

The Great Solipsist: Reading the First Emperor *

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ABSTRACT: The question of the First Emperor's extraordinary achievements is posed by looking at a suggestion that emerges from a reading of the Terracotta Warriors as portraits of real warriors. The idea is that the Terracotta Warriors reveal a tight knit state-building cadre, whose honouring of the Emperor rested on his honouring them in return. This suggestion founders on the demonstrable implausibility of the portraiture premise. Instead, a reading is offered of the terracotta warriors and the great mausoleum in which they are placed to present the Emperor, his life and state-building policies, in terms of his solipsism.

Introduction and Background

In 1974, in Shaanxi Province, 30 km outside the city of Xi'an, a group of farmers digging a well discovered something extraordinary.¹ They had stumbled on what came to be known as the Terracotta Warriors. Here were perhaps 8,000 warriors, arrayed in battle formation, part of the great mausoleum constructed over 40 years by perhaps 700,000 workers, of Qin Shihuang (259 BCE–210 CE), the First Emperor of China (221 BCE–210 BCE).

The most striking thing about these warriors—their numbers aside—was that each warrior was an individual, with his own physiognomy and bodily posture. The obvious impression given was that each warrior was a sculptural portrait of one of the Emperor's actual warriors. As Arthur Cotterell wrote, in *The Imperial Capitals of China*:²

[the] life-size terracotta warriors...individual modeled faces were nothing less than actual portraits of men belonging to his [Qin Shihuang's] personal bodyguard.

We were looking, it seemed, at real warriors.³

* I thank John Ryan for inspiring this essay, and Annette Kilarr, Alan Scott, Jeff Archer and Paul Healy for improving it.

¹ For this story and much more (including the seed of the argument I make in this essay), see Zhang Lin, *The Qin Dynasty Terra-Cotta Army of Dreams* (Xian Press, 2005).

² Arthur Cotterell, *The Imperial Capitals of China*, (Random House, 2008) p. 1157 (Kindle Edition).

³ See too, D. Keightley, 'The Quest for Eternity in Ancient China: The Dead, Their Gifts, Their Names,' in G. Kuwayama, ed., *Ancient Mortuary Traditions of China: Papers on Chinese Ceramic Funerary Sculptures* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991) pp. 12-24. Certainly it is the view expressed in most popular and many introductory accounts.

The Meaning of it All?

If that were the case, then clearly it had implications for how we understood the First Emperor. In particular, it meant we had to see him as a man who was *honouring* his soldiery, indeed honouring each and every one of his soldiers. He was immortalizing them, as the individual persons they were.⁴ The entire power of the Empire was being refracted through their individuality, recognizing and honouring it.

The beauty of this story was that it promised to help explain the extraordinary career and achievements of the First Emperor. It might, that is to say, help to explain how the leader of one of the most backward and peripheral of the seven Warring States of the preceding age managed, over two decades, to conquer them all, and to construct, in a mere ten years, the most extraordinarily powerful, centralized, ambitious state in all the world.⁵ For let there be no doubt, the state the First Emperor built—with its standardization of measures and weights and coinage, its meritocratic order, its bureaucratic logic of classification which saw surnames extended for the first time to all subjects so to perfect its cadastral capacities to tax, engage forced labour and exact military service, its communication and transport infrastructures centered on the Imperial capital at Xianyang, including both an extraordinary highway network, the beginnings of the Grand Canal and the Great Wall—its destruction of the past through the burning and burying of Confucian books and scholars, the imposition across the realm of a single

Here, for instance, is the *Travel China Guide*: (http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/shaanxi/terra_cotta_army/sculpture.htm, accessed 05/10/2013):

experts have confirmed that these [the terracotta warriors] facial features were reproductions of individual Qin warriors.

And here is what the *World Association of Technology Teachers* have to say at <http://www.technologystudent.com/culture1/terrcot1.htm>—accessed 05/10/2013)

The terra-cotta warriors are in battle formation and include cavalry, infantry and charioteers. They are a replica of the Qin army and were created over 2200 years ago.

It was also what I was told by my guide Cheng Jia, who led me around the site, July 7, 2013. (My university, the University of New England, advertises itself to students with a picture of the Terracotta Warriors and the slogan ‘Choose a Degree That’s Cut Out For the Individual’—unfortunately, as we shall see, the Terracotta Warriors properly understood imply quite an opposed message to what one assumes the marketing arm of the university intends.)

⁴ Think, for instance, of Alexander honouring his horse Bucephalus after its death by building a city to memorialise it. Or recall the sculptural historical figures who lurk at the heart of so many European cities, and the names on the cenotaphs at the centre of so many Australian cities and towns.

⁵ The standard line of explanation for the rise of Qin power points to legalism, administrative efficiencies and militarism, and typically associates this with the impact of Shang Yang (Lord Shang) on later Qin Kingdom policy. The trouble isn’t that this is wrong, just that it is manifestly incomplete. After all, Lord Shang wasn’t doing anything particularly new.

He, himself, hailed from the Kingdom of Wei, and drew his policies from the earlier Wei born legalist philosopher, military leader and politician Wu Qi who had implemented like reforms in the Kingdoms of Wei and Chu. Indeed, the Warring States tended, for obvious reasons tended to march pretty much in lock step when it came to such matters.

written, political, language, and its incredible mixture of strict legalism, horrendous punishments, and monumental paeans to the Emperor's power and virtue⁶—was unique in its state building precocity.⁷ No Western state was to achieve anything like this ordering on such a scale for nearly two millennia. Its very uniqueness, its very precocity, meant that, although the Emperor ruled all China for just over a decade, and his dynasty collapsed a mere four years later in chaos, that order he established remained forever after, both as a sometimes reality, and always as an aspiration.

⁶ On his five tours of his realm the Emperor, at places he chose, had seven Stele raised on mountaintops, instigating a practice that would continue on with later dynasties. Here is a transcription of the text that he placed on Mount Zhifu. One should read it carefully.

It was in His twenty-ninth year,
According to the season of mid-spring,
The mildness of Yang had just arisen.
The August Emperor traveled to the east,

On His tour He ascended (Mt.) Zhifu,
Looked down on and illuminated (the lands by) the sea.
The attending officials gazed in admiration,
Traced back and contemplated (His) excellence and brilliant
Accomplishments,
Recalled and recited the fundamental beginning:
The Great Sage created His order,
Established and fixed the rules and measures,
Made manifest and visible the line and net (of order).
Abroad He spread cultured and grace,
Enlightening them through rightness and principle,
The six kingdoms had been restive and perverse,
Greedy and criminal, insatiable—
Atrociously slaughtering endlessly.

The August Emperor felt pity for the multitudes,
And consequently sent out His punitive troops,
Vehemently displaying his martial power.
Just was He in punishment, trustworthy was he in acting,
His awesome influence radiated in all directions,
And there was none who was not respectful and submissive.
He boiled alive and exterminated the violent and cruel,
Succored and saved the black haired people,
And all around consolidated the four extremities.
He universally promulgated the shining laws,
Gave warp and woof to All-under-Heaven—
Forever to serve as ritual norm and guideline.
Great, indeed, was [...]!
Within the universe and realm
One followed receptively His sage intent.
The multitude of officials recited His merits,
Asked to carve (this text) into stone,
To express and transmit the constant model.

From *China and Rome Compared*, Fritz-Heiner Mutschler Achim Mittag (ed.), (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-2).

⁷ I first became aware of the precocity—one is almost tempted to say, the hypermodernity—of the Qin Imperial State through reflecting on a passing remark of James C. Scott's. See his, *Seeing Like a State*, (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 65.

So how did he do it? And how did he do it when—all state propaganda aside—he taxed and tortured and enslaved like no-one before him? For there is no doubt—history, poetry and folklore are unanimous on this—he was not merely much disliked, but positively loathed for his power, his brutality, and his unceasing demands on the people to become warriors, labourers and slaves.⁸

Here, at the heart of this mystery, it seemed the Terracotta Warriors had something important to offer. For given these representations of his soldiers—and not just his soldiers (infantry, archers, charioteers, cavalry), for later excavations discovered equally individuated ministers of state, servants, wrestlers and acrobats—honoured these men under, as it were, the Aspect of Eternity, an explanation seemed at hand. The First Emperor achieved what he achieved, and in the face of general hostility and fear, because of the immense and reciprocal bond of respectful loyalty obtained between him and a core body of officials, military and civic, on which everything turned.⁹ That this reciprocity extended also to those who entertained him seemed only to reinforce the point that here we had a community of personal interaction bound together by ties of reciprocal loyalty.

The great and precocious state the First Emperor constructed may have been awful for those outside this close knit communal core—that is to say, for the people—but at its heart was an Emperor of honour who honoured those he needed to make that state, and who honoured him in return by doing just that.

It is a nice idea—and there is no doubting the effectiveness of his state building cadre—but I very much doubt it is true. Certainly there are reasons for thinking the court of Qin Shihuang to have been far from a place of tight and cosy reciprocal loyalties. It is recorded, for instance, that one of the palace eunuchs, aware that the First Emperor disapproved of the scale of his Chief Minister's entourage, quietly informed the Chief Minister who prudently downsized. Seeing the reduction, the Emperor was enraged—'This is because a eunuch leaks what I say'—and had all his all his attendants arrested and (under torture) interrogated. None owned up. So all were slaughtered.¹⁰ Consider too, an earlier attempt on

⁸ The almost contemporaneous poet Jia Yi (220 BCE–120 BCE) describes how the First Emperor 'flogged the entire world' and 'cracked his long whip to drive the universe before him'. (It is illuminating—and rather congenial to the argument here—that the only time there has been any kind of reversal in this assessment was in the 20thC, when some Guomindang and Communist historians revisited the Emperor in the light of their state-building concerns.)

⁹ Note, for instance, the last words of the Stele inscription given above:
The multitude of officials recited His merits,
Asked to carve (this text) into stone,
To express and transmit the constant model.

¹⁰ Sima Qian, Raymond Dawson (ed.) *The First Emperor* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 76.

his life, whilst still King of Qin, before he assumed the Imperial Throne. Attacked before his attendants and ministers by an emissary armed with a knife at a grand levee, none, bar his doctor, who simply swung his medical bag at the would be assassin as he pursued the King around the hall and between pillars, had sought to help him; leaving the King to fight off, and finally kill the knife wielder alone.¹¹

Then, to cap things off, the end of the Qin dynasty four years after his death was the upshot of two his key officials' self-seeking corruption. (When the mercury finally did him in, his Prime Minister Li Si and his Chief Eunuch Zhao Gao had the rightful, and seemingly competent, heir killed and a pliable and definitely incompetent replacement installed.) Something else was going on, something (as it had to be) to do with the Emperor. Let us see what it was.

And the Emperor's Dream Army

Let me say why the portraiture account of the terracotta figures is very likely false; before going on to make a positive argument for my case. Consider, for a moment, these facts.¹² The Terracotta Warriors were not created all at once, but over more than a decade; indeed there are warriors still in various stages of construction to be found on the site. How likely is it, over this period of time that any single body of troops, let alone 8,000 of them, is actually represented here? Are we to imagine all 8,000 being modeled/sketched initially (down to the treading of their footwear), then moulded and fired over the succeeding years by, it seems, assembly lines of workers at 1000 strong? Not only is this implausible (and without any evidence at all), but it overlooks the fact that the Emperor's soldiers were continuously engaged, throughout this time, in various border wars and internal pacification throughout the breadth of China's new immensity.

How on earth are we to imagine 8000 of them available either to be meticulously modeled/sketched at any time whatsoever? More than this, soldiers all too regularly are wounded, disfigured and die. Yet not a single terracotta warrior is disfigured or bears any sign of injury or wounding. Further, there is no reason at all to think that the Emperor would have wanted or countenanced having a representation of a now dead warrior placed in his mausoleum. He wanted, it seems, a functional army, but dead soldiers are of no use at all.

Then there are more concrete considerations. For despite the individuation of the terracotta figures, they were assembled from uniform leg moulds, to which equally uniform, but now differently sized, torsos,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹² Drawn from Zhang Lin, *op. cit.*, and Kesner, see note 10.

arms, hands, and heads were added. That which most individualises them—their heads and facial features—was a matter of manipulating eight basic head moulds, each, it seems representative of ethnic groups still to be found in China today, with each mould itself divided into front and back halves. To these eight basic moulds were added, by hand, hair, noses and ears, then sharp bamboo used to etch particular facial features (mouth, mustaches, beards). This very process, with its multiple contingent contributions to a basic form, would have generated some individuation anyway, especially so when many different craftsman were at work.

But why any individuation—even if not that of portraiture—at all? Why did the First Emperor insist on this? Why not—for it would certainly have been easier to produce, and, seemingly, no less effective as a fighting force—an army of identical figures? After all, isn't standardization a theme of this Emperor's rule and of military states and forces in general?¹³

Here things are necessarily speculative, but let me speculate.¹⁴ To begin with, one thing very noticeable for those who gaze upon the terracotta figures, warriors and others, is that their sculptural presentation is not at all like that to be found, say, in ancient Egyptian or archaic Greek sculpture—they are not so static, symmetrical, rigid—and that despite this, they are entirely free of the suppleness, expressibility and atmosphere of (say) Greek sculpture of the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Their physical deployment in space isn't that of individuals, with all their individual peculiarities and personal idiosyncrasies, but is always and everywhere entirely functional. Soldiers stand in lines soldierly. Archers crouch archerly, ministers of state stand ministerially, servants prostrate themselves servantly, and so on. Everything of their posture and position in space is determined by their functional role, and nothing more appears. There are no spontaneous or discordant movements modeled. None of the 8000 warriors are winking, picking their nose, sneezing, scratching, yawning, stretching. Their facial individuality is likewise constrained. True, each face is different, but the difference lies at the edges. All the warriors look directly ahead. None is laughing, expressing fear or boredom, or indeed expressing anything at all except a determined

¹³ One Chinese researcher, Sun Jiachun, has suggested that the Terracotta Warriors are really ancient models used for military training (http://xinhuanet.com/English/china/2011-12/01/c_131282591.htm) which might be (barely) plausible if they were simplified and standardized identikit figures, and if they exhibited any sign of previous use. Without this (and in the light of the exquisite care taken in their manufacture) the suggestion is hardly worth considering.

¹⁴ Speculations that owe much to Ladislav Kesner's pioneering work in this area. See esp. 'Likeness of No One: (Re)presenting the First Emperor's Army', *The Art Bulletin*, 77.1 (March, 1995), pp. 115-132.

equanimity in their place and role. They are all alike, even in their differences.

What we have here is an army—*from the Emperor's Point of View*. Any and all armies are made up of individuals, the which individuals are standardized, first as troops, then infantry, cavalry, etc. Which particular individual they are matters not a whit. They are individuals melded into a whole, and this is how they appear, and only how they appear, to their Commander in Chief, to the Emperor. And so their individualised features atop bodies shaped entirely by their military function. And so too with the officials, acrobats, servants and wrestlers. What we have are *individuals-in-their-roles*—their individuality secondary to their total immersion into their Emperor centered, Emperor determined, role. In short, the Terracotta Warriors is the Emperor's *dream* army. The Emperor does not see *this* or *that* individual warrior, he sees only *His* warriors. He does not see individuals as such, but as occupants of roles, and of roles that are specified, are determined and animated, from and by his point of view. We have—and this is where I begin to make my greater argument—a *solipsist's* army.

And Now to Solipsism

As solipsism is central to my argument, let me say what I mean by the term. A solipsist is someone who thinks that the existence of the world and all that it contains is sustained by their own conscious existence. For the solipsist the world is not something external, but is the content, and *only* the content, of *their* consciousness. This does not mean—this is a common misconception—that they think or take everything they experience to be under the control of their *will*, so that they are literally as God is supposed to be. After all, this isn't how things *are* in experience. Some things I can will—to move my arm, for instance—but others I cannot. In experience there are many things I am aware of that are independent of my will. Being desperately hungry, for instance, or that tree I see over there. Even further, there is no reason to think a solipsist must lack what is fashionably called a 'Theory of Mind'.¹⁵ Nothing stops a solipsist from theorizing the nature of his or her experience, and so nothing stops them from attributing to some such facts, in an as if fashion, consciousness, beliefs and desires. (Indeed, such theoretical attribution may itself be a ground or reason for their solipsism in the first place. For it is dependent on—both in terms of the positing itself and its content—the brute fact of their own consciousness.)

In the purely experiential sense, then, the solipsist's world need be no different from that of the non-solipsist. What is different is the belief that

¹⁵ One might well argue that it is a commitment to solipsism that leads to the view that understanding others—even as 'others'—requires *theory* here.

the very existence of this world depends on my existence; that if I were to die, then the universe itself would die with me.

In the *Tractatus*,¹⁶ Wittgenstein had expressed solipsism this way:

5.62 The world is my world...

5.621 The world and life are one.

5.63 I am my world. (The microcosm.)

Here, I think, we have the secret to the First Emperor's life and achievements first glimpsed in the presentation of his Terracotta Warriors; a secret that unlocks the mystery of this most puzzling of men.

The Life (and Death) of a Great Solipsist

Notoriously, the First Emperor had a troubled relationship to the idea of death—or rather, of *his* death, and this came out in a myriad of instructive ways. In the first place—and this has puzzled virtually everyone who has thought about the man¹⁷—he both aspired to immortality and spent nearly 40 of his 50 years building the largest underground mausoleum in the history of the world, and the largest mausoleum China has ever seen. At the same time as his 700,000 forced labourers worked on the tomb, he (according to the *Liexian Zhuan*¹⁸ (79-78 BCE)) followed the advice of the Daoist Sorcerer, the 1000 year old Anqi Sheng, who told him that if he visited him at his home on Penglai Island he would provide him with the elixir of life. The First Emperor initiated many expeditions to the island, and sent thousands of others there to find the Wizard, but the island, he, and the elixir, proved elusive.

This may have depressed the Emperor—evidenced perhaps by his refusal to allow anyone to even mention or use the word 'death' in his presence without themselves being executed—but it did not alter his faith or project. He swallowed his Daoist advisers mercury pills to the same end (this probably killed him), and he refused to make any kind of will or arrangements for the Imperial Succession on the grounds that such were only for mortal men.

One is tempted to say he had a blind faith in his immortality, and one—as the prohibition on the word 'death' implies—he simply refused to question or allow to be questioned. And yet there is the Tomb

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1922).

¹⁷ For a representative example, see Jennifer Wolff, *Emperor Qin in the Afterlife*. 'It is puzzling why someone so focused on staying alive as long as possible would have such lavish and detailed plans in place for his tomb.' (twp.duke.edu) And it just this puzzle which means we cannot simply plug in traditional Chinese beliefs about the soul and afterlife; for those beliefs held for men who most certainly didn't think themselves immortal in the earthly sense.

¹⁸ *Collected Biographies of the Immortals*, ed. Liu Ziang.

building; a project that dwarfed any other of his magnificent projects and dominated every aspect of his rule. Here was a man, it seems, who both denied his mortality and invested almost his whole empire in preparing for it.

And how he prepared for it! For nothing in previous Chinese history was like this mausoleum, and more especially, nothing at all, anywhere, was like the tomb it enconced. In general aspect the mausoleum was a replica of the adjacent city of Xianyang, the Qin capital, now the Imperial Capital, extended and much rebuilt. As with the city, the mausoleum's area was enclosed within an inner and an outer wall, with the tomb lying within in the same relative position as the Imperial Palace in the city. Just as in the city, the mausoleum had quarters for officials and servants, wives and concubines.¹⁹ It had too, and similarly located, its own pleasure gardens and animals, its stables and horses, its soldiers and entertainers. And then there was the tomb itself. Here is Sima Qian, the Grand Historian, writing a mere 100 years later.

They [the labourers] dug through three layers of groundwater and poured in bronze to make the outer coffin. Palaces and scenic towers for a hundred officials were constructed, and the tomb filled with rare artifacts and wonderful treasure. Craftsmen were ordered to make crossbows and arrows primed to shoot at anyone who enters the tomb. Mercury was used to simulate the hundred rivers, the Yangtze and Yellow River, and the great sea, and set to flow mechanically. Above were represented the heavenly constellations, below, the features of the land. Candles were made from 'man-fish', which is calculated to burn and not extinguish for a long time.²⁰

Inside the tomb, then, we find the whole world, its rivers, seas, stars and lands. We find, in the microcosm, the macrocosm. And it is lit up. This is a solipsist's logic. If I die, the universe dies. If I live, the world lives. If I must die, then I will live if there is still a world. And here, in the tomb (which is the city), is the world. And so I do not die. Could not die. Have not died. If the world—like my army—is my dream, then the dream itself means there is a dreamer. And so, as he proclaimed in 221BCE, his was *The Empire of Ten Thousand Generations*. He would rule, that is to say, forever. And for that goal, for that achievement, one can and should oppress and tax the people and bleed the land. What

¹⁹ Here, perhaps, is the place to note that there is not a single female figure to be found in all the terracotta figures—not surprising with the army, but more surprising when it comes to servants and entertainers—and that uniquely the First Emperor, unlike any of his successors, never chose an Empress. If, as I think, he was a solipsist dreaming of a world in which all had become legible to his mind and so tractable to his will, women played no part at all in this precocious state builders dream, either because he simply didn't notice them or, more plausibly, because he saw them always as subject to his will.

²⁰ Sima Qian, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

might look to others as a kind of empire destroying madness is, in fact, the very foundations of ‘an Eternal Empire. An Empire, indeed, that unlike any other, has and will have no issues of succession with all its disintegrative possibilities and dangers. An Empire, in Spinoza’s phrase, that exists *sub species aeternitatis* ‘under the aspect of eternity’. I, and my world (which is all the world there is) am eternal, for that is how I, the emperor, dream it.

It is tempting to think this kind of thinking a form of madness, but that is to miss its foundation in the world, in something we all know and (however anxiously and fearfully) accept.²¹ For it just *is* true that, from *my* point of view, *my* death is *the end of the universe*. There is no difference here between my death and the extinction of the universe I have known.²² If, it seems to the solipsist, I care for the universe I sustain, shape and find, then I must care most of all for myself; and if I want that universe to continue forever—for is it not a green and pleasant land?—then I must go on forever. This is the logic of the First Emperor, the logic of his rule and his tomb.

Solipsism and State-Building

At the start of this essay I posed the question of the First Emperor’s extraordinary achievements by looking at a suggestion that emerged from a reading of the Terracotta Warriors as portraits of real warriors. The suggestion was that this revealed a tight knit society of honour centered on the Emperor. It was the impressive ties of respect and loyalty that obtained between the Emperor, the core of his army, and his close associates, that did the trick. This suggestion foundered on the demonstrable implausibility of the portraiture premise. Instead, I offered a reading of the Emperor, his life and policies, in terms of his solipsism. This reading is, as it must be at this distance, speculative, but it isn’t historically or metaphysically wild, and it is politically plausible. Metaphysically, it just is the case that my death means the end of my world. Historically there is the Emperor’s virtually life long tomb building and his conviction of immortality, and politically there is the nature of his self-appointed task—to create, a centralized state, with himself at its centre and peak, so that however disorganized and will independent things might have seemed at first, now all is legible and focally ordered.

²¹ This is why Wittgenstein says:
5.62 In fact what solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself.

²² This comes out another way when we see that while the mortality, the death, of others can be—and, as we age, increasingly just is—a fact in the world for us, our own death is not and cannot be such a fact.

I want to finish by taking up the political dimension, and to approach it by returning to the question we began with: that of the nature and basis of the Emperor's hold on the loyalty and efforts of others. For how can a solipsist be so successful in a world—however he thinks of it—that just isn't his world? A world where others—however he thinks of them—are not creations of his consciousness, but have their own lives, their own wills, and—just as he—their own worlds? How, in short, can a solipsist be a *state builder*, indeed perhaps the greatest the world has ever seen?

As before, I draw the beginnings of an answer from Wittgenstein, our profoundest philosophical analyst of solipsism. Consider the following specific passages:

- 5.631 If I wrote a book 'The world as I found it', I should have therein to report on my body and say which members obey my will and which do not, etc. This then would be a method of isolating the subject or rather of showing that in an important sense [the solipsist's sense] there is no subject: that is to say, of it alone in this book mention could not be made.
- 5.632 The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world.
- 5.633 *Where* in the world is the metaphysical [solipsist] subject to be located?
- 5.64 Here we see that solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism. The I in solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and there remains the reality coordinated with it.

Think of the solipsist's world—think of the First Emperor's world, think of the state builders world—in terms of the visual field. The one thing that doesn't appear in that field is the seeing eye itself.²³ What appears is simply what is 'out there'. And so, as Wittgenstein says, pure solipsism turns into pure realism—though a realism that, like the visual field, appears or structures itself around an unperceived centre or axis. Thus the solipsist, the Great Solipsist, the precocious state builder, is what might be called a *focal* realist. Like the earth in traditional astronomy he is the eternal axis about which all orbits, and that which gives existence and meaning to that dependent circling. It is tempting to say, with Wittgenstein, that he sees the world—all the world—as 'coordinated with' him, but this is only true insofar as he can bring all that whose existence depends on him under the power of his will. Then, when under his volitional control rather than merely the content of his consciousness, he can *care* for the world rather than, as with Atlas, merely have it rest upon his all sustaining shoulders.

²³ Which is why narcissism is not to the point here.

The Great Solipsist as precocious state builder succeeds where others fail because being the (metaphysical) limit of the world—the eye of the visual field—he can see and do what others simply cannot see and cannot do. This isn't because they do not have their own focal outlook—they do, as we all do, and not merely in an *as if* positing from the focal centre²⁴—but because their focal outlook includes the knowledge that there really are *other* focal points of view (crucially, The Emperor's), and so they simply cannot be as centred and so as single-minded.²⁵ They are in a complex world in which focal conflict and negotiation are essential and complicate everything. Not so for Qin Shihuang. His world, viewed in terms of his solipsism, is not complicated at all. The project is clear, and it is simple. That which is visible to me—which is all there is—must be ordered in such a way that it becomes subject to my will. Those then, for whatever focal reason(ing) of their own, are willing to work with the Emperor at his project find themselves with a task and a plan of extraordinary simplicity. Render the world legible to the Emperor's eyes, so that he may control it with his will. It was, I suspect, the extreme simplicity of this demand that helps explain the capacity of the Emperor to carry others with him, even as he denied their otherness. The Great Solipsist is, at the same time, and from their point of view, the great state builder, and it is to this project of political order(ing) they have dedicated themselves. This is a reality—a political reality—of focalized functional standardization, just as we find with the Terracotta Army.

If state building is the articulation and deployment of a solipsistic logic in which all is lit up and all is subject to the volitional power of that centre of light, then it is no surprise that the First Emperor's character and achievements are inscrutable and overwhelming, magnificently and horrendously, sublime. Those, in fact, of a Son of Heaven.

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²⁴ Which is why, in philosophy, any position that implies solipsism is thought to have reduced itself to absurdity.

²⁵ I have been asked: 'Doesn't this mean he is a sociopath?' I'm not at all sure this term is of much use, but I think the deep point concerns what morality might mean to a solipsist. Certainly it can't mean anything to do with the Golden rule or Universalizability. Nor can it be—as was the suggestion at the start of the essay—a matter of an Honour Community. None of this means, however, that a solipsist cannot have a project, and a project that demands effort and action in the world as he experiences it; nor does it mean that project must be a matter of selfishness, a notion which, anyhow, looks as meaningless here as altruism.