of the Earth. However, hydrogen is still one of the most important elements in the entire periodic table, due to its omnipresence throughout all of space- the universe is estimated to be composed of almost three-quarters hydrogen by mass, after all. Hydrogen is the primary component of stars, gas giants, and even human beings. One of the most powerful weapons of recorded history relies on the fusion of hydrogen, and without it water wouldn’t exist.

With that in mind, picture the Earth, shrunk to the size of a hydrogen atom.  If the rest of the universe followed suit, then the sphere of the observable universe- not the entire thing, just what we can currently observe- would still have a radius roughly five times that of the sun.  To put that another way, if you packed a billion, billion, billion, billion, billion, billion Earths together like gum-balls, you wouldn’t even have filled up one one-thousandth of the gum-ball machine that is the observable universe. As an individual unit, our presence in the universe is exponentially less frequent than the presence of hydrogen- but are we as important?

In his essay “Why We Travel,” Pico Iyer sets out to answer the question put forth by the title, using the royal “we” to refer to people like himself- American, relatively privileged citizens. He writes that “we” travel partly “just to shake up our complacencies,” but also to “fill in the gaps left by tomorrow’s headlines” (Iyer 2). For Iyer, we travel to subvert our expectations and presumptions about the world, and replace them with completely unexpected revelations. We experience events that would be impossible in our overly familiar homes, and become more enlightened as a result, since we now know more about the reality of our world than we did before. In short, travel is primarily about learning; as Iyer states, “If a diploma can famously be a passport… a passport can be a diploma (for a crash course in cultural relativism)” (Iyer 2).

But travel is not exclusively about learning- even Iyer admits that “seeing without feeling can obviously be uncaring” (Iyer 1). In order to really immerse ourselves in a foreign place, we have to become attached to it, not observe it from a cold distance. Through this balance of learning and feeling, Iyer believes that “every trip to a foreign country can be a love affair, where you’re left puzzling over who you are and whom you’ve fallen in love with” (Iyer 6). Both love and travel have a sense of mystery to them, they both foster a newfound feeling of childlike innocence, and in both endeavors the world becomes foreign and new again to the lovers or travelers. And travel, just like love, is able to “whirl you around and turn you upside down, and stand everything you took for granted on its head” (Iyer 2).

Most importantly, travel and love are similar in that their effects are felt equally both ways; Iyer proposes that, like love, “travel is a two-way transaction” (Iyer 6), in which the traveler has as much an effect on the locals as they do on him or her. When we travel to Japan, we may learn about unexpected aspects of the cultures we come across there, but at the same time we give those places a picture of our own culture. We whirl foreign cultures on their heads just as much as they whirl us on ours; Iyer analogizes, “When you go to North Korea, for example, you really do feel as if you’ve landed on a different planet- and the North Koreans doubtless feel that they’re being visited by an extra-terrestrial, too” (Iyer 2). For Iyer, at least, travel represents an anthropological counterpart to Newton’s third law.

But Iyer romanticizes travel without thinking about the reality of it. The previous analogy is an extension of Iyer’s concept of a “truly foreign place” (Iyer 3)- a place which is meant to reveal to us “moods and states of mind and hidden inward passages that we’d otherwise seldom have cause to visit” (Iyer 4). However, this idea creates a contradiction. Can any inhabited place on Earth really be considered foreign? Iyer writes that, even though the world has been largely homogenized by chains like McDonald’s and KFC, various cultures have ways of making these things their own: “the way in which each culture takes in this common pool of references tells you as much about them as their indigenous products might… When you go to a McDonald’s outlet in Kyoto, you will find Teriyaki McBurgers and Bacon Potato Pies” (Iyer 7-8). He mentions this in order to heighten the impact that foreign cultures have on American society, but it only serves to undermine his original argument and lend a sense of American superiority to it. When every destination you travel to has the same restaurants and attractions scattered about in the same way at home, how could it ever be considered “truly foreign”? Furthermore, how can you focus only on the American influence on these places and not admit to a cultural tunnel vision? To borrow from Iyer’s own analogy, the experience would be similar to journeying all the way to Saturn’s moon Titan, only to find that Starbucks, Hooters, and soccer moms have beaten you there- and then writing back home exclusively about those phenomena. Like George Carlin said, “You still feel okay, because you have some of your stuff with you.”

Alan Lightman, a professor at MIT, relates one of his own personal travel experiences in his essay “Our Place in the Universe”. On a boat outside Greece, he traveled so far out to sea that all he could see in every direction around him was water. Upon noticing this, he writes that “I felt insignificant, misplaces, a tiny odd trinket in a cover of ocean and air” (Lightman 33). Stuck on his tiny, floating piece of wood, he was faced with a world that he had never experienced before, and could not communicate with at all, and he becomes struck with a fear of what is really a “truly foreign place”. There is nothing beneficial to be gained from this fear; it is simply a “slight inkling of infinity” (Lightman 38), combined with Lightman’s realization of his own insignificance. This sensation of inconceivable distance causes him to immediately turn his boat back towards land.

Fear is the only reasonable reaction to this kind of inconceivability; and, ironically, fear is one of the capacities of foreignness that Iyer advocates in his essay. He even quotes from Albert Camus, writing, “what gives value to travel is fear”, and extrapolates that this fear represents a “disruption” from familiar habits (Iyer 5). But what Iyer describes is a kind of superficial fear, one without meaning or significance. He writes that a truly foreign place allows us to “[surround] ourselves… with what we cannot understand” (Iyer 4), but he never mentions any such places. HIs examples, like Hanoi and Japan, represent places that we understand less readily, but not places we completely fail to understand, so the fear that he describes is almost entirely negated, and its impact on us watered down. In effect, Iyer’s essay becomes a more poetic version of “Survivor” or “Man vs. Wild”; the danger may be real, but the entire thing is tightly controlled, regulated, and edited. Even Camus’s quote contradicts Iyer’s arguments- Camus goes on to say that, in traveling, “we are seized by a vague fear, and an instinctive desire to go back to old habits… There is no pleasure in traveling.” By omitting this clarification- that the fear inherent in a foreign place is not a positive aspect- Iyer disrupts and mangles Camus’s original message.

The only places that can be accurately thought of as completely foreign lay within the natural world and, by Lightman’s extension, the stars and the cosmos. In his essay, Lightman relates the history of humanity’s conception of size, and so our implied conception of our universal significance. In ancient Babylonia, the world was considered finite, albeit incalculable; however, as science and technology progressed exponentially, so did our realization of the scale of the universe around us. It wasn’t until almost 1500 years after Babylonia that the Greek geographer Eratosthenes was able to estimate the size of the Earth, and 1500 years after that until astronomers discovered the distance from the Earth to the Sun (Lightman 34-36). In the present day, our universe is believed to be approximately 28 billion parsecs in diameter, or 93 billion lightyears- that is, a ray of light on one end of the universe would take 93 billion years to reach the other end. Neil Armstrong describes our situation perfectly when he said, about landing on the moon, “It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth… I didn’t feel like a giant. I felt very, very small.”

Iyer’s concept of a “truly foreign place” suddenly becomes almost delusional. By implying the existence of such places outside of nature, he over-inflates the significance of local cultures, and by suggesting that “we are being consumed by the cultures we consume” (Iyer 6), he over-inflates the the significance that individuals have on foreign culture. It suggests a typically American arrogance about our own significance- an arrogance Iyer’s upbringing was firmly rooted in, since he moved to America when he was just seven years old (Iyer 8). Iyer believes that we are not only significant, but responsible for the interactions of world cultures; he writes that “…in the process [of traveling], we… see how much we can bring to the places we visit, and how much we can become… the only channels that can take people out of the censored limits of their homelands” (Iyer 2-3). But, in reality, individual people are minuscule in comparison to world cultures. We are almost completely unable to affect the much larger machinations we are a part of.

The narrator of Camus’s novel *The Stranger,* for instance, eventually finds himself on trial for murder, facing the possibility of execution. He notes that, during the trial, “[the lawyers] seemed to be arguing the case as if it had nothing to do with me. Everything was happening without my participation” (Camus 98). This inability to impact his fate irritates him, but eventually he comes to accept it, by accepting that same inability in his entire life. In prison, he realizes that “it doesn’t much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case other men and women will naturally go on living- and for thousands of years” (Camus 114). This runs parallel to a person’s lack of impact on foreign cultures- long after we die, other people and their way of life will continue to go on unimpeded and untransformed for centuries to come. Iyer states that, when we return from travel, we bring back “an ineffable compound of [ourselves] and the place” (Iyer 9), but cultures themselves are made up of the traditions of millions of people over centuries. A culture, then, can also be considered a compound, composed of the experiences of the people who created it; and when a culture is composed entirely of human experiences, it is impossible to describe it as “truly foreign.” Furthermore, it is impossible to believe that the addition of a single person will significantly alter that compound, and Iyer’s idea that it will only reveals an American sense of over-importance about our impact on the world around us.

However, millions of people do travel all across the world every single day; over time, the cumulative effects of so many people would eventually alter the cultural compound of a place. But more often than not, this cultural exchange dilutes that compound rather than adds to it. Tourism, as Iyer writes, can “resuscitate or revive” foreign cultures, but over time the constant homogenization caused by modern travel will wear away at local cultures, making them antiquated and forgotten. Percy Shelley’s sonnet “Ozymandias” epitomizes this idea; in it, a traveller comes upon a weathered and nearly-destroyed statue, with a pedestal reading, “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (Shelley 10-11) However, the next few lines read, “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/ of that colossal wreck…/The lone and level sands stretch far away.” (Shelley 12-14) Over the years, even the works of the so-called “king of kings” was insignificant in comparison to the ravages of time, and was lost in the infinity of the desert.

Time wears away at everything. In Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, a young American solider gets into an argument with an old Italian man, who believes that Italy will last far longer than America will. The old man taunts the soldier, saying, “Rome was destroyed, Greece was destroyed, Persia was destroyed, Spain was destroyed. All great countries are destroyed. Why not yours?” (Heller 243) As a final question, he even asks, “Could you really say that America, with all its strength and prosperity, with its fighting man that is second to none, and with its standard of living that is highest in the world,will last as long as… the frog?” (Heller 243) Nothing can stand for all eternity, just by principle of the second law of thermodynamics- Iyer even admits that “the world seems increasingly in flux” (Iyer 8-9). With that in mind, how can Iyer answer the question posed by the old man in *Catch-22?* Can he really say that American culture, with its McDonald’s and its KFC and its Jerry Lewis, will last as long as any other culture, or that we have the capacity to affect these other cultures as much as they do us? The soldier in question is unable to answer; he only retorts that America will last “[m]uch longer than you or me.” The old man replies, “Oh, is that all! That won’t be very much longer then.” (Heller 244)

Iyer believes that, in traveling, we can give other cultures “a sense of how special the warmth and beauty of their country [is]” (Iyer 3). In doing this, he gives “us” the extraordinary power, the near-omnipotence of being able to alter a culture’s path. “We” are almost princes in Iyer’s mind, responsible for the hopes, dreams, and knowledge of those around us. In truth, we can never impact other cultures the way they impact us, because we are too insignificant and, in the same way, other cultures will never have as much of an impact on us as we would like, because they can never be considered “truly foreign”; everyone is subject to the “gentle indifference” (Camus 122) of Camus’s world.

We may be bigger and more complex than hydrogen and the frog, but in the end we mean much less than the former and last much shorter than the latter. In some of his final thoughts, Lightman questions our meaning in the universe: “the fraction of stuff in the visible universe that exists in living form is something like… one millionth of one billionth of 1 percent. If some cosmic intelligence created the universe, life would seem to have been only an afterthought” (Lightman 38). That kind of infinitesimality paints Iyer’s writing in a different, more imperialistic light. We’re naive, especially as Americans, in thinking that we can subdue the planet, physically or culturally; eventually, we have to re-define our sense of scale, and zoom out of the narrow field of view we usually live with. At the end of everything, all our traveling and discovering amounts to nothing more than meaningless adventures in time and space.

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