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Pontiffs.
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This will be about art criticism. Which is an attempt to translate from images into the words of a language (for instance English). It will thus have to do with the building of bridges. In ancient Rome bridge builders were called "pontiffes", and the chief builder ("pontifex maximus") still lives there. Which is to say that art critics and the Pope are in the same business. Consider the business of bridge building in general, before you consider the special case of art criticism.

It is about solving the problem of transportation over abysses that separate regions. Here an example: For the Ancients, there were two worlds, the sublunar one and the one above the Moon, and they were separated by an abyss. Nonetheless, traffic between the two worlds was essential, if life were to have a meaning. Bridge builders (pontiffs) were needed. They solved the problem by building a temple on a hill (called the "Capitol") and by connecting it to the lowly political space called "forum". Thus the immaterial bridge between the Capitol and the forum was capable of carrying the traffic between Heaven and Earth for most of the history of Western civilisation. Then came Newton, he unified celestial with terrestrial mechanics, he levelled Heaven to the ground, did away with the abyss, and thus rendered bridges and pontiffs redundant. It took some time until people realized this, but now it has become more or less obvious that no bridge is needed between the hill and the plain, for instance between the Capitol in Washington and Art-"forum" in New York City.

Let us leave that example for a moment, and take a different one to understand better what is involved here. Suppose you want to translate the German expression "es gibt" into English. There are bridges for you to use, they are called "dictionaries", and they will lead you on to the English expression "it gives". But here the pontiffs have misled you. For a reason not quite obvious the correct translation is "there is", and to get at it, you have to jump over the abyss that separates German from English. It is this jump which is called a "translation". This is not to say that dictionaries are useless. There are regions where German and English overlap, and dictionaries are good guides in those regions. But the expressions "es gibt" and "there is" seem to stand outside those regions and near the centers of the two universes (the German and the English one), and it is those centers which are separated from each other by an abyss. It is there that pontiffs are really needed.

Let us now come back to Newton. He established a gray zone where Heaven and Earth overlap, and he fixed the rules which order that region. But unfortunately it became apparent that Newton's dictionary is sometimes misleading. There is a "big" universe which sits on the Newtonian one, there Einsteinian rules apply, and astronauts take their walks there, and there is a "small" universe which sustains the Newtonian one, there Planckian rules apply, and nuclear explosions occur there. We have to live with two abysses instead of the one Newton abolished. How are we to translate "this table" (which stands within the Newtonian universe) into the big and the small one? By "curvature of space-time" upward, and "by "probability wave" downward? This sounds as awkward as if we translated "es gibt" by "it gives". But we have to find correct translations. Pontiffs are needed.

Let us imagine artificially intelligent Popes, and this is how they will look like: you feed "es gibt" into them, and they will spout "there is", then you feed "this table" into them, and they will spout equations of quantum mechanics. Let us go one little step further, and feed a postcard into them: they will spout a perfect English description of that picture post card. Now feed Mona Lisa into them, and they will spout her out in English, still smiling. You might say that such artificially intelligent Popes are an impossible nonsense. Look again, and you will see electronic intermixes, machines which translate light into sound and vice versa. You feed the image of a sandwich into them, and you can hear the sandwich, then you feed a Schubert sonata into them and you can see it. And now look a little bit closer, and you will find computers with plotters. You feed algorithms into them, and they will spout synthetic images, and very soon they will spout holograms as well.

At this point, art critics should shudder and artists should panic. Because if an artificially intelligent Pope can translate from light to sound, and from number to image, why should he not translate from image to number, and from there to English? Would not that amount to an art criticism which would be just as exact as are quantum mechanics? Such an intelligence would feed on any sort of art work, it would chew it into numbers, then spit it out as a text, and that text would be a cart test, a quantified criticism of that art work. Which means of course that all art critics would be out of work, and that all artists would be subject to relentless examinations without any possibility to appeal against them. Very soon the artistic scene, the "art forum" would be transformed into a desert.

This is not going to happen, however. Artificially intelligent Popes can build bridges only within gray zones where universes overlap, not where abysses separate them. They can build bridges only where those bridges are not needed. They will translate from image to word like dictionaries which translate "es gibt" by "it gives". And the reason why artificially intelligent Popes cannot substitute the one in Rome is hidden in the question: what are the bridges made of? Consider that question: You translate "es gibt" by "there is" into English. Where are you while you do that? Apparently within a meta-language which embraces both German and English. Thus the bridge you are building is made of that meta-language. Again: you translate "this table" by an algorithm into the universe of quantum physics. Where are you while you do that? Apparently within a meta-universe which embraces all possible universes, and the bridge you are building is made of that meta-universe. And again: an artificial art critic stands in a universe that embraces images and words, and that meta-universe permits him to build his bridges. In short: artificially intelligent Popes sit on thrones that stand in meta-universes.

But there are no such meta-universes. If you translate from German into English, German is the meta-universe, and English is the object to be lifted into that universe, to be "translated". And of course: this works both ways. If you say that "this table" may be rendered in equations of quantum mechanics, English is your meta-universe, and you are lifting the language of quantum mechanics on the English level. Again: this works both ways. If you criticize an image in English, it is English that is the meta-universe of the universe of pictures. Maybe this does not go both ways.

But in any case: "meta-" is a reversible level, and if you were to build Papal thrones on that level, His Holiness would have to sit on slippery ground and would not be very comfortable.

Admittedly: this argument is difficult to follow. But it is important. Please read it again, and be sure you understood what it meant, before you go on reading. What it meant is that art critics stand on the level of words, and they try to lift images on that level. But there is an abyss. Words are not competent to utter the meaning of images, nor that of musical compositions, nor that of algorithms, nor that of simple body gestures for that matter. And this works both ways: images are not competent to utter the meaning of a word language. There are abysses between all the cultural codes, or, if you prefer: the cultural codes are islands of meaning which float in an ocean of meaningless nothing. An art critic is a pontiff who tries to build a bridge between where he stands, namely words, and the universe of images, and the bridge he is building is made of words but of words which advance into the meaninglessness of an abyss. This an artificial art critic, or an electronic intermix, or a synthesizer will not do. It will only work where there is an overlapping of universes.

Every code is imperialistic. He who stands therein believes that his code is universal. That "everything" may be said in English, or in music, or in numbers. Indeed: this is what "faith" means. If you are within the codes of words, you believe that the word was in the beginning, that it became flesh, that it is creative, ("logos spermatikos"), that it is the dwelling of Being. And if you are within the code of numbers, you believe (like Pythagoras and Platon) that it is numbers which are what is real, and that it is through the art of numbers and music (mathematikai kai musikai technai) that you may achieve wisdom. The same goes for pictures, or, as Platon would say, for "ideas". But there is this moment of translation, where you come up against the limits of the universe you believe in. People like the Pope and like Wittgenstein stand there. And art critics do, although most of them might not always realize it.

We were told in high school to translate as faithfully as possible, and as freely as necessary. This is a curious recipe for pontification, because it opposes faith to freedom, it links freedom to necessity, and it says that faith is better than freedom. The recipe goes this way: if I am faithful to German, I shall translate "es gibt" by "it gives", but I will find that faith is not good in this case. I therefore and of necessity am forced into freedom. Into that meaningless abyss between German and English. If I want to translate I must give up faith and dare freedom. This is the business of bridge building in general, and especially of art criticism. Because it is not the word which is sacred, but it is the abyss of silence which separates words from other codes and from each other. It is that sacred, meaningless, absurd abyss to which pontiffs, including art critics attempt to give meanings. Now that artificial intelligences seem to do precisely that, but cannot, pontiffs are needed more than ever.