Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism: a comparative morphology of medieval movements

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KABBALAH AND NEO-CONFUCIANISM:
A COMPARATIVE MORPHOLOGY OF MEDIEVAL MOVEMENTS

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KABBALAH AND NEO-CONFUCIANISM:
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ABSTRACT

This study is a comparative analysis of the rise of Neo-Confucianism in China during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the emergence of the school of Kabbalah in France and Spain during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. This comparison is grounded in the observation that the two schools, in spite of their obvious differences, were an outcome of separate reactions to the rising popularity of foreign paradigms. I draw a distinction between synthetic and analytic modes of operation, arguing they represent contrasting cultural paradigms characterized by divergent cognitive, social, linguistic, and cultural temperaments. I argue that both the classical Chinese and Jewish worldviews conformed to the basic characteristics of the synthetic modality, and that they entered a period of acute crisis as a result of the rising popularity of the analytic Buddhist and Greek philosophical traditions respectively. As I define it, the synthetic worldview is characterized by the affirmation of the body and this-worldly life, an emphasis on ritual and community, cultural particularism, and associative, non-analytical modes of thought. The contrasting analytic worldview stresses individualism, de-contextualization of data, other-worldliness, contemplative spirituality, and universalism.
In the context of this project, I develop a methodological framework I call genetic-morphology. This methodology seeks to integrate a synchronic search for cross-cultural patterns with an emphasis on the diachronic evolution of traditions as they change and adapt to new environmental conditions. It also integrates data from diverse academic fields such as religious studies, anthropology, cross-cultural psychology, biology, and systems theory. As such this study offers a gestalt appreciation of cultural systems, their internal dynamic, the symbiotic relationship between their constituent parts, and the function of information in their operation. This dissertation concludes that Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism can be understood as “defense theologies,” or adaptive responses devised to protect their classical synthetic modes of operation from the cultural pressures of analytic paradigms. Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism were unique in their ability to appropriate powerful features from analytic traditions and subordinate them to native synthetic sensibilities, thereby equipping the Jewish and Chinese traditions with revolutionary theologies that dismantled the challenges of foreign analytic paradigms.
PREFACE

Some twenty years ago, guarding at an outdoor military post in the contested Golan Heights, I accidentally stumbled upon a damp and worn out book laying abandoned on the ground. I must confess that at the time I wasn’t sure whether the familiar iconic face on the cover belonged to Ho Chi Minh or Mao Zedong. Unimpressed I picked the book up, shook the dust off its cover and started reading on a random page. The scene I came upon was so captivating that it made me flip to the back cover to verify whether I was reading history or fiction. It turned out to be a historical account of the Red Army’s epic Long March. Needless to say, I read the whole book and it left me overwhelmed with curiosity. Harrison Salisbury’s sympathetic portrayal of the communists and especially of Mao’s charismatic leadership fueled my enthusiasm to know more about these mysterious and distant people.¹ It was that fortuitous incident that eventually led me to enter the department of East Asian Studies at Tel-Aviv University with the intention of focusing on contemporary Chinese politics.

But the more I read about China’s fascinating modern history, the more I became aware of the historical depth that preceded it. Confucius, with his great wisdom, taught that “a gentleman works at the root. Once the root is secure, the Way unfolds.”² I followed his advice and it was the Confucian tradition that he himself spawned that became my root and has remained so ever since. After I completed my degree, equipped

with basic undergraduate level Chinese, I left to China fully committed to bringing my linguistic skills to an academic level. By that time I was already captivated by Chinese calligraphy, ink painting, philosophy, as well as Chinese pop culture. I also secretly developed an ambition to pursue my Master degree in a Chinese university. After four years of intense language courses in Beijing, I entered an M.A. program in Traditional Chinese Aesthetics, focusing on the history and theory of classical landscape painting. The three years I spent immersed in a Chinese academic environment were priceless. This period gave me a unique chance to experience China from within; taking classes and exams alongside local classmates who soon became close friends. Looking back, those were also the years that made me academically and linguistically ripe to work with Chinese texts.

Throughout my years in China I sensed that something about the Chinese tradition resonated with my own Jewish heritage. Curiously, it felt similar to a form of Judaism that I myself was distant from. I couldn’t help but sense subtle parallels between experiences in China and ones I had among orthodox Jewish communities, or what my friends and I frequent condemned as exilic Judaism. As a secular Israeli whose political and social worldview was nourished by Western humanism, my encounters with religious orthodox communities have often left me in a state of confusion. I was constantly torn between admiration for their warmth, informal casualness, and impressive scholasticism on the one hand, and their particularistic stubbornness and blatant utilitarianism on the other. Oddly enough, this was reminiscent of similar dispositions that I sensed among the Chinese, especially of older generations.
Perhaps the first thing that struck me was the uncanny similarities between Jewish and Chinese forms of pragmatism. To the Western idealist, both traditions were likely to tackle daily dilemmas from an angle that would appear distastefully utilitarian. This is especially true when it comes to commerce and material success, concerns that are unapologetically central to both Chinese and Jewish cultures. In honoring their dead, the Chinese will burn paper limousines, fake dollar bills, and other material amenities in order to provide deceased ancestors with financial security and physical comfort. Phenomena such as auspicious symbols for monetary success, New Year blessings such as “wish you become rich” (zhu ni facai - 祝你發財), and restaurant entrances adorned with money-gods (cai-shen - 財神) were all a common sight. This reminded me of one rabbi in Zafed who advised me that my career decisions should first and for most be oriented towards securing a high salary and prospects for promotion. I looked around in astonishment but no one around the holiday table felt that we were digressing from an appropriate “religious” discussion. As stereotypical as it may sound, Jews will often speak of financial matters as part and parcel of religious discourse, the two don’t seem to conflict as much as they do in the West where spirituality tends to shun away from matters of the world.

I was amazed how many books about Jewish wisdom I found in Chinese bookstores and libraries. Most of these books were not dedicated to Marx, Einstein, or the Cohen Brothers; instead, they were overwhelmingly obsessed with entrepreneurial success. Initially, when Chinese people frequently claimed that “Jew were very smart,” I was flattered, until I realized that Jewish wisdom was mainly associated with the ability to
make money. What struck me the most was that such statements were completely free of anti-Semitic undertones; in fact, they involved true admiration and genuine curiosity. Today I feel comfortable to say that the traditional Jewish and Chinese worldviews, together with their exceptional veneration of scholarship and intellectual achievement, see financial security and monetary success as obvious and legitimate channels for the achievement of wellbeing, power, and fame. Nothing to be uneasy about - simply life.

I could go on to speak of other resonances since there were plenty, perhaps one more example can help us sense the kind of subtlety that some of these similarities involved. It is well known that both traditional Jewish and Chinese societies held parents and educators in the highest esteem. But on a closer look, one is bound to be surprised by how this phenomenon plays out in actual life. My amazement regarding the relationship between students and professors in my Chinese University felt like a *deja-vu* from some of my Sabbath and holiday dinners in orthodox communities. Considering their traditional authority, when the Chinese teacher or Jewish rabbi spoke, one would expect the community to go into complete silence and full attention. In the Jewish case what I encountered was a constant chatter in the background, kids running and shouting without being hushed, some adults clearly attentive while others dividing their attention between food, listening, and occasional comments to neighbors - all this while the rabbi was attempting to communicate a message. I felt uneasy with this lack of respect to an authoritative figures and I found it strange that it was happening in a place where authority was considered to be extremely important. I found myself is endless similar

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3 J.Z Smith sees the *deja-vu* as that which is problematic about the comparative process. Here I use it in positive terms as a legitimate and inevitable part of our thought process.
situations in China and in both cases I was struck by how normal this seemed to the participants. Even more surprisingly, rabbis, like my Chinese professors, didn’t seem to be concerned at all with these situations, let alone offended.

The formal attentiveness I was familiar with in the West was simply absent. A similar scene in an American classroom or church would have been utterly inappropriate; when a person of stature speaks the audience listens in silence, background noises would be an obvious sign of disrespect. Interestingly, the Jewish and Chinese leniency on such matters was countered by signs of authority that would be unthought of in the West. As an example, my Chinese professor would frequently order students to refill his tea flask, or even help him purchase books at a distant bookshop. In my department, Chinese students literally spent hundreds of hours editing and formatting a dictionary in honor of our university’s famous calligrapher, Qigong. They were clearly inconvenienced by this time-consuming project, but since the head of the department “asked” them to, they complied. The paradox between authority and casualness felt extremely familiar to me. Indeed, the same contradictions are apparent in religious Jewish communities. A rabbi’s decision has final authority, he is rarely constrained by the same rules of etiquette prevalent in Western institutions. But in spite of this almost absolute authority, the interaction between the community and the rabbi could be surprisingly casual and informal. I was constantly asking myself whether such strange and somewhat elusive parallels actually meant anything?

Throughout my seven years in Beijing I gradually came to believe that these apparently trivial cultural resemblances were actually significant. As I began to immerse
myself in traditional Judaism and in the China of the Analects and the Five Classics, I became increasingly convinced that a comparative analysis of these traditions was not only fascinating, but that it contained potential insights into the nature of culture in general. As I started looking deeper into the theological and philosophical underpinnings of the Confucian and rabbinic traditions I became increasingly uncomfortable with the prevalent dichotomy between East and West. If the traditional Chinese and Jewish worldviews shared common sensibilities in contradistinction to the West, wasn’t the common association of Judaism as a Western tradition misleading? Better yet, doesn’t the term monotheism obscure the fact that Jewish and Christian forms of monotheism were substantially different? And if this was true, what exactly made them so different, and how does their sibling religion, Islam, fit into this scheme?

As a result of these lingering questions I became increasingly interested in comparative religion, comparative philosophy, and cultural studies. It became clear to me that this was something I wanted to explore and that pursuing a doctoral degree was the perfect place to do it. As I began reading academic literature in comparative religion I understood that the first hurdle I had to cross was methodological. The question I asked myself was how do I construct a comparative framework that could bring such elusive but nevertheless powerful “gut feelings” into a unified and compelling argument? At the time I was already familiar with Neo-Confucianism, a school of thought I was attracted to early in my undergraduate studies. Revisiting this tradition again, this time from a more educated position and with access to academic literature in Chinese, I began to see things in a different light. The central position of Buddhism in the emergence of Neo-
Confucianism helped me better appreciate the differences between the Indian and Chinese worldviews. Echoing my suspicion towards the notion of “Western traditions” and “Monotheism” the Indian/Chinese tension led me towards a similar uneasiness with the somewhat simplistic and sweeping notion of Eastern traditions. Once I felt that both the Western and Eastern categories were destabilized for related reasons, I got the first inkling of a potential solution to my comparative conundrum. The debate surrounding culture and religion needs a theoretical framework that can help us look beyond East/West distinctions by introducing new cultural categories. What I will refer to as synthetic and analytic traditions enables us to do just that: to appreciate Judaism in relation to China while contrasting both traditions with the common analytic ethos of Christianity and Buddhism.

I will keep the methodological details of this solution to the next chapter, suffice it to say that the more I looked the more I was convinced that behind the external diversity of China and Judaism lurked a common infrastructure, or cultural DNA. Being aware of the “perennial” dangers of such a claim, my doctoral research has been dedicated to articulating my argument in a way that avoids simplicity. Today, I am convinced that the methodological framework I am offering is successful in unveiling some of the mystery that engulfed my early reflections on China and Judaism. The next step is to convince my readers.

My search led to another fortunate result. As I became more involved in theoretical questions, I came to believe that the methodology I was constructing was valuable in its own right. In other words, it was not only instrumental for my specific project but could
function as a theoretical framework for a wide range of comparative phenomena. I must confess that in the process of writing this dissertation I wasn’t always sure whether I was primarily comparing Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism or whether I was using the comparison of these schools as a showcase for the instrumentality of my comparative methodology. I would like to believe that the two need not be mutually exclusive.
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CHAPTER 1
METHODOLOGY
1. INTRODUCTION

One might wonder why comparing two foreign traditions such as Judaism and Confucianism is useful, or even possible? Not only do these cultures share very little in terms of content but they also operated in substantially different cultural environments with no indication of real contact or diffusion of ideas. On one hand we have vulnerable and isolated Jewish communities dedicated to a monotheistic worldview based on revelation, prophecy, and messianic redemption; on the other hand, a politically independent and culturally confident Middle Kingdom committed to a substantially different set of concerns and religious symbols. The choice to compare such unrelated traditions positions us at the heart of a turbulent debate regarding the validity, function, and instrumentality of comparative religion.

In her comparative analysis of the Confucian and rabbinic traditions Galia Patt-Shamir asks: “my aim in the present chapter is to discuss the possibility of creating a fruitful dialogue between the two traditions, yet how can such a task be conducted? What methodology can we apply to systems that are essentially so different?”

Considering the radically foreign cultural settings of the Confucian and Jewish traditions, focusing on what sets them apart seems trivial. On the other hand, when we detect similarities can we prove that they actually carry significance? How do we know whether cultural resemblances are not an outcome of humanity’s shared biological makeup, or perhaps a

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5 Clyde Kluckhohn, “Universal Categories of Culture,” in A.L Kroeber et al., Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Donald E.
result of historical contingencies? Scholars have long been aware of affinities between
the Chinese and Jewish traditions in areas such as ritualism, their family based ethos,
their stress on ethics, scholarship, and commentary. The problem is that as far as I am
aware, a deeper causative explanation for such resemblances has yet to be proposed.
Similarities between the two traditions are “floating in the air” without a theoretical
grounding; they are first and foremost descriptive but rarely ask why commonalities exist
and is there a deeper reason for their existence? All these complex dilemmas hinge on our
ability to devise a methodology that brings Judaism and the Chinese tradition into an
intelligible comparative framework. I believe that such a methodology is available, one
that provides coherence to a joint appreciation of these traditions and especially, as I will
argue, to the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism.6 Although concerned with

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Thomas E. Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and
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6 Comparative works dealing on the Jewish and Chinese traditions include: Joseph P. Schultz.
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both similarities and differences, this methodology will begin by looking at what is common. It will argue that parallels between Judaism and Confucianism should not be treated as isolated phenomena, but rather understood as an outcome of profound structural affinities.

I chose to refer to my methodology as *Genetic-Morphology* or alternatively the *Morphogenetic* method. Morphology is a living tradition; it is practiced in various fields and has roots that harken back to the eighteenth century. In order to clarify the details of this approach it is helpful to trace its historical origins. Such an analysis serves three main goals; first, it provides us with a better appreciation of the genesis of systematic comparative approaches to the study of religion. Secondly, it underscores the different theoretical and methodological problems that have haunted morphology. And finally, the analysis of early morphology can help us state the exact meaning of this term as it will be used in this dissertation and in contradistinction to earlier morphological approaches.
1.1 THE MORPHOLOGICAL TRADITION

The field of Morphology was originally inspired by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who coined the term in his 1790 book *The Metamorphosis of Plants*.⁷ According to Goethe, morphology is “a science of organic forms and formative forces aimed at discovering the underlying unity in the vast diversity of plants and animals.”⁸ Goethe’s pioneering morphological work was done in the field of Botany where his contributions left a lasting mark on subsequent generations of scientists. Indeed, the dilemmas involved in modern morphological approaches to comparative religion can be traced back to those early days at the end of the eighteenth century. Some of the most influential morphological approaches to comparative religion were rooted in that period’s romantic tradition; a stream of thought that was frequently attacked as an unscientific subjective idealism. There are three central issues that warrant our attention, all of which are present in Goethe’s early botanical morphology and remain influential, to different degrees, in twentieth century morphological approaches to comparative religion. The first factor is Goethe’s ‘delicate empiricism’ (*zarte Empirie*), an approach that sought to create an almost mystical relationship between subject and object.⁹ As Gordon Miller notes “starting from sense perception of the outer particulars, Goethe’s scientific approach

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⁸ Gordon Miller, *Metamorphosis*, p. xvi. Goethe’s Botany was both a reaction and continuation of Carl Linnaeus’ (1707-1778) famous *Systema Naturea* in which the latter introduced his famous “binomial” taxonomic system, which categorized plants according to genus and species. Linnaeus’ classificatory system had a profound impact on the natural sciences.
⁹ Miller, ibid., p. xxiii.
seeks the higher goal of an illuminating knowledge from within.” Although Goethe believed that empirical investigation was crucial for arriving at scientific insight, he also believed that the intuitive penetration of nature’s patterns led to a spiritual illumination, a sort of organic unity between the scientist and his object of investigation. Goethe’s idealistic inclinations sought to preserve a holistic unity in reality by avoiding the analytic separation of subject and object. The German school of Naturphilosophie to which Goethe belonged contained a sentimental, emotional feature that, in the eyes of rationalists, undermined its reliability as an objective science in the strict sense. In a passionate letter to his friend Charlotte von Stein Goethe states:

What pleases me most at present is plant-life. Everything is forcing itself upon me, I no longer have to think about it, everything comes to meet me, and the whole gigantic kingdom becomes so simple that I can see at once the answer to the most difficult problems. If only I could communicate the insight and joy to someone, but it is not possible. And it is no dream or fancy: I am beginning to grow aware of the essential form with which, as it were, Nature always plays, and from which she produces her great variety. Had I the time in this brief span of life I am confident I could extend it to all the realms of Nature – the whole realm.

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10 Ibid.
11 According to J. Z. Smith Goethe’s scheme employed a “complex dialectic between the universal and the particular, between ideal and experience, between idea and appearance, between Being and history.” see “Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit” in History of Religions 11, No. 1 (Aug., 1971): 83.
12 Heinrich Duntzer, Life of Goethe, Thomas W. Lyster trans., (London: Macmillan, 1884), p. 431. In a different instance Goethe states: "The happiest moments of my life were experienced during my study of the metamorphoses of plants, as the sequence of their growth gradually became clear to me. This method of regarding the plant world inspired me during my stay at Naples and Sicily; it became more and more precious to me; everywhere I gave myself to practice in its application." In “Propitious Encounter” in Meuller, Bertha tr. Goethe’s Botanical Writings (Woodbridge, Conn.: Ox Bow Press, 1989), p. 219.
Goethe’s terminology, suggestive of bliss, ineffability, and intuitive insight all point to a unitive mystical experience of sorts. Immersed in the patterns of nature, Goethe began to sense a unitive resonance with nature. Amidst the mesmerizing botanical diversity of the lush Italian landscape, Goethe began to detect an underlying recursive pattern that stood at the root of all variation. As his own testimony indicates, with sufficient time he would be able to extend his insights from the realm of flora to that of fauna and eventually to “the whole realm of Nature.” His morphological project contained the grand promise of unlocking the secrets of nature through a penetrating analysis of reoccurring forms and shapes (μορφή, morphē).

Goethe’s romantic streak became an important current in comparative religion, but it was also seen as increasingly problematic in the eyes of postmodernists. In the field of religious studies the detection of reoccurring forms led to a preoccupation with common patterns and grand theories. This growing trend attracted enthusiastic followers but eventually led to an over-reliance on impressionistic theories.\(^\text{13}\) In light of the postmodern critique, most scholars today agree that classical morphology is in need of a corrective. Comparative religion is in need of new methodologies that will constrain ungrounded associations.

The second problem with Goethe’s morphology, the tension between what J.Z. Smith calls ‘Ideal and History,’\(^\text{14}\) has been particularly controversial in comparative religion. Although Goethe described three possibilities for a plant’s metamorphosis:


regular, irregular, and accidental, he chose to almost exclusively focus on regular
metamorphosis, the type that proceeds from seed to fruit, uninterrupted by unexpected
environmental influences.\textsuperscript{15} Transported to the study of religion this led to the
prioritization of ideal structures over historical context. Smith claims that “Goethe's
scheme, despite the claims of some of his later admirers, was never evolutionary; it was a
typological series that was fundamentally ahistorical…”\textsuperscript{16} The conflict between history
and cross-cultural phenomena highlights the paradox comparativists face; postulating
perennial structures deems historical change redundant while the insistence on history or
what Geertz terms ‘thick description’ ultimately excludes the possibility of shared cross-
cultural structures.

The third distinctive feature of Goethe’s morphology was his focus on
similarities. As Donald Kaplan notes, Goethe's goal was to discover what plants had in
common, not what made them different from each other. In this regard, classical German
morphology differed from contemporary botanical morphology where scientists focus on
the differentiation of individual species.\textsuperscript{17} Goethe’s project was oriented towards unity
and harmony, his famous \textit{Urpflanze}, the prototypical plant, functioned as an ideal
unifying structure that could be discerned across the plant kingdom. Such a methodology

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\textsuperscript{15} Goethe gave scant consideration to the second type, the ‘irregular’ or retrogressive
metamorphosis, where the plant proceeds forward but then regresses a step or two, a motions
which leaves some sections of the plant in an indeterminate stage of relative impotence. Goethe
dealt with ‘irregular metamorphosis’ only as a means for understanding what is ‘unseen’ in the
regular type. The third, accidental, metamorphosis that is affected by outside agents, mostly
insects and severe weather is completely ignored.
\textsuperscript{16} In another instance Smith writes: “Goethe shows how unexpected circumstances can change the
course of metamorphosis but he chooses to eliminate this factor thereby excluding the
contingencies of history,” \textit{“Adde Parvum,”} p. 83.
\textsuperscript{17} Donald Kaplan R., “The Science of Plant Morphology: Definition, History, and Role in Modern
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urges us to pay particular attention to the common features that lay at the core of variation.

In order to understand these methodological dilemmas in context we need to turn to Mircea Eliade who transported Goethe’s ideas to the field of comparative religion. The three aforementioned components of classical German morphology, the idealistic, the ahistorical, and the focus on similarities are all present in Eliade’s work, which dominated the field of religious studies prior to the postmodern critique. The romantic currents that flow through Eliade’s thought are impossible to ignore; the endless occupation with mythology, the prioritization of the archaic and pre-rational, and the reification of the sacred are all indications of an idealistic streak that is common with Goethe’s botanical morphology. Such idealism, as Wendy Doniger points out, has led many to label Eliade as a crypto or covert theologian. One scholar points out that Eliade’s phenomenology was "as normative as theology because it is based on an assumed ontology that is neither historically derived nor descriptively verifiable." The intuitive features of Goethe’s morphological science resonate in Eliade’s approach where the latter insisted on turning his nostalgic gaze towards an archaic past, free from the analytical raptures of modernity. Eliade yearned to intuit the same kind of untainted experience that his homo

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20 According to Allan Sun Eliade believed that: “Science could not provide the eternal truths he was looking for, its mode of acquiring knowledge based on the observation of contingencies. A society ruled by appearances, he held, is like a house built on sand. In order to avert the tragedy
religiosus experienced through the sacred, he believed that the scholar should be equipped with a special “immediate intuition” towards the sacred and the symbolic world through which it becomes manifest. Ironically, in Eliade’s eyes, the intuitive familiarity with religious consciousness is a prerequisite for a more scientific and reliable appreciation of the religious psyche, without which the scholar is unable to penetrate the very essence of what the field of religious studies is after. Although I agree that impulsive associations between religious phenomena may prove detrimental to our quest for objectivity, it seems that the exaggerated attack against the use of intuition and imagination is itself problematic. As I will show, new approaches to comparative religion have justifiably reacted against the postmodern attempt to exile imagination and intuition from the process of inquiry.

The second feature Eliade shares with Goethe’s morphology is his a-historical approach. There is an interesting affinity between Goethe’s famous Urpflanze and Eliade’s notion of the sacred. Both metamorphose into different manifestations that can

of human finitude, Eliade posited the sacred: the transcendent ground of all being, including time itself. He eschewed the methods of science for those of intuition and religious experience, which he understood to emanate directly from this transcendent source, providing unmediated access to the secrets of the cosmos. Critics retort that this is hardly the disinterested pursuit of knowledge that ought characterize the academic enterprise; it is ‘covert theology’, a ‘religion after religion’. Claiming the existence of a totality no-one could actually observe, Eliade’s method is dogmatic in its propositions and unfalsifiable in its conclusions: the bugbears of bad theory.” Allen Sun, “Chasing One’s Tail: Some Reflections on the Methodologies of Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Z. Smith.” In On a Panegyrical Note: Studies in Honour of Garry W Trompf (Sydney: Dept. of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney, 2007), p. 192.

be perceived and studies empirically. The *Urpflanze* is the primal prototype behind the perplexing variation of plants. Similarly, Eliade’s Sacred reveals itself in the form of hierophanies, namely, manifestations of the holy that are expressed as a result of a dialectical process between the sacred and the profane. The a-historical form of the sacred (or Goethe’s *Urpflanze*) impresses itself on the contingencies of time and matter thereby revealing itself in the mundane world.  

Eliade tried to show that the sacred, in spite of its various cross-cultural manifestations, is subject to ‘modifications’ and ‘degradations’ brought about by cultural and historical conditions. However, although Eliade rejected the possibility of understanding the sacred outside of time, he was often blamed for employing a method of investigation in which religious experiences were isolated, decontextualized, and all too often compared cross-culturally. It is apparent that he sought to excavate and recover something that transcended history; he strongly opposed the existentialist view that man is a product of his decisions and environment, devoid of an a-priori essence. Eliade asks us to acknowledge the archetypal human, the *homo religiosus* who stands above cultural conditioning. Humans interact with history, they adjust to history but they don’t owe their identity to it. His *Archaic Ontology* sought to penetrate our symbolic world and reveal an untainted sacred moment in *illo tempore*, a

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23 Both Goethe and Eliade were very much aware of the impact of environmental and historical circumstances on reality; it is exactly in this sense that Eliade was different from phenomenologist of religion such as Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw. Robertson Smith’s controversial *Religion of the Semites* (1889) can also be seen as an early synthesis of synchronic typologies or the morphological stance with historical and evolutionary methodologies. See more in Paden, *Religious Worlds*, p. 43. Like the phenomenologist, Eliade exhibits an interest in the inner experiences of *Homo Religiosus*; ecstasy for instance, is beyond history, it is a human capacity linked to our biological constitution, and as such, stands above a particular cultural context. See for example Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London: Routledge & K. Pauk, 1989), p. xiv.
“primordial paradise” as well as a prototypical human being, a human that history managed to obscure in many fundamental ways. His notion of the “terror of history” reflected the way archaic humans yearned to return to the perfection of creation and to the reassuring safety of cyclical time. Not so with modern humans, who have alienated themselves from their primordial roots by the adoption of a linear historical perspective, constantly haunted by the unknown future.²⁴

Finally, Eliade’s focus on similarities was yet another feature he shared with Goethe. In fact, the attack against Eliadean grand narratives that marginalize cultural particulars was one of the most central critiques of postmodernism, especially in the field of anthropology.²⁵ Much like Goethe, the thrust of Eliade’s project is oriented towards

²⁴ Looking at Eliade’s work, it is almost impossible to ignore his own terror of history; in his journal he attests: “my essential preoccupation is precisely the means of escaping History, of saving myself through symbol, myth, rites, archetypes.” Douglas Allen, op. cit., p. 555. In spite of Eliade’s attempts to incorporate change into his theoretical framework, we are left with the strong impression that history is an obstacle in one’s quest to experience the Sacred. Ivan Stenski, one of Eliade’s main critics, claims that “Eliade's history of religions is based on a priori truths, which stand in an a priori relation to the historical data both logically and chronologically. These "truths" may sometimes be “confirmed” in historical materials, but falsification from these materials seems ruled out.” Allen attempts to demonstrate that many of Eliade’s supporters acknowledged and admitted his anti-historical stance without finding sufficient reasons to discard his project. According to him Eliade was not as troubled by his methodology as many would expect him to be. Allen, is a good example of someone who is generally sympathetic to Eliade’s approach, he tries to highlight the complexity of the latter’s phenomenology, and the intricate interplay between a-historical elements and historical particulars. Eliade comfortably admits that “at some point the historian of religion must become a phenomenologist of religion, because he tries to find meaning. Without hermeneutics, the history of religion is just another history - bare facts, special classifications, and so on.” Ibid., p. 548.

²⁵ Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 167. One of the main opponent of generalizations, and by extension the comparative method, was Clifford Geertz who believed that truth is in the particular rather than in the general. His notion of ‘thick description’ was highly influential on the anti-comparativist trends in Anthropology, especially as it was presented in his Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Interestingly, Geertz’ Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia
highlighting the common and unifying facets of religious traditions while brushing differences aside. This becomes apparent in Eliade’s penchant towards excavating cross-cultural categories such as sky gods, sacred stones, symbols of regeneration, *axis mundi*, and myths of eternal renewal. His work reflected the idea that differences obscure what is fundamentally real and most important about religion.

The Eliadean ‘golden age’ was followed by an extremely antagonistic backlash by postmodern and postcolonial thinkers and the subsequent decline of comparative religion as a legitimate field of inquiry. The postmodern and postcolonial critics were directed at ‘classical morphology,’ the type of morphology associated with Goethe’s romantic and idealistic tradition and especially with the work of Eliade and his followers.

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(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) is a comparative work par excellence, focused of the analysis of Islam as it developed in two different cultural settings Indonesia (Java) and Morocco. As Robert Segal notes, the comparative method in Anthropology and Religious Studies “….descended from a dominant position to a point where it is in general either not practiced or even condemned explicitly.” Segal, “In Defense of the Comparative Method,” *Numen* 48, no. 3 (2001): 339-373.

The synchronic method of comparing religions is best associated with the phenomenological approach of Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade. For more on phenomenology and the neglect of historical context see Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 197. Inspired by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, postcolonialists blamed comparativism for the perpetuation of the colonial project. According to this position the comparativist imposes her own biased categories on foreign cultures, thereby distorting their true nature. In this view the Eurocentric analysis of non-Western cultures is yet another vestige of the West’s pretense of evaluating foreign traditions according to its own standards. The anti-comparativist attack has also targeted the aforementioned inclination towards detecting similarities rather than differences. Such criticism was guided by the postmodern conviction that religious and cultural phenomena are fundamentally unique and that no two things can possibly be the same. In addition to these charges, historians have pointed out the comparative method’s neglect of context, attacking its synchronic tendency to isolate themes from their historical settings.
Subsequently, comparative religion has been forced to redefine itself; this entailed a methodological reorientation that the field is still undergoing today.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{1.2 NEW COMPARATIVISM}

In the last decade of the twentieth century, following a long dormant period, comparative religion began to show promising signs of recovery. A new generation of scholars committed to revitalizing the field began to respond to the postmodern and postcolonial critiques by devising new methodologies that could enable students of religion to compare traditions responsibly. Fortunately, the scholars behind this recovery did not only offer creative methodologies, but also convincingly argued “for the continuing necessity—and relevance—of the comparative study of religion.”\textsuperscript{29} According to this position comparative religion is not something we should simply tolerate, but an enterprise we must actively engage in as responsible scholars.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} At the conference held in 1973 in Turku, Finland on methodologies in the science of religion, sponsored by the International Association for the History of Religions, Lauri Honko (1979: xvii) observed: “At the turn of the 1970s it was becoming clear that Western science, not least in the humanities and social sciences, was undergoing a profound process of self-examination, which seemed to be leading to the breakdown of certain older paradigms and even, possibly, to the emergence of new ones.” See Cox \textit{Phenomenology}, p. 211. Armin Geertz and Russell McCutcheon \textit{New Approaches}, 2004 contend that the Turku Conference was an attempt to save the science of religion “from its theoretical naiveté and encourage interdisciplinary cooperation.” Certainly, they were referring in large measure to the phenomenology of religion, which by the 1970s was being increasingly criticized for combining theological assumptions with a simplistic understanding of Husserl's work.

\textsuperscript{29} Patton, \textit{A Magic Still Dwells}, p. 1.

A landmark work in this effort of revitalization was Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray’s ed. *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. The book’s title is in reference to Jonathan Z. Smith’s controversial article *In Comparison a Magic Dwells*, in which the latter articulated some of the problems involved in comparativism. The collective effort at correcting old methodologies has been termed “New Comparativism,” and has led to the construction of more nuanced and historically informed comparative strategies. New comparativists sought to offer a corrective to both classical morphology and to the exaggerated reaction against it; as in so many cases, the solution seemed to lay somewhere in the middle. Although they acknowledged that the exaggerated use of imagination and intuition was problematic, they also defended their tempered use as legitimate part of the intellectual process.

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32 Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 21. Smith illustrates this problem by referring to J.G. Frazer’s notion of ‘homoeopathic magic’ in which there exists a “confusion of a subjective relationship with an objective one.” In The Golden Bough Frazer, following his teacher E.B. Tylor, contended that the misapplication of the ‘Laws of Association’ contains the danger of responsible science declining into magical practices, based on ‘contagion’ of similarities. According to Smith at some point in his research the comparativist will inevitably experience: “a sort of Deva-vu, the scholar remembers that he has seen “it” or “something like it” before…this unintended consequence of research, must then be accorded significance and provided with an explanation. In the vast majority of instances in the history of comparison, this subjective experience is projected as an objective connection through some theory of influence, diffusion, borrowing, or the like. It is a process of working from a psychological association to an historical one; it is to assert that similarity and contiguity have a causal effect.” J.G. Frazer, 3rd ed. (New York, 1935) 1:53 (see also 1:221-22) Ironically, Smith wrote his doctoral dissertation on Frazer which reaffirmed his feeling that Frazer’s *Golden Bough* was an immense ‘laboratory of comparison’ that nevertheless
Intuition and imagination, they argued, play a central role in the process of human discovery. If a falling apple could inspire the discovery of gravity in the sciences, why should we delegitimize the role of intuition in comparative religion? New comparativists also responded to the postmodern attack against the search for cross-cultural patterns; they argued that historical specificity does not deny the existence of pan-human and cross-cultural patterns; the two can co-exist and even enrich each other. This dissertation follows both of these correctives: as noted in the prologue, it was an initial intuition that led me to this project. At present, I believe that this initial intuition can be supported by a wide array of facts. With respect to the tension between history and universal patterns, genetic morphology tried to demonstrate that overarching patterns are subject to gradual change and history gives us a valuable glimpse at the way these changes take place over time.

I do not believe we can isolate a fixed method to compare religious traditions; our methodologies will inevitably change to suit the unique context, characteristics, and objectives of our projects. Since theory and methodology are forever intertwined, every comparison demands a tailoring of a procedure that is best suited to illuminate a specific set of data. What I refer to as genetic-morphology is an attempt to offer one way to approach comparative religion. In what follows I will try to clarify how morphology will

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be used in this dissertation. I’ll begin by looking at some basic definitions of the term and then proceed to introduce my own definition.\(^{34}\)

### 1.3 GENETIC MORPHOLOGY

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* provides the following characterizations of the term morphology: “(a) The form and structure of an organism or any of its parts.”\(^{35}\) In the case of this study the main “organism” subjected to morphological analysis will be religious traditions, both whole traditions such as Judaism and Confucianism as well as sub-traditions such as Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, offers the following definition: “The study of the size, shape, and structure of animals, plants, and micro-organisms and of the relationships of the parts comprising them.”\(^{36}\) This definition helps us appreciate the importance of the *interrelationships* of constituting components, a factor that will be crucial to this work. J.Z. Smith argues that morphology “has as its necessary presupposition an a priori notion of economy in which there are relatively few “original elements” from which complex systems are generated.”\(^{37}\) Smith’s definition raises the notion of *emergence*, the idea that the interaction and interrelatedness

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\(^{34}\) J.Z. Smith notes that comparative religion lacks a robust methodological framework for comparing traditions. He asks and then replies: “Is comparison an enterprise of magic or science?....In no literature on comparison that I am familiar with has there been any presentation of rules for the production of comparisons.” Jonathan Z. Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” in *A Magic Still Dwells*, p. 26.


\(^{36}\) This is a definition of morphology as it is applied in the field of biology. See *Encyclopedia Britannica*: [http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/392797/morphology](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/392797/morphology)

\(^{37}\) In his definition Smith claims that morphology “is a logical, formal progression which ignores categories of space (habitat) and time.” As mentioned, one of the central goals of Genetic morphology is to incorporate diachronic considerations to the analysis of cultural structures. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
of relatively few “original elements” leads to complex systems that cannot be accounted for by pointing back to their constituent features. I will try to demonstrate that although the Jewish and Confucian traditions look very different, their morphology adheres to the same synthetic modality.

Finally, Goethe’s definition: “A science of organic forms and formative forces aimed at discovering the underlying unity in the vast diversity of plants and animals.”

This definition adds the somewhat ambiguous notion of “formative forces.” What exactly are these forces? Are they something we should treat seriously or just an outdated philosophical idealism? Although fully answering this question is beyond the scope of this study, I will tentatively suggest that systems theory might help us understand the notion of formative forces in an updated scientific language.

Before I proceed to offer my definition of genetic morphology a few words about the term genetic are in place. As we have seen, traditional morphological approaches tended to ignore history and context. I believe that our search for underlying patterns must by accompanied by a diachronic analysis that accounts for historical change, or genesis. The idea of genesis and change means that the cultural systems we are dealing with are dynamic and therefore exist in an ongoing relationship with their surrounding environments. In other words, although the cultural systems we are dealing with are robust and relatively stable, they nevertheless change over time and adapt to new circumstances. The notion of adaptation assumes a fundamental flexibility that organism or system must disclose in order to endure in hostile environments.
Based on the information above, I offer the following definition of genetic morphology:

Genetic morphology aims to detect the irreducible components of cultural systems. It attempts to explore the internal dynamics of such systems by describing the way their constituent components interact with each other and relate to the whole. Genetic morphology explores the development and evolution of cultural systems in relation to their shifting historical contexts and aims to understand the mechanisms that enable such systems to adjust and adapt to new external conditions without compromising their underlying traits.

With this definition in mind, the following pages will explore how genetic morphology can be applied comparing Judaism and Confucianism. Before proceeding to explain the details of my methodology I introduce a few terms that will frequently appear throughout this study. I present them from the specific to the general:

1) **Morphological Features**: the irreducible constituent parts that compose a cultural system. This term will be interchangeable with ‘morphological components.’

2) **Morphological Levels**: The three basic levels that compose a cultural system; the cognitive, social, and cultural. Each level is constituted of various morphological features.

3) **The Two Morphological Modalities**: The way the three morphological levels and the morphological features that constitute them interact to form a cultural systems: synthetic or analytic.
1.4 THE SYNTHETIC AND ANALYTIC MODALITIES

This study postulates two modes of operation: the synthetic and analytic. The synthetic and analytic modalities are two ways of constructing culture that have proved to be exceptionally pervasive throughout history. My central argument is that in spite of the diversity of pre-modern traditions, cultural systems tend to conform to one of these modalities. Scholars from the humanities, especially Sinologists, have been well aware of essential differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Recently, studies by cross-

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39 Nelson Goodman, Peter Berger, and William Paden use the idea of ‘world construction’ and ‘world-making.’
cultural psychologists and cognitive psychologists have supported the synthetic/analytic dichotomy with empirical evidence. Positing the two cultural modalities should not be seen as an act of reification, but rather a methodological devise for highlighting two pervasive modes of operation. It is helpful to think of the analytic/synthetic distinction as extending on a continuum from highly analytic traditions to highly synthetic ones. It is also worth noting that cultural systems disclose an internal diversity that includes both synthetic and analytic currents; the function of comparative religion is to highlight the most dominant tendencies of traditions. Such generalizations are crucial for understanding what an exaggerated focus on details frequently obscures.

The distinction between synthetic and analytic modes of operation helps problematize our common East/West distinctions. We have become accustomed to place monotheistic traditions in the same ‘Western’ category, and traditions as different as Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in the same ‘Eastern’ category. The synthetic/analytic contrast re-organizes traditional typologies by placing the Jewish and
Chinese traditions in the same category of synthetic traditions and contrasting them with the ancient Greek and Buddhist analytic traditions. The central argument of this study is that the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism was a result of a cultural clash between the synthetic Jewish and Chinese traditions and the analytic traditions of Greek philosophy and Buddhism respectively.

1.5 THE THREE MORPHOLOGICAL LEVELS

The synthetic and analytic modalities are each composed of what scholars have identified as the three fundamental layers of reality; cognition, society, and culture. The first level refers to the different cognitive strategies that synthetic and analytic traditions use. The second level refers to the way individuals organize into social entities. The third level refers to cultures, which includes both society (family units, kin relations, and clan structures) and additional elements such as human motivations, activities, and ideas.

Perhaps the first thinker to clearly articulate the differentiation of the three layers was the sociologist Talcott Parsons who argued that:

all human groups exist on three tiers, or levels, of organization: (1) individual personalities, which are shaped and governed by (2) a social system, which is, in its turn, shaped and controlled by (3) a separate “cultural system.” The last of these, which is a

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41 Under the influence of the Durkheimian tradition, sociologists and anthropologist formerly believed that in studying culture our basic unit of analysis was “societies.” It was only with the advent of American anthropology under the influence of Fraz Boas, Louis Kroeber, and Robert Lowie that anthropologists began to notice the important distinction between the social and cultural layers. These early thinkers noted that the unit of anthropological analysis was “culture” rather than simply society. They stressed the fact that society was only one element in a greater cultural arena that included ideas, customs, symbols, and institutions.
complex network of values, symbols, and beliefs, interacts with both the individual and the society, but for purposes of analysis it can be separated from them.\textsuperscript{42}

This tripartite differentiation of reality was adopted by Clifford Geertz who argued that “no matter how deeply interfused the cultural, the social, and the psychological may be in the everyday life… it is useful to distinguish them in analysis, and, so doing, to isolate the generic traits of each against the normalized background of the other two.”\textsuperscript{43} More recently, following Parsons and Geertz, scholars such as Robert Bellah and Merlin Donald have adopted the cognitive, social, and cultural distinctions as well.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{1.5.1 The Cognitive Level}

The first level will refer to the different kinds of cognitive strategies that synthetic and analytic cultures use. I use the terms \textit{analytic thought} and \textit{synthetic thought} to differentiate between these strategies. A tradition’s cognitive orientation towards thinking analytically or synthetically is not an ideology or content-based disposition but rather a mental temperament. Within the cognitive level I will discuss three opposing morphological features, which distinguish the synthetic and analytic mindsets.

\textsuperscript{42} This was argued in Parson’s book \textit{The Structure of Social Action}, Pals, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 266.
\textsuperscript{43} Clifford Geertz “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture” in \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures}, p. 5. In Pals, \textit{Eight Theories}, p. 260.
a) Atomization of Data vs. Integration of Data (Holism)

Analytical thought is oriented towards the differentiation of data into atomic units. The atomization and deconstruction of information and substances leads to a tendency towards reification and essentialism. Synthetic thought, on the other hand, is holistic in that it tends to preserve a rounded and all-inclusive unity of data. Linguistic, social, and metaphysical categories tend to be more ambiguous and undifferentiated than those in the analytic mode. Linguistically, analytic thought focuses on precise conceptual language while synthetic thought shows a greater use of metaphors and terms with a broad and multi-layered semantic range.

b) De-contextualization vs. Contextualization

Analytic thought tends to de-contextualize information such that there is an ongoing search for the static, immutable, and universal underpinnings of reality. De-contextualization takes place on multiple levels: metaphysically, it leads to universal and static cosmological structures, while ethically it is inclined towards a typically Kantian categorical imperative, in which situations and events are subordinated to a universal and non-changing moral rationalism. In contrast, synthetic contextualization means that things and ideas are forever anchored in a specific situation and flow of events, which lends reality a more dynamic and process-oriented nature.

These distinctions also have an impact on the manner in which data is integrated into a coherent whole. Analytic thought joins discrete units of data using content-free (de-contextualized) formal or logical relations. In contrast, synthetic systems ‘navigate’
information through association and analogy or through a certain plot or *narrative*. In other words, the content, value, and meaning of data in a synthetic system impinge upon the way information will be handled and integrated. Instead of strict logic, one’s associative thought will be central in determining the general progression of ideas.

c) **Self-Enclosed Linear Systems (Analytic) vs. Open-Endedness Non-Linear Systems (Synthetic)**

Analytical thinking works according to logical procedures in which information is presented in linear sequences that terminate with a conclusion based on preceding data. The progression of information can be inductive in which particular assumptions support a general conclusion, or deductive in which a general hypothesis is supported by specific examples and proofs. Most importantly, information is integrated so as to strive towards a self-enclosed and coherent whole. Synthetic thought, on the other hand, treats data organically and although there are certainly rules of organization, the presentation of information is based on non-linear networks of connections that are open-ended rather than teleological or enclosed.

In conclusion, on the cognitive level the analytic and synthetic modalities are differentiated by three opposing morphological features: 1) atomization of data vs. integration of data, 2) De-contextualization (formal relations) vs. contextualization (association), and 3) self-enclosed and linear systems vs. open-ended and non-linear systems.
1.5.2 The Sociological Level

a) Social Embeddedness vs. Social Autonomy

On the sociological level I will distinguish between two types of social configurations: *social autonomy* and *social embeddedness*.45 In the analytic mode, the autonomous individual is seen as the most fundamental constituent of the community and is therefore perceived as a discrete entity. Theologically, such a social orientation provides individuals with private channels for accessing ultimate truths and achieving spiritual realization. Although traditional cultures that adhered to social autonomy disclosed strong familial and communal bonds, theologically the individual was perceived as the fundamental unit of spiritual fulfillment – I will refer to this as *cognitive individualism* in order to distinguish it from the type of *social individualism* that emerged in the modern West.46 Social autonomy leads to religious phenomena such as monasticism, celibacy, and asceticism all of which are unlikely to emerge in synthetic cultures.

The synthetic modality conforms to social embeddedness in which the most fundamental social unit is the family rather than the individual. Although traditions that subscribe to social embeddedness are comprised of individual members with private

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lives, it is also the case that individuals in this modality are perceived in relation to other members of the family and the community. This is what sociologist Basil Bernstein termed the positional perspective in which the individual is relativized vis-à-vis other members.\textsuperscript{47} This positionality is especially apparent in the family, the first social entity in which we witness a relational dynamic. Family members in synthetic traditions are nested in a matrix of relationships that inhibits the emergence of extreme forms of individualism. Spiritual fulfillment in traditions of social embeddedness will be generally opposed to monastic and ascetic practices; the idea of sagehood in these traditions requires an intense social awareness and ongoing engagement in community affairs. Self-realization outside the community is paradoxical since sagehood is first and foremost a social affair.\textsuperscript{48}

1.5.3 The Cultural Level

The third morphological level is cultural, and consists of four morphological dichotomies:

a) Ritualism (orthopraxy) vs. Contemplation

Synthetic traditions, certainly Judaism and Confucianism, are characterized by dense ritualistic behavior in which a central part of one’s religious and social commitments is related to the following of preconceived and socially accepted patterns of behavior. This is opposed to analytic traditions that lay a stronger stress on contemplative


\textsuperscript{48} This topic has been explored in detail by Durkheim and Mauss, the school of \textit{L’Annee Sociologique}, and more recently by Mary Douglas in her \textit{Natural Symbols} (Harmondsworth; Middlesex; England; New York: Penguin Books, 1978).
channels for religious realization. While orthopraxy focuses on physicality, contemplative techniques emphasize spiritualistic and reflective modes of operation that are theoretically free of physical constraints, and attempt to downplay the role of the body.

Although analytic traditions certainly have rituals, they tend to occupy a less central position than those in synthetic traditions. Qualitatively, rituals in analytic traditions tend to evolve towards mechanisms that embody theological ideas rather than being oriented towards praxis or simply “doing stuff.” Conversely, synthetic traditions may have contemplative features but these are overshadowed by the stress on participation in communal ceremonies and embodied channels of communication.

b) This-Worldly vs. Other-Worldly

This dichotomy refers to the synthetic modality’s positive attitude towards this world rather than some other-worldly sphere such as the Christian Kingdom of Heaven, the abstract realm of Platonic Forms, or Buddhist Nirvana. World affirming conceptions see the human realm as the main domain of religious action and a valid sphere for self-realization, while other-worldly cultures postulate a more sublime world that is superior to the one we live in. Consequently the analytic mode of operation tends to perceive this world of matter as blemished and inherently flawed, a sphere we attempt to escape.
c) *Particularism vs. Universalism*

Particularistic traditions may disclose universalistic tendencies but they nevertheless insist on preserving a certain priority for members of a specific community. In Judaism this is reflected by the unique relationship God forges with the Jews as well as the distinctive function the Israelites play in the cosmic drama. In China particularism was mainly associated with a cultural affiliation that distinguished the well-cultivated Chinese from barbarians on the periphery. Although it was hypothetically possible for non-Chinese people to become part of China (中華民族), required foreigners to adopt the Chinese language and writing system, as well as subordinate themselves to the Chinese way of life and the indisputable superiority of the Chinese imperial order.

Analytic traditions such as Buddhism and the Greco-Christian tradition represent forms of religious universalism in which there are no hereditary or cultural distinctions between potential members of the community. Through active proselytization analytic traditions encourage people to become members of the group regardless of background. Procedures for joining analytic traditions are rather lenient and do not necessarily entail a substantial change in one’s life style, let alone her national, cultural, and ethnic affiliation.

d) *Language: Non Indo-European vs. Indo-European*

Different linguistic orientations between the synthetic and analytic modalities are the fourth distinction on the cultural level. Cultures that belong to the Indo-European language family are predisposed towards the adoption of the analytic modality, while
non-Indo-European cultures tend to conform to the synthetic mode of operation. In our case the Chinese and Jewish traditions belong to the non-Indo-European rubric while the Greek, Christian, Indian and early Buddhist traditions belong to the Indo-European category. I will discuss the impact that language is believed to exert on the construction of reality and try to demonstrate why analytic traditions emerged out of cultures with Indo-European roots. Although radical forms of the Whorf-Sapir theory have been abandoned, most scholars working in the field today agree that language has a ‘non-trivial’ impact upon the way we perceive and interpret the world. My intention is not to resurrect the position held by linguistic determinists, but rather to contend that language is one of several characteristics that shape a tradition’s cultural ethos.

The categorization above represents a rough and preliminary sketch of the morphological structure of the analytic and synthetic modalities. Each mode is constituted of the three morphological levels (cognitive, social, and cultural) and the different morphological features that compose them. The main contribution I attempt in this study is to offer a more systematic analysis of these distinctly different cultural modalities; one that attempts to explain their fundamental constituent, internal dynamic, and adaptive nature.
Table 1: The Two Morphological Modalities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Analytic Modality</th>
<th>Synthetic Modality</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Atomization of data</td>
<td>Integration of data (holism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>De-contextualization</td>
<td>Contextualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-enclosed, linear systems</td>
<td>Open-ended, non-linear systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Social autonomy (personal)</td>
<td>Social embeddedness (positional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Other-worldly</td>
<td>This-worldly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Universalism</td>
<td>Particularism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indo-European</td>
<td>Non-Indo-European</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.6 METHODOLOGICAL COMMENTS

1.6.1 Axial Traditions

My analysis of traditions will focus on what has come to be known by the controversial, albeit highly influential term, “axial traditions.” Exploring the vague topic of “axiality” is certainly beyond the scope of this study. Different views and interpretations of the meaning of the axial age have been offered in a host of articles and most notably in two compilations edited by Shaul N. Eisensadt and more recently by Robert Bellah and Hans Joas. There are three reasons for why I am highlighting the idea of axiality. The first is that axial traditions happen to be the most dominant traditions in our global landscape and those that we are by far most familiar with in terms of archeological, textual, and historical data. The second reason is that there are reasons to believe that the analytic mode of operation is an axial phenomenon; some, like Merlin Donald, convincingly argue that the roots of systematic analytic thought can be traced back to ancient Greece between the sixth and eighth centuries BCE, a period that according Karl Jaspers represents the beginning of the axial age. If he is correct, as I believe he is, the analytic mode of operation emerged as a reaction or alternative to the

dominant synthetic modes of operation of the pre-axial age. Ironically, the emergence of analytic traditions also led to a counter-reaction and the emergence of more updated axial age synthetic modes of operation. Although hints of analytic thought can be found before the emergence of the rational Greek tradition, it seems tenuous and rather vague to discuss a clear opposition between synthetic and analytic cultural modalities before the axial age.\(^5\)

The third reason why I find axiality important is the centrality of sacred written texts in these traditions. For the first time, written language came to play an increasingly important role in the processing and transmission of information. This new phenomenon of storing information on a durable medium enabled axial traditions to disseminate information more efficiently and therefore persevere for millennia. It also enabled axial traditions to emancipate themselves from the growing burden of memorization by ‘downloading’ information onto an external format thereby freeing people to engage in new mental tasks and activities. This is not only an issue of storing information externally; the peculiar interaction between humans and these new literary formats had important cognitive ramifications. According to Merlin Donald:

> external memory is a critical feature of modern human cognition… The brain may not have changed recently in its genetic makeup, but its link to an accumulating external memory network affords it cognitive powers that would not have been possible in

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\(^5\) Scholars such as Peter Machinist and Leo Oppenheim have argued that pre-axial traditions in Mesopotamia never disclosed the type of self-conscious reflection vis-à-vis other cultures. Similarly, Eisenstadt in intro to *The Origins and Diversity*, pp. 1-28, claims that in opposition to earlier near Eastern systems, axial traditions became strongly aware of their conventionality, a state of events that led them to form and develop in contradistinction to other cultural forces in their proximity and the lack of cultural identification in Mesopotamia. See Peter Machinist, “On Self Consciousness in Mesopotamia” In Eisenstadt, *The Origins and Diversity*, p. 184; 192.
isolation. This is more than a metaphor; each time the brain carries out an operation in concert with the external symbolic storage system, it becomes part of a network. Its memory structure is temporarily altered; and the locus of cognitive control changes.\textsuperscript{51}

For the purpose of this study I will define axial cultures as traditions that distinguished themselves from pre-axial cultures by the production of specialized written canonical corpuses that managed to endure as a living tradition to our present day. As such the general groups I have in mind are the Monotheistic (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the Greek (Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism), the Sinitic (Confucianism and Daoism), and the Indian (Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism).\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{1.6.2 The Greco-Christian and Indo-Buddhist Traditions}

My grouping of the Greek and Christian traditions under the same analytic rubric is a point that begs an explanation, one that is somewhat complicated by the fact that these two traditions were themselves in a state of continuous tension and ongoing conflict. Such tensions notwithstanding, I will treat Christianity as a tradition in which


\textsuperscript{52} There is a reason for why focusing on Judaism, the Greco-Christian tradition, China, and India is beneficial. As part of my effort to understand the genesis of the morphology of cultures I am particularly interested in the ongoing historical interaction between the synthetic and analytical modes of operation. Such a focus renders an analysis of a latecomer such as Islam as less informative. Said differently, the best way to understand the enduring interaction between the synthetic and analytical modalities in the West is to look at the long term interaction between Judaism on the one hand and Greek philosophy and Christianity on the other; an interaction that preceded the birth of Islam by more than a millennium in the Jewish/Greek case and close to seven centuries in the Jewish/Christian case.
monotheism, under the intense impact of Greek culture, gradually shifted from its Jewish synthetic mindset towards the adoption of an analytic mode of operation. Indeed, the Greek features of the Christian tradition became apparent early in its inception, a fact that led to the emergence of various forms of Neoplatonic, and rationalist/Aristotelian theological strands.\(^\text{53}\) The rationalization of Christianity can be seen in misgivings that many Christian theologians had towards Christianity’s deviation from its original Jewish Eastern roots. According to one of them the doctrine of the trinity “arose from Greek philosophy rather than the gospel,” another complaint was that the trinity was a “gross perversity by those who take pride in Platonizing [Christianity]…brought upon us by the Greeks who have forgotten that ‘Christ was not speaking to philosophers…but to common people.’”\(^\text{54}\) Much like Jewish thinkers throughout the ages, it seems that alienated Christians felt the inherent danger that lurked in the Greek mindset. I believe that it is in this sense that Peter Berger claims that “Christianity has been its own gravedigger,”\(^\text{55}\) a metaphor that points to the somewhat ironic fact that Christianity’s cultural DNA contained the subversive seeds of Greek rationalism and secularization. These contradictions led to an ongoing tension between faith and reason in the Greco-Christian tradition.

\(^{53}\) One obvious example is Augustine’s Neoplatonic form of Christianity can be seen in his distinctions between the pure City of God and the corrupt and matter-based City of Man, a clear theological adaptation of Plato’s division between the sublime realm of Forms and the mundane sphere of shadows and imitations.

\(^{54}\) Common to all these voices was the sense that Platonism corrupted the pure tradition of the apostles and a discomfort with the growing discrepancy between philosophical, Platonized Christianity and the original tradition of the founders. J.Z. Smith, Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990), pp. 15-16.

I will support the distinction between the Greek/Christian traditions and Judaism with many examples that will make this initially elusive dichotomy clearer. For now I will tentatively categorize Greek philosophy and Christianity as following the analytic modality and Judaism following the synthetic modality.

The relationship between India and Buddhism reveals a similar internal complexity. Although many of the characteristics of the analytic modality are apparent in the early Vedic tradition, it is only with the advent of early Indian Buddhism that we see the analytic modality in its full-fledged form. This is somewhat complicated by the fact that Buddhism was later transported into China where it adopted many synthetic modes of operation. However, in spite of its Sinicization, Chinese Buddhism preserved many of its analytic characteristics. The common idea that Buddhism has been wholly Sinicized by the time of the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), although correct in many important ways, downplays the fact that the Indian roots of Chinese Buddhism continued to exert foreign cultural pressures on native Chinese systems of thought. It is for this reason that my distinction between the synthetic and analytic modes of operation in the Chinese case will contrast the Chinese synthetic modality on one hand, and the Hindu, Indo-Buddhist, and Sino-Buddhist analytic modalities on the other hand. I will use the term *Indo-Buddhist* when referring to the early and more purely analytic forms of Hinduism and Buddhism; this will also include early non-Sinicized schools of Buddhism that operated in China such as the *Yogacara* or *Consciousness Only School* (唯識宗) and the *Madhyamaka* or *Three Treatise School* (三論宗). In contrast *Sino-Buddhist* refers to less analytic and
more Sinicized forms of Buddhism such as Tiantai (天台宗), Huayan (華嚴宗), and especially Chan Buddhism (禪宗).

1.6.3 Periodization

My analysis of the Jewish and Chinese traditions will begin by a comparison of their morphological physiognomy during what I refer to as the classical period. I chose the term ‘classical’ since the periodization I am suggesting does not quite correlate with the commonly used categories - antiquity, medieval, and modern.\(^{56}\) In Judaism by ‘classical’ I am referring to the Mishnaic/Talmudic period which can be traced back to R’ Yehuda ha’Nasi in the first century CE. Although the Talmud remains the core of Judaism to this very day, the ‘classical’ stage refers to a time in which it was the sole literary extension to the Bible, a period before the emergence of the Zohar as an additional layer of the Jewish corpus. Therefore the classical period in Judaism begins in the first century CE, and ends at the tenth century CE with the emergence of philosophy and medieval mysticism.

By ‘classical Confucianism’ I am referring to the consolidation of the Confucian tradition as an official ideology in the second century BCE, during the reign of Han Wudi (漢武帝). Under the influence of the Confucian scholar and cosmologist Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒 - 179-104 BC) the Five Classics became the textual foundation of Confucian orthodoxy, a trend that persevered until the emergence of Neo-Confucianism in the

\(^{56}\) My term ‘classical’ is closest to the common ‘medieval’ category but nevertheless different enough to merit a term that distinguishes it from both the Chinese and Western Middle Ages.
eleventh century, when the Four Books eventually replaced the Five Classics as the focus of the imperial examination system.\footnote{57}

The historical periodization I suggest is tailored to serve the specific goals of this dissertation but like any periodization it begins as an hypothesis that aims to highlight a specific interpretation of historical progression. I leave it to the readers to decide whether such a periodization is beneficial. As scholars have noted, historical categories “seldom fit neatly or exactly; historical events resist periodization into watertight compartments. But we must use such large-scale groupings and divisions unless our historical knowledge is to remain inchoate and meaningless.”\footnote{58} The periodization of the Jewish and Chinese traditions into ‘classical periods’ is intimately related to a body of literature (the emergence of the Mishnah and the Talmud in Judaism and the rise of the Five Classics in China). Again, the Talmud and Five Classics remained highly influential long after the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism, but instead of representing an exclusive body of literature they were supplemented by additional literary layers, the Zohar and Four Books respectively. These new canonical texts reflected the revolutionary changes that took place in the Chinese and Jewish traditions as a result of the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah.

\footnote{57 In both the Jewish and Chinese cases the ‘classical period’ excludes their earlier axial phases of development, namely, the Temple period that preceded Rabbinical Judaism and the era known as the Warring States Period between Confucius and the Han dynasty.}

\footnote{58 Meribeth E. Cameron “The Periodization of Chinese History” in Pacific Historical Review 15, No. 2 (Jun., 1946): 171-177.}
1.6.4 Scales of Analysis

What are the scales to which a morphological analysis can be applied? If we look at various fields in which morphology is practiced it becomes apparent that scales of analysis vary according to the researcher’s goals and interests. In linguistics, for instance, morphology can pertain to the study of specific linguistic units such as affixes, root words (morphemes) or alternatively focus on the structural characteristics of entire languages. Similarly, biological morphological approaches vary from the exploration of the structural physiognomy of whole species, all the way to more focused examinations of particular features, as in the case of molecular morphology. Scholars have pointed out that “a subjective definition that includes system limits and a scale, or scales of interest must be imposed on the real world before we can achieve the clarity and rigor that good research demands.” Units of analysis may vary according to one’s objectives, but they cannot be completely arbitrary; we still need an objective feature, or a common trait, that will provide our choice with coherence.

Part of the definition I proposed for the notion of genetic morphology is that it is oriented towards the detection of the irreducible components of relatively self-contained and self-validating systems. Due to the complexity of cultural systems it is difficult to clearly delineate the idea ‘self-contained’ units. Jonathan Z. Smith was aware of this

59 As mentioned earlier there also exists a difference in scales of analysis between Goethe’s classical botanical morphology and modern forms of plant morphology, the former being focused on the general morphological structure of plants in their entirety while the latter concentrates on specific species of plants.
61 I follow Paden’s terminology in Religious Worlds, p. 20.
problem; in his critic of E.P. Sanders’ idea of ‘holistic comparison’ in which the latter suggests that we compare an “entire religion, parts and all, with an entire religion parts and all,” Smith notes “I am baffled by what “entire religion, parts and all” could possibly mean for Sanders… I find no methodological hints on how such entities are to be discovered, let alone compared.”

I believe that identifying relatively self-contained cultural entities is indeed possible. David Sloan Wilson notes that social entities must be defined according to a common trait, a phenomenon he calls “trait-group.” Any social entity, be it a school of thought or a religion, must be defined according to that which endows it with coherence. The ‘trait’ I will use as a unifying factor for determining cultural units will be textual, or more specifically informational. According to Jan Assmann, one of the basic characteristics of axial-age traditions is their capacity to unite people into groups in which affiliation is to some extent related to a body of foundational written texts that members engage with through commentary and communally identify as authoritative. In his theory of cultural memory Assmann contends that memory and identity are derived from the documentation of cultural information that is not oral.”

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65 According to Assmann “The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable text, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize
Neusner suggests that in order “to describe a system, we start with the principle documents…. Our task then is to uncover the exegetical processes, the dynamics of the system, through which those documents serve to shape a conception, and to make sense of reality.”\textsuperscript{66} Hajime Nakamura is in agreement with the textual framing of traditions when he suggests that comparativists must search for the literature that is “particularly esteemed by the people in question.”\textsuperscript{67} Without paying too much attention to this fact scholars have nevertheless been well aware of the importance of canon in the definition of a tradition as a distinct entity.

When I highlight a tradition’s textual orientation as that which endows a group with coherence, I am not claiming that other features such as ritual, politics, finance, art, and cuisine, are not relevant. But I do believe that such features, especially in traditional societies, are strongly informed by the informational locus that is found in their sacred canons. The information contained in these texts represents an unalterable informational source that biases the entire system. The irrefutability of canon has a unique resilience

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and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.” see Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” \textit{New German Critique} 65, (1995): 132.\textsuperscript{66} J.Z. Smith, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 34. Neusner replaces Sanders’ “Holistic Comparison” with the idea of “Systematic Comparison.”\textsuperscript{67} Hajime Nakamura. \textit{Ways of Thinking}, p. 10 [italics in original]. According to Nakamura literature that is not pervasively recognized as authoritative and central “may be interesting from the point of view of the modern reader, [but] will be of little significance as sources for determining the ways of thinking common to the entire people.”
and ability to persevere over time, it also displays the necessary flexibility to adapt and adjust to new circumstances through commentary.\footnote{This includes what Roy Rappaport termed \textit{Ultimate Sacred Postulates}. See his \textit{Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity} (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).}

As an example, consider classical Judaism (pre-Kabbalistic Judaism). At the center we have the sacred canon, namely the \textit{Torah} which is revealed, eternal, and unalterable; then the Tanakh which is not revealed but nevertheless binding; yet later we see the development of the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrashic literature which are interpretations of more authoritative texts and themselves binding to different degrees but nevertheless dynamic and open to further interpretation. These texts consist of a central locus of information that deems Judaism a self-contained system in which information radiates from the center and biases and informs motivations, activities and institutions. The fact that all Jews perceive these texts as authoritative endows Judaism with an internal order that is distinct from its outer environment; maintaining such an order without this constant informational locus would be unlikely, especially for a traditions that is composed of geographically distant communities.

In China, this informational nexus was the Classics and their commentaries. Although China had other important texts, it was the Confucian Classics that functioned as the core of the imperial system where power was concentrated and decision-making took place. It was these selected texts that stood at the center of China’s pedagogical system and state ideology. Theodore de Bary claims that “for our purpose it is enough to identify as Confucianists those who accept the authority of the Confucian classics as
providing the most reliable guide to the conduct of life and government.” Like the canon of other traditions the Classics also offer a link with the ancient past, both to real historical figure as well as mythical figures, thereby functioning as a foundation for understanding who we are, where we came from, and where we should go.

But what happens when we are dealing with systems within systems? How can we undertake a joint analysis of Judaism as a whole with respect to the school of Kabbalah? Or better yet, can the school of Kabbalah be subject to morphological analysis on its own right? I will attempt to show that an analysis of sub-traditions such as Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah is possible under the same informational logic. Scales of analysis are related to each other in a nested hierarchy in which smaller units (sub-systems) are included within larger cultural units and are differentiated by distinct loci of information. Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism are excellent examples of sub-systems that operated according to an additional informational locus that unified their members into a distinct community. Beyond the Torah, Tanakh, and Talmud, medieval Jewish mystics began to construct a new textual orientation that functioned as an extension to the primary textual layers of their tradition. Among many contending schools, theurgic Kabbalah managed to construct a theology that was institutionalized in the Jewish canon. The Zohar, its sefirotic structure, the sacred symbolism that accommodated its new theological vision, and the type of activities it informed represented a new informational bias that deemed mystics distinct from other Jews. By virtue of this new textual orientation and the type of biases and constraints it imposed on members, a new sub-

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system emerged that was both part of, and distinguished from its greater Jewish environment. Networks of symbols, rituals, and general commitments distinguished Kabbalists from other groups such as philosophers, other mystical schools, and schools that remained focused on Talmudic studies.

Neo-Confucians were behind a similar textual reorientation in the form of the Four Books. Peter Bol notes that they recognized that “they differed from traditional Confucianism… there were people who could be called Confucians but did not accept Neo-Confucian claims.”70 Neo-Confucians saw themselves as a unique fellowship of people with their own mannerism, dressing code, institutions, and distinct ways of performing Confucian rituals. Neo-Confucians highlighted a new set of information that was not as dominant in the Five Classics that preceded the Four Books. This new information was studied in their academies and used to indoctrinate generations of students. In both the Chinese and Jewish cases new texts and commentaries facilitated the construction of a very distinct kind of memory that had a profound impact on the type of identity members constructed. My analysis will continuously look at the interaction and relationship between such sub-traditions and their greater native cultures, namely, between Kabbalah and the mainstream classical Rabbinic tradition and Neo-Confucianism and pre-Song classical Confucianism.

Morphology, as applied in this study, will therefore be oriented towards both the scale of ‘entire’ traditions as well as to the smaller scale of sub-traditions that are nested

70 Peter Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History (Harvard East Asian Monographs. Reprint ed. Harvard University Asia Center, 2010), p. 83.
within their greater cultural systems. Although borders between social systems can be fuzzy and boundaries certainly overlap, networks of activities based on information can help us parse out different units within greater wholes. I will therefore follow information theory where it is argued that the distinctiveness of a system (unit of analysis) is an outcome of its dense internal connectivity in contrast to its sparse connectivity to its surroundings. I will argue that this connectivity is an outcome of a textual foundation that informs all other activities and interactions by virtue of being sacred and relatively unalterable.

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71 This discussion will follow some of the ideas introduced in the above-mentioned A Magic Still Dwells, where it is argued that different scales of comparison facilitate different comparative goals.
72 I will attempt to show that although sub-traditions tend to conform to the general modality of their greater traditions, they can nevertheless disclose slightly different biases and inclinations. Said differently, Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah may represent a peculiar and distinct variation of the synthetic modality to which they belonged. The various morphological features that constitute Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah, although clearly within the synthetic range, disclose a certain bias towards the analytic modes of operation. This was an outcome of the heavy borrowing of Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists from Buddhism and rational philosophy respectively. I will argue that sub-traditions, although possibly distinct, remain within the general morphological range of their greater native tradition. Too drastic a shift towards an opposing mode of operation will lead to allegations of heresy, or simply a gradual decline as a result of social disapproval. One pertinent example is the sharp decline of analytic modes of operation in the form Jewish philosophy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. What seemed to conservative rabbis as the exaggerated departure of philosophers from native Jewish sensibilities led to ongoing attacks against philosophy and its eventual decline. Unsurprisingly, this happened precisely at a time that Kabbalah rose to prominence and provided a viable and efficient ideological substitute to Greek rationalism.
73 Applying systems theory to pre-modern traditions is beneficial since as opposed to the modern age, in which we witness a large number of informational loci (government, supreme court, media, free-market economy, internet etc.), traditional societies disclosed a less complex architecture. Their authoritarian character did not allow for the establishment of alternative sources of information to thrive. Such centralization of power and strict control of information means that we can more clearly understand how these societies operated in term of processing and disseminating information.
1.6.5 Adaptive Systems & Symbiosis

As described above, the morphology of the synthetic and analytic modalities is constituted of three basic levels: the cognitive, the sociological, and the cultural. As opposed to reductionist approaches that tend to prioritize one level over the other, I will argue that the cognitive, social, and cultural spheres interact in a symbiotic fashion such that each level has a profound impact on the other two levels. Here we are dealing with a tripartite feedback relationship in which cognitive and social realities are just as much an outcome of culture as the other way around. In the comparative chapters that follow I will attempt to demonstrate how the three morphological levels and the morphological features that constitute them interact symbiotically such that they support each other in a way that further consolidates their coexistence and the perpetuation of the system as a whole. I will also stress the incompatibility of morphological features that belong to different modalities. Such an analysis can help us understand why classical cultures displayed a proclivity to ‘coalesce’ into coherent matrices that belong to one of the two morphological modes but seldom to a combination of the two. Therefore, the robustness of the synthetic and analytic worldviews is a result a peculiar commensurability among their constituting features. The unique organization of a systems means that it will suppress certain possibilities and encourage others. In other words, the structural qualities

74 The position taken by the school of Methodological Individualism is that society and culture are an outcome of individual agency. The opposing Durkheimian view sees society as the bedrock on which individuals develop. Others have argued that there is an interaction between these levels especially between the individual and the social sphere. See Peter Berger Sacred Canopy (1967), and Margaret Archer’s Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Archer sees the impact of social realities and culture on individuals as the initial stage in a three phase dialectical process of interactions between society and individual.
of the synthetic and analytic worldviews impose certain constraints that bias the system towards a peculiar dynamic that leads to a coherent cultural temperament. With these topics in mind, I will try to explore the unique symbiotic dynamic of cultural systems and the nature of their interaction with their environments.75

Genetic-morphology attempts to challenge the a-historical approach of classical morphology. It deals with the interaction of dynamic, albeit stable cultural formations, as they evolve and change considerably in time. Such an approach means that the traditional tension between static cross-cultural patterns and historical reality is to a great extent diminished. New approaches in comparative religion have been particularly concerned with the historical and phenomenological tension. In Religion of the Gods, Kimberley Patton notes:

we do not have to make the artificial and, in my opinion, bitter choice between a historical or a phenomenological approach to the study of a religious question. For in making such a choice, we are robbed… religious evidence is at the same time culturally

75 Scholars from different fields have not been oblivious to the coherence and self-validating character of traditions. After discussing the great flexibility of ancient Greek religion in contradistinction to the more dogmatic and rigid systems of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel, Jean-Pierre Vernant reminds us that novelty, even in Greece, was strongly constrained by a broad cluster of cultural inclinations: “Even in the variations to which it lent itself, a myth obeyed the severe constraints of the community. During the Hellenistic period, when an author, such as Callimachus, wrote a new version of a legendary theme, he was not free to modify the elements or to recompose the scenario as he pleased. He belonged to a tradition; whether he conformed to it exactly or deviated on a certain point, he was restrained and supported by it and had to refer to it, at least implicitly, if he wanted the public to hear his tale….even when a narrator seemed to have completely invented a tale, he was actually working according to the rules of a “legendary imagination” that had its own functioning, internal necessities, and coherence.” Jean Pierre Vernant “Greek Religions” in Seltzer, Robert M. Religions of Antiquity (New York London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 167.
and historically specific as well as part of a larger picture in which common structures emerge, and can be talked about interpretively.\(^{76}\)

In the case of genetic-morphology, cross-cultural structures and history are not in tension; on the contrary, a broad historical overview of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism can provide us with insight into the peculiar dynamic of cultural patterns that otherwise seem static. Genetic-morphology enables us to appreciate both similarities in the structural foundations of traditions as well as how historical circumstances impinge upon such modalities, leading to their gradual adaptation to new environmental conditions.\(^{77}\)

### 1.6.6 Defense Theologies and Adaptation

In order to explain the adaptive nature of cultural systems I will follow Gregory Bateson and Roy Rappaport’s informational definition, according to which “adaptive systems are organized in ways that tend to preserve the truth value of certain propositions about themselves in the face of perturbations continually threatening to falsify them.”\(^{78}\) In the case of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism ‘perturbations’ refer to the way classical Judaism and classical Confucianism were destabilized by the introduction and growing influence of foreign analytic traditions. I believe that the emergence of medieval Jewish

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\(^{77}\) Scholarship on Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism has been dominated by interpretations of philosophical content while historical and sociological aspects have been relatively marginalized. Peter Bol tried to remedy this by a more balanced approach: ”In looking at Neo-Confucians in their times we must be historical, and in understanding their ideas we need to be philosophical. I hope that doing so will speak to the study of both philosophy and history in China’s past.” Bol *Neo-Confucianism in History*, p. 2.

\(^{78}\) Rappaport, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
mysticism and Neo-Confucianism represent a typical example of how adaptive systems operate in order to persevere and continually validate and reinforce their ‘truth value.’ In the ‘truth value’ of the synthetic and analytic modes of operation refers to the preservation of each modality’s foundational morphology. The adaptive flexibility that characterizes cultural systems is of much interest to this work; I will contend that Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism should be understood as ‘defense theologies’ that emerged as an adaptive reaction to acute environmental pressures. These movements enabled the Jewish and Chinese traditions to safeguard many of their native features, which were suffering a decline as a result of the growing popularity of Greek philosophy and Buddhism respectively.

In my analysis of the interaction between the synthetic and analytic modalities in China and medieval Europe I will use of terminology used to describe scientific revolutions by Thomas Kuhn. Using Kuhn’s theory, classical Judaism and classical Confucianism represent “normal religion” (see Kuhn’s normal science) which operates according to an uncontested paradigm, namely, what I refer to as the Talmudic and Five Classic paradigms. Kuhn’s “period of crisis” represents the destabilization of the Jewish and Chinese traditions by foreign analytic systems. This crisis led to the proliferation of contending schools that sought solutions to the emerging cultural crisis they confronted. Social Realists offer the terms *homeostasis* and *morphogenesis*, the former refers to

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79 In Axial cultures this flexibility is to a great extent a result of an additional symbolic level that is absent in biological systems that are confined to the re-combination and transmission of genetic information – information that is inevitably anchored in physicality. The symbolic or linguistic flexibility of traditions is related to their peculiar textual orientation and the unique adaptive nature of commentarial formats.
complex systems that tend to preserve or maintain their given form or organization, while morphogenesis refers to “those processes which tend to elaborate or change a system’s given form, state of structure.”\textsuperscript{80} These terms will be helpful in describing Judaism and Confucianism during their classical periods (homeostasis) and later during the period they were challenged by the Greek and Buddhist analytic paradigms between the tenth and thirteenth centuries (morphogenesis). Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism will be understood as reactions that successfully enabled the Jewish and Chinese traditions to restructure themselves during periods of morphogenesis, and thereby return to a stable period of homeostasis.

\textit{1.6.7 Comparative Generalizations}

The broad comparative nature of this project inevitably entails the use of generalizations – a practice that has been accused for trivializing the complexity of cultures. Indeed, generalizations, when applied too leniently, can lead to a simplification of religious traditions, and in extreme cases, to outright distortion. Since generalizations will play a central role in this work I will refrain from using controversial data to support my argument. Instead, I will rely on views that are shared by an overwhelming majority of specialists in the various topics in question.

The very nature of generalizing is such that it entails exceptions to the rule, namely, examples and situations in which a generalization collapses or fails to reflect the reality on the ground. Generalizations are nevertheless both important and real; they are a

\textsuperscript{80} Archer, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 157-166.
necessary tool for understanding broad cultural trends, thereby giving us a better idea of the general context that informs the specificities of everyday life. As an example, when I contend that the Jewish and Chinese cultures are particularistic it doesn’t deny the fact that both traditions disclose various forms of universalism (e.g. the Jewish prophets and the Mohist school in China). Nevertheless, my argument that the Jewish and Confucian traditions failed to develop the type of universalism characteristic of Christianity and Buddhism is correct and can be supported by a wealth of data from various fields of inquiry.

When generalizations are used responsibly they expose us to the most dominant psychological, social and cultural trends of a tradition. The problem is that such dominant tendencies are forever accompanied by sub-currents that oppose them. This is why the mainstream analytic tradition is the West, represented by science and the legacy of the enlightenment, was frequently opposed by romanticists who advocated a more synthetic and emotive approach towards the acquisition of knowledge. Nevertheless, these romantic currents were constantly marginalized by the rationalistic thrust of Western civilization; the same mode of thought that informed the emergence of democracy, capitalism, and science. Similarly, China has produced several schools with stark analytic inclinations, but these were clearly overshadowed by the mainstream that conformed to a synthetic mode of operation.\footnote{As Graham argues, forms of extreme rationalism never survived in China. \textit{Disputers}, pp. 315-316.} Attaching equal significance to a traditions central ethos and its various sub-currents is highly misleading and comes to show just how important
generalizations are in giving us an inkling of the dominant forces responsible for the construction of a culture’s institutions, rules, and prevalent modes of operation.

There is yet another important reason to go beyond mere particulars towards a more comprehensive appreciation of general patterns. The postmodern backlash against grand narratives has blinded us to the internal consistency and relatively self-enclosed nature of religious systems. This dissertation treats religions from a systems perspective that both acknowledges the complex texture of traditions but is ultimately interested in highlighting the overarching and relatively persistent patterns that emerge from this complexity. This is no longer an impressionistic analysis of religious traditions nor is it a form of perennialism, but rather an approach that analyzes cultural units according methodologies that have proved fruitful in dealing with complex and non-linear systems. In other words, genetic-morphology can be seen as one specific approach to how systems theory can be applied to religious traditions.

In order to rise above the complexity of cultural systems we must pay attention to general patterns. Therefore generalizations, when informed by historical data, can help us rise above specificities and grasp a general dynamic that cannot be discerned “on the ground” or at any particular moment.
1.6.8 Methodological Eclecticism

In supporting my argument I will resort to scholarship from a diverse range of academic fields. I follow what Moshe Idel terms methodological eclecticism in which different modes of analysis are employed according to their instrumentality in highlighting different sets of data. As part of this eclectic perspective, one of the main methodological suggestions of this work is our need to be informed by a more cross-disciplinary approach, especially one that integrates the sciences into the study or religion. While scholars of religion have been reluctant to engage in biological, pan-human, and cultural generalizations, scientists from diverse fields such as cognition, evolutionary biology, neurology, and cross-cultural psychology have been eagerly pursuing such directions with considerable success. Their work is presenting the humanities with a growing body of invaluable data for comparative analysis; information that is crucial for the advancement of new theories of religion.

82 Moshe Idel, Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism Pillars, Lines, Ladders (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2005), pp. 1-12. Although Idel’s classification treats comparativism as one of nine methodological alternatives, it doesn’t seem to deny the possibility of using non-comparative methods in the service of comparativism. Idel’s nine methodological alternatives: the theological, historical, psychological, textual-literary, comparative, ritualistic-technical, phenomenological, and cognitive. To these he adds perspectivism.

83 Paden, “Universals Revisited,” p. 289. In response to Michael Carrithers’ warning against “severing ourselves as a species from the larger book of natural history,” Paden claims that: “In trying to think of religion and culture independently of nature and natural behaviors, I am afraid we have in fact so severed ourselves [from the sciences.] And in advocating that we close the gap it is not just my point that somehow behavioral science has now to inform religious studies but also, since religion is itself a part of nature’s performance, the other way around as well.”

Inter-disciplinary cross-pollination is far from being one-sided, just as the sciences are enriching the field of religion, experts in different domains of the humanities, culture, and religion can be extremely helpful in directing scientific research in stimulating directions or alternatively supporting or falsifying conclusion with concrete historical data. In fact, as Richard Nisbett shows, it was scholars from the humanities that have compelled scientists from the field of cognition to re-evaluate their well-ingrained conviction that human cognition discloses a universal uniformity. Recent scientific data has confirmed conclusion that have long been dominant in the humanities: different cultures disclose substantially different ways of perceiving and interpreting reality. The new complementarity that is emerging between the social and natural sciences should be used to our advantage in an attempt to provide a more broad and multi-layered picture of religious and cultural realities.

1.6.9 Structure of Dissertation

This study will be divided into five chapters; the current chapter dealt with methodology. The second chapter will focus on the comparative study of the two modalities during the classical period before the emergence of the schools of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism. The second chapter will establish that central distinctions between the synthetic and analytic modes of operation during a period of stability or homeostasis. The third and fourth chapters will explore the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism respectively. These chapters will examine the ways in which Kabbalists and Neo-Confucians grappled with, and eventually overcame, the growing pressures of analytic cultures – these are periods in which the Jewish and Chinese traditions went through a phase of morphogenesis. Finally, the fifth chapter will be dedicated to a re-examination of some methodological topics and concluding remarks.

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85 By Greek philosophy I am mainly referring to Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, or what some have termed Neoplatonized Aristotelianism, which reached Judaism and Christianity via Muslim thinkers, especially Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina).
CHAPTER 2
TRADITIONS IN HOMEOSTASIS
2. JUDAISM AND CONFUCIANISM IN THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that behind the different manifestations of the Jewish and Chinese traditions there exist important structural similarities. The morphological approach seeks to demonstrate that this common synthetic morphology sets the classical rabbinical and Confucian traditions apart from, and in opposition to, the analytical systems by which they were confronted in their respective historical environments. The following chapter will focus on what I refer to as a stage of homeostasis; a period before Judaism and Confucianism came into tensions with the Greek and Buddhist paradigms. In Kuhnian terms, this refers to ‘normal’ Judaism and Confucianism as they operated in relative comfort, unperturbed by destabilizing external pressures.66 This will be followed by chapters 3 and 4, which will explore Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism respectively. The emergence of these schools represent periods of crisis, or morphogenesis, in which imported analytic ideologies began to infiltrate the classical rabbinic and Confucian worldviews leading to an inevitable process of adaptation and structural reorganization.

Before continuing it is worth reiterating a point I made in the methodology chapter regarding the importance of literary formats. In order to understand the classical Chinese and Jewish traditions prior to the radical changes they underwent between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, we need to look at their most representative documents, those that

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66 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). According to Kuhn anomalies are discrepancies in a paradigm that are usually brushed aside as unimportant, or alternatively, problems to be solved in the future. A period of crisis begins when a proliferation of anomalies begins to undermine the authority of an existing paradigm and thereby compels the scientific community to embark on new research programs and explore alternatives directions.
Hajime Nakamura refers to as “particularly esteemed by the people in question.” As I argued earlier, the treatment of classical Judaism and classical Confucianism as distinct periods or phases in Jewish and Chinese history is first and foremost a textual designation. In Judaism, the Talmud and Midrash became the defining statements of the post-temple period. A testimony of their centrality is reflected by the fact that those who did not acknowledge the Talmud’s authority, such as the Karaites, were harshly attacked and frequently labeled as heretics. Classical Judaism was therefore a Talmudic and Midrashic-based tradition, it was in these corpuses that one could find the defining characteristics of how a Jew behaved and related to the world prior to the eruption of philosophy Kabbalah.

In the Chinese case the Five Classics represented the quintessence of the Confucian tradition and the backbone of its ideological, bureaucratic, and pedagogical vision prior to the emergence of Neo-Confucianism. In exploring the classical Chinese and Jewish traditions I will base much of my analysis on the information that transpires through the pages of these highly esteemed canons, but I will also be concerned with their structure. Understanding how Rabbis and Confucians said things is just as important as understanding what they said. Their unique literary formats, their peculiar modes of

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87 Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking*, p. 10 [italics in original].
88 Originally six classics: the Yijing 易經, the Classic of History 書經, the Classic of Poetry 詩經, the Spring and Autumn Annals 春秋, and the Classic of Ritual 禮記. The Yuejing 樂經 or the Classic of Music was lost. What has come to be known as the 'Thirteen Classics’ consisted of the Five Classics with the two parts of the Classic of Ritual the Zhouli 周禮 and the Liyi 禦禮, the three commentaries to the Spring and Autumn Annals, the Zuo Zhuan 左傳, the Gongyang Zhuan 公羊傳, and the Guliang Zhuan 經梁傳, the Analects 論語, the Mencius 孟子, the Classic of Filial Piety 孝經 and the Er Ya 烂雅 China’s traditional dictionary.
discourse, and the hermeneutical strategies they devised must be a central consideration in determining how these traditions perceived the world.

2.1 THE COGNITIVE LEVEL

In comparing the classical Confucian and Rabbinic periods I will follow the basic morphological categories introduced in the previous methodological chapter, beginning with the cognitive level. As elaborated earlier, the cognitive level is composed of the following three morphological dichotomies, which set the analytic and synthetic modalities apart:

a) Analytic Atomization vs. Synthetic Integration

b) De-contextualization vs. Contextualization

c) Systematicity vs. Open-Endedness

First let me reiterate the fundamental differences between the synthetic and analytic mindsets in terms of cognition. Analytical thought encourages the type of economy and clarity that foreshadow the advent of rational philosophy and science. It tends to focus on well-defined and irreducible substances that are governed by a set of formal relations. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the efficiency of the analytic stance can be found in its unrivaled capacity to brush aside fluctuating elements and focus on the de-contextualized and immutable foundations of reality. The process of arranging atomic entities according to different formal matrices results in a peculiar form of rational coherence or systematicity, so adequately implied by the Greek notion of cosmos. Analytic thought therefore consists of three general layers beginning with the cognitive
disposition towards analysis and deconstruction, it then uses formal or causal relations to bond discrete components together, and finally it results in a self-enclosed system or conclusion that provides the lower levels with an overall context for operation. The whole is frequently arrived at through postulation, in which a higher order hypothesis is set forth as a general organizing framework for the interpretation of specific elements. The general assumption is that the logical reconstruction of constituent elements will result in proving the veracity and accuracy of the initial hypothesis.89

As opposed to the atomizing tendencies of analytic thought, the act of synthesis is concerned with the integration of data. Synthetic thought refrains from treating constituent components as clearly distinct substances. Due to the ambiguity of boundaries between ideas, substances, and terms, synthetic systems can afford a fairly high level of coexistence among contradictory features. This is reflected by their unique ability to accommodate incongruities and unexpected incidents without severely destabilizing the system. The high capacity to absorb data entails a less frequent reevaluation of the system in light of new circumstances, which might also entail a lesser ability to promote change. Synthetic paradigms usually take the form of official ideologies rather than an indisputable truth that is arrived at logically. Jerome Bruner refers to this distinction as one between the search for Truth (analytic) and the attainment of verisimilitude

89 Richard Nisbett, The Geography of Thought, p. 10. In Anticipating China Ames and Hall note that postulational thought is such that “rules at various levels of abstraction would be generated as hypotheses,” pp. 113; 118. In his Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, F.S.C Northrop introduced his influential distinction between “concepts by postulation” and “concepts by intuition,” pertaining to Western and Eastern thought respectively. See “The Possible Concepts by Intuition and Concepts by Postulation as a Basic Terminology for Comparative Philosophy” in Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities (New York: World Publishing Co, 1947).
(synthetic).\textsuperscript{90} Since synthetic systems are not predominantly based on formal logic, and especially since they refuse to eliminate context from their interpretive procedures, they frequently present reality through a certain narrative. As opposed to proving a truth, the synthetic mind tries to convince us of the merits of living according to a certain worldview.\textsuperscript{91} Instead of formal relations and logical connection, synthetic systems disclose a greater stress on the use of association, analogy and imagination as devices for creating connections between ideas and concepts.\textsuperscript{92}

As I will argue throughout this study, it is not that synthetic morphologies do not exhibit analytic tendencies and vice versa. But it is nevertheless relevant that different cultures tend to prioritize one mode of interpretation over the other. In the case of the classical Chinese and Jewish traditions, the synthetic mindset dominated mainstream discourse. In both traditions a highly developed mode of analytic thought never emerged to the same extent that it has in the ancient Greek and Buddhist worldviews.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{90} Jerome Bruner, \textit{Actual Minds}, pp. 11-12.
\textsuperscript{91} The notion of narrative thought also brings to mind Schelling’s idea of “narrative philosophies,” a notion that was later adopted by Gershom Scholem. See Moshe Idel “Rabinism versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem’s Phenomenology of Judaism,” \textit{Modern Judaism} 11, no. 3 (Oct., 1991): 292.
\textsuperscript{92} While synthetic thought can be generally contrasted with analytic thought, it is not as simple to find correlates for the analytical reliance on formal relations. This elusiveness reflects the irony of trying to analytically capture a system that is inherently non-analytic.
\textsuperscript{93} Cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald suggests that human culture evolved in four stages: the episodic, mimetic, mythic, and theoretic. The two latter phases are directly relevant to my distinction between the analytic and synthetic modes of operation. In his search for the overarching characteristics of axial traditions, Robert Bellah uses Donald’s four-stage theory as an explanatory device for understanding the axial breakthrough, arguing that axial traditions disclose a shift towards theoretical thinking. According to Bellah, the emergence of theoretic thought, or what Yehuda Elkana termed “second order thinking,” represented a pan-axial characteristic. It is here the Eric Voegelin’s idea of “Mytho-speculation” is helpful for a more nuanced distinction between the analytic and synthetic modalities. According to Voegelin, the synthetic worldviews that were systemized during the axial age developed a peculiar form of
2.1.1 Analytic Atomization vs. Synthetic Integration

The distinction between atomization and integration is one of the hallmarks of analytic and synthetic thinking. Aristotle's ten categories represent a quintessential example of an analytic classificatory system, one that forces the deconstruction of reality into fundamental attributes and organizational rubrics. The Indian tradition of analytic philosophy reflects a similar stress on the atomistic and logical stratification of knowledge; in both cases complex systems of classification sought to pinpoint the fundamental features of existence, displaying a tendency towards the fragmentation, deconstruction, and reification of ontological and epistemological qualities. The general cognitive trajectory is to depart from the ‘fundamental’ towards growing recursive patterns; in epistemology this is reflected in a progression from the constituting components of the individual psyche, such as the Buddhist skandhas, towards a complete theory of knowledge. In metaphysics, we see a move from foundational ontological substances towards a coherent and self-enclosed cosmological perspective, frequently referred to as substance metaphysics.

Theoretical speculation that was entertained within a mythic narrative, namely, “mytho-speculation.” In contrast, Greek analytic thought of the same period disclosed a more radical departure from the mythological worldview towards philosophical conceptualization; “reflection for its own sake” or “thinking about thinking.” Bellah builds on this insight and argues that in the axial age we witness a “radicalization of mytho-speculation, but not an abandonment of it.” It would therefore be a mistake to assume that synthetic traditions remained in what Donald refers to as the pre-theoretical, mythic stage of cultural evolution. Bellah stresses the rule that in evolution “nothing is ever lost,” namely, that “analytic or theoretic thinking does not displace, but is added to, narrative thinking [synthetic thought].” Robert Bellah, “What is Axial About the Axial Age?” Archives Européennes de Sociologie 46, no. 1 (2005): 79-81; Elkana “The Emergence of Second-Order Thinking in Classical Greece” in Eisenstadt ed., The Origins and Diversity of the Axial Age; Eric Voegelin, Order and History, Vol. iv (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956).

94 Also known as the five aggregates, the skandas are the most fundamental building blocks of human consciousness.
John Berthrong notes that “in terms of their religious significance, no other cultural region places more emphasis on the worth of categorial reflection than the traditions deriving from the South Asian matrix.” Berthrong points out the similar argumentative approaches of Hindus and early Buddhists, characterized by complex “schemes of enumeration and classification.” The analytical proclivity towards atomization that Hindus and early Buddhists shared also led them to construct self-enclosed systems: “What drives the Abhidharma search for an analysis…. is the desire to show how all the various elements relate to each other….as with many other forms of Indian Buddhist thought, the entire complicated dharmaic world is connected by various causal relations….” Berthrong mentions all the three levels I stressed above: analytical atomization, causality (formal relations), and systematicity, all of which entered China in the first centuries of the common era through the introduction of the Buddhist tradition and its Indo-European traits. In their discussion of Western and Chinese thought, Hall and Ames claim that:

the importance of the development of formal concepts in the Western tradition, born with the Socratic quest for “definitions,” illustrates the significance of knowledge as a function of enclosure. To “de-fine” is to set finite boundaries. On the other hand, the Chinese depend, for the most part, upon exemplary models or instances rather than strict definitions to evoke understandings. Knowledge under these conditions has an element of

95 Robert C. Neville, *Ultimate Realities*, p. 245. Nakamura draws a strong distinction between the Japanese and Chinese traditions on one hand and Indian culture on the other. In the sphere of art he shows that Indian painting and sculpture are not grasped intuitively as in East Asia. One needs to reconstruct the different components logically in order to understand the whole as opposed to understanding it in one intuitive glance. Similarly, Michael Sullivan makes an interesting distinction between Indian and Chinese art; The Chinese is carefree and fluid whereas the Indian is inhibited by formal and intellectual aspects. See “Religion and Art in China” in Christian Jochim *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1986), pp. 96-7.
rich, unbounded vagueness which contrasts rather starkly with the Western “Quest for certainty.”

Similarly, Robert Eno notes that Confucianism is “a nonanalytic philosophy. Ruists [Confucians] did not pictures the world as an infinite collection of intrinsically atomic particular entities structured by a limited set of deterministic relational laws…” In contrast, Eno claims that the Chinese worldview focuses on relational norms rather than logical ones.

While most scholars focus on the distinctions between Western and Chinese thought, it is important for me to highlight that the Western and Indian traditions share the same tendencies towards the analytic atomization of data. Hajime Nakamura claims that

Westerners are said to be “postulational” or logical, and they try to grasp things systematically and by orderly planning. Indeed the ways of thinking of the Chinese and the Japanese may be characterized as “intuitive”. But in the case of the Indians this label is hard to apply… the intricate arguments of the Abhidharma literature are logical and can never be called intuitive…[therefore] We cannot say that only Westerners have a tendency to be analytical.

Nakamura’s description is helpful in that it both distinguishes between China and India, so often coupled together as “Eastern,” while it simultaneously stresses the common analytic temperament shared by India and the West. I believe we tend to ignore the analytic nature of Buddhism for two main reasons. The first reason is that Buddhism

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96 Hall and Ames, Anticipating China, p. xxii.
97 Robert Eno, Creation of Heaven, p. 8.
belongs to the ‘exotic East’ which we frequently contrast with the rational West, while the second reason is that Indian and Buddhist thought never led to the development of natural science which we usually see as the encapsulation of analytic thought. It is important to bear in mind that the fact that Westerners directed their analytic gaze towards the natural world rather than towards the structure of human consciousness as Buddhists have, doesn’t undermine the fact that both traditions used similar analytic strategies to interpret reality. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that “the Abhidharma method presents the Buddha's teachings in technical terms that are carefully defined to ensure analytical exactitude… It does so by analyzing conscious experience—and in this sense one's “world”—into its constituent mental and physical events.”

Indeed, Indian thought is analytical par excellence; its tendency towards the atomization of information represents one of its most salient characteristics.

The Jewish case can be similarly contrasted with Greek analytic thought. Although classical Judaism is certainly concerned with sacred/profane dichotomies, nowhere in the tradition do we see the type of analytic atomization of reality into distinct categories. The Jewish corpus disclose a synthetic fluidity with very little interest in creating rigid and distinct categories. Jacob Neusner claims that the rabbis are attracted

100 The Book of Creation (Sefer Yetzirah – ספרא יצרה), a work that will be explored separately in the third chapter, is one rare example of a Jewish work of classification, but as many scholars have pointed out it is unclear when this document was authored and just how influential it was prior to the rise of Jewish philosophy and medieval mysticism. One point is well agreed upon, Yetzirah’s rise to prominence came at a time when the Jewish tradition sought to refine its cosmological categories in reaction to Greek philosophical formats. Moreover, scholars agree that Yetzirah was strongly influenced by Greek systems of thought, especially Pythagoreanism.
by ambiguity “a species” that lies in between categories. Structurally, tractates, chapters, and passages are only loosely classified, frequently overlapping and interpenetrating each other. Theodore Steinberg strikes at the heart of the Hebraic/Greek tension when he claims that:

[the] Talmud is not organized according to the kind of logic to which Western readers are accustomed. Thus the first tractate in the Talmud is called Berakhot, Blessings. Had Aristotle written a book with that title, we would expect it to focus on blessings and to contain everything that Aristotle knew about the subject. Not so with the Talmud. Berakhot contains much material that has nothing to do with blessings, material that is arrived at by associative logic rather than deductive or inductive logic.

This passage highlights both the absence of rigid categories as well as the associative way in which ideas are related to each other, a subject I will turn to shortly. The synthetic insistence on the holistic fluidity of information brings to mind the rabbinical metaphor of the “sea of the Talmud.” In spite of the common distinction between Halakah (Law) and Aggadah (non-legalistic and homiletical discussions) the two are constantly intertwined, operating as general domains of discourse rather than distinct and rigid categories. Such lack of logical clarity evokes the ‘sea’ metaphor where pinpointing the end of one wave and the beginning of the next, or where the sea shifts from shallow to deep waters is impossible.

101 Jacob Neusner claims that at the “bottom of this investigation lays a deeper metaphysical inquiry into the nature of entities as they relate to each other. Fusion and union, connection, division, and disintegration.” As an example, “Talmudist will frequently “manufacture” a conflict between two laws that don’t display an inconsistency by pointing to a possible conflict between their secondary implications.” in Take Judaism for Example, pp. 18-19.
It is worth mentioning that the lack of analytic atomization in the Jewish and Chinese traditions is not confined to the domain of religious and philosophical discourse. As we shall see soon, the refusal of synthetic traditions to fragment the family and society into secluded and autonomous members is yet another indication of the non-analytic, holistic disposition that Rabbis and Confucians shared.

2.1.2 Decontextualization vs. Contextualization

The next difference between the analytic and synthetic modes of interpretation is related to methods of integrating data. Christopher I. Beckwith contends that strategies of argumentation that were originally devised by central Asian Buddhists were the origin of the European scholastic method, so well-known for its analytic and logical procedures of argumentation. Beckwith calls the Buddhist argumentative style the recursive argument, contending that its analytical procedures were content-free and therefore easily applied to theology, natural philosophy, and many other fields of knowledge. Beckwith suggests that objective formal qualities were foundational to both the Buddhist and the medieval European models of argumentation in which the central characteristic is a recursive repetition, or a ‘nesting’ of formal patterns. He argues that “the most characteristic features of the recursive method are its recursive and internal lists of arguments representing views, both real or hypothetical, on a problem…Formal recursion is the

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distinctive, crucial aspect of the method.”\textsuperscript{104} The recursive argument formalizes information by explicitly numbering arguments, sub-arguments, and sub-sub-arguments. The complexity was such that even sub-sub-arguments were themselves likely to contain the initial argument writ small.\textsuperscript{105} This highly analytic procedure was “at heart a way of examining a problem systematically, logically, and in great detail.”\textsuperscript{106}

Abhidharma analytic thought helped shape early schools of Chinese Buddhism such as the Yogacara (Consciousness-Only School 唯識宗), and the Three Treatise School (三論宗 – Sanlun Zong). These early forms of Buddhism in China were all characterized by their strict Indian formalism and tendency towards the construction of complex categories.\textsuperscript{107} The utter discrepancy between the Indian and Chinese mindsets presented translators with challenges that transcended the domain of language per-se. Transporting early Indian Buddhism to China entailed a process of decoding a cognitive orientation that was completely alien to the Chinese mind. Many consider the transportation of Buddhism into China as one of the most daunting intellectual projects in human history, a process that lasted for approximately one thousand years.\textsuperscript{108} Of particular importance is the fact that purely Indian schools of Buddhism eventually died

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p. 23. Beckwith believes that the earliest preserved recursive argument can be found in a scholastic work written in Gandhari Prakrit as commentary on the Astagrantha a work written in the first century BCE in Gandhara. One of the main proponents of the Yogacara School, Vasubandhu (世親), used this very same method as early as the fourth century CE, while the earliest roots of this model can be traced to the first century CE.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p. 25.
\item \textsuperscript{107} The earliest examples of the recursive argument including the characteristic Indian habit of numbering argumentative units, have only survived in Chinese translations, especially in Xuan Zang’s (玄奘, 602-664 CE) famous translation of the Mahavibhasa Sutra, which he obtained in the important Sarvastivada institution in ancient Bactra, today’s northwestern Afghanistan.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Julia Ching, \textit{Chinese Religions}, p. 127.
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out in China, an indication of their failure to be assimilated into Chinese culture. According to Chad Hansen this failure was to a great extent due to the theoretical complexity that characterized these Indian formats.\textsuperscript{109} The inability of analytic forms of Buddhism to survive in China was also reflected in the way that central Buddhist texts, especially those of the highly analytic Sarvastivada school, were radically transformed in China. As Beckwith points out, although a great amount of Buddhist texts based on the recursive argument entered China “Chinese Buddhist authors rarely, if ever, used the recursive argument method in their own personally authored Chinese works.”\textsuperscript{110} The Chinese, it seems, were more interested in the underlying conclusions of Buddhist thought while completely ignoring the procedural complexity of the argument. The fascinating story of the integration of Buddhism into China unfolded through a steady and laborious process in which Indian analytic features gradually gave way to native Chinese synthetic sensibilities.

If the analytic modality shows a tendency towards the use of formal logic, what kind of methods did Chinese scholars and Rabbis use in constructing their systems of thought? In the Chinese case, important works such as the \textit{Yijing (The Book of Changes)} and proto-scientific systems such as the Yin-Yang and Five Elements schools were overwhelmingly focused on a \textit{metaphorical} language. The eminent A.C Graham argued that such classificatory systems could be referred to as \textit{correlative}. According to Graham associative correlations display the capacity to harmonize categories that don’t disclose a

\textsuperscript{109} Chad Hansen, \textit{Language and logic in ancient China} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983).
\textsuperscript{110} Beckwith, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 134.
necessary logical relationship. Instead of formal connections we see a reliance on an associative concordance between the different parts of the system.¹¹¹ The associative clustering of notions such as ‘Heaven’, ‘Emperor’, ‘Father’, and ‘Center’ is only one example of how synthetic traditions manage to integrate information without the use of strict logic. A father, like an emperor, is expected to be benevolent and responsible while both father and emperor are in turn related to the idea of ‘center’ and therefore ‘heaven.’ Making such correlations involves a certain associative ‘leap’ that is predicated on a cultural narrative rather than logical inevitability. Instead of a linear logic, the Chinese system is based on non-linear associative relations that are anchored in a culture’s shared symbolic repository. As an example, our understanding of the function of the liver is enhanced by its correlation to notions such as spring, birth, the element of wood, the direction East, and the color blue. Such relationships only make sense within a specific cultural and symbolic setting; there is nothing normatively inevitable about them. To further complicate matters, relationships can change and shift according to context: in Chinese medicine the chest is perceived as a Yin (female) area in relation to the back of the body, which is Yang (male). But once the context shifts and the chest is considered in relation to the pelvis it transforms into Yang and then returns to become Yin in relation to the head. As opposed to constant and static connections of analytic systems, synthetic

¹¹¹ A.C. Graham, Disputers of the Dao, pp. 313-316. According to Graham before the emergence of modern science in the West primitive magic and medieval proto-science were also correlative in nature (315): “such systems may include Gods, but in correlating them with colours, sounds, numbers, it reduces them to the same level and denies them transcendence.” Post Galilean science is when things take a shift –together with Kepler – the three planetary laws are the first modern laws of nature. Interestingly Graham claims that the two major components of science were the fusion of Greek logic and geometry with Indian Numerals (Both of which I consider as analytic traditions).
taxonomies, whether we name them correlative, associative, analogical, or intuitive, provide an explanatory model that is dynamic and fluctuating in nature. There exists a higher accountability for diversity with a greater capacity to absorb new information without offending the general coherence of the system. Such dynamism is related to the synthetic modality’s refusal to ignore the crucial role of context. This is why Robert Eno notes that from a Chinese perspective a situation or a claim cannot be analyzed or evaluated outside its own perspective.\(^{112}\)

Turning to the West, Merlin Donald argues that the emergence of formalized strategies of argumentation or theoretical thinking can be traced back to ancient Greece where the field of rhetoric became increasingly important.\(^{113}\) The Greeks were keen on refining their thinking strategies in an attempt to make arguments more effective. In fact, the formal procedures of their arguments became so dominant that the sophists began to emphasize “techniques of persuasion without regard to content.”\(^{114}\) The negative connotations of the word ‘sophistry’ is a reminder of this school’s somewhat shrewd ability to support contradictory views with equal logical coherence. Consequently, the refinement of one’s cognitive skills and techniques of argumentation became just as important as mastering fields that were content-based such as astronomy and natural science. In linguistics and grammar, domains that are of central concern to analytical cultures, Europeans began to search for universal rules and general patterns. In other

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\(^{114}\) Ibid., 348.
words, the special attention to the structural features of language irrespective of vocabulary reflects another example of the Greco-European stress on decontextualized formal relations.\footnote{Ibid.}

Christian theology is another case that can highlight the analytic/synthetic distinction. As opposed to Judaism, the analytic proclivity towards the construction of exclusive truths led Christianity down a polemical path that was based on debates between individual theologians, a form of communication that required efficient argumentative skills. These polemical procedures were very different from the Talmudic model where “decisions ordinarily record the main points, but not the successive steps in argument and counter-argument.”\footnote{Neusner, \textit{Reader’s Guide to the Talmud} (Leiden, London: Brill, 2001), p. ix.} As in the Chinese case, Jewish thinkers preferred to focus on the practical implications of a dilemma rather than on its logical coherence. Whereas Jewish discourse was predominantly commentarial, Christians followed the Greek path of theory and argumentation. This bears a striking resemblance to the Chinese case; Nakamura notes that while the preferable mode of relating to canon in China was through the medium of commentary, the Buddhists had a clear preference towards the construction of thesis.\footnote{As mentioned earlier, F.S.C Northrop echoes this view when he claims that "while the Greeks developed the way of knowing nature by postulation and scientific hypothesis, the Chinese approached Nature throughout their history only by direct inspection and aesthetic intuition. See Wing-Tsit Chan “Neo-Confucianism and scientific thought,” p. 327. Joseph Needham whose monumental project \textit{Science and Civilization in China}, was to highlight Chinese scientific achievements strongly disagreed with Northrop. See \textit{Science and Civilization in China}. vol. 2 (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), p. 579.}


Instead of strict formal relations between concepts Jewish discourse was founded upon association and analogy. Although the Talmud certainly displays some form of ‘qualified’ analytic tendencies, it certainly did not employ linear formal relations as a dominant procedural tool. The Talmudic argument attempts to convince rather than prove; the agreement of several voices on a solution is more important than a solitary and conclusive logical argument. Adin Steinsaltz points to the organic and fluid nature of the Talmud in aesthetic terms. He notes that it is reminiscent of “great literary masterpieces, where the ultimate goal is to evoke and reflect life itself.”

Steinsaltz’ life-metaphor points to the idea of a changing and dynamic organism, one that operates according to non-linear rules. As Steinberg argues, the rabbis do not have a formal procedure to navigate information, their discussions are based on an associative intuition. Association is therefore quintessentially different from the linear causality of well-structured analytic arguments; it is inherently relational and dynamic rather than linear and static.

The absence of a rational Greek form of argumentation in Judaism does not, however, entail a lack of conscious procedures. Indeed, the Talmud displays a methodology that operates according to constant argumentative principles. Once we become aware of these underlying rules, it is apparent that Talmudic discourse, in spite of its flexibility, associative tendencies, digressions, and ad hoc contradictions doesn’t lack

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118 Adin Steinsaltz, Madrich la Talmud (Jerusalem: Keter, 1984), pp. 6-7 [Hebrew].
119 Theodore Steinberg, Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages, p. 31.
structure; but it certainly is not the type of structure we are accustomed to in the West.\(^{121}\) When a rabbi decides to move from one passage to another or to cite a biblical verse in support of an opinion, the methodology that guides him cannot be logically schematized. An examination of a certain topic can begin with a surprising assertion that has very little to do with the main issue, there can be endless digressions where the relationship between the central point and what is discussed seems increasingly accidental. Eventually, however, there will always be a return to the initial central concern.\(^{122}\) The relationship can be extremely tenuous and subtle but it is nevertheless real. Such subtlety functions as a stimulus for recognizing the elusive nature of boundaries and the delicate interrelationship of ideas. The Talmudic procedure mirrors the complexity and dynamism of reality rather than attempting to capture it through definitions, static forms, and the projection of hypotheses.

Finally, this distinction between de-contextualization and contextualization becomes especially apparent in the way the Chinese and Jewish traditions emphasized the field of ethics. In stark contrast to the typically analytic Kantian *categorical imperative*, in which universal laws are highlighted at the expense of context, the Jewish and Chinese ethical minds based their moral verdicts on real life situations and actual events. Although synthetic thought in the Chinese and Jewish traditions may have been expressed differently, the underlying disposition towards the analysis of moral dilemmas

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\(^{121}\) Not only were Talmudic methodological rules known implicitly through habit but they were explicitly put down in writing. e.g.: the 7 rules of Hillel and 13 rules of Ishmael. Neusner contends that these methodologies may be the result of the final redaction of the Talmud, nevertheless, he claims that it is beyond doubt that these methodologies were used and known by the Amoraim. Neusner, *The Rules of Composition of the Talmud*.

\(^{122}\) Steinberg, *Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages*, p. 31.
according to real situations was common to both traditions. Indeed, the way Jewish and Chinese thinkers insisted on contextualizing events was drastically different from the Greek and Indian obsession with objectification. In the former case one is interested in the uniqueness of the particular while in the latter case there is an attempt to capture eternal, static patterns.

2.1.3 Systemization vs. Open-Endedness

One of the most powerful illustrations of the synthetic approach in China and Judaism can be seen in the way these traditions chose to present and classify knowledge. John Passmore notes that as opposed to systematic philosophy in the West, Chinese thought is almost entirely composed of dispersed ‘pronouncements’ that lack an internal methodical organization. Confucian literature, even the parts that are considered relatively ordered such as the Mencius and Xunzi, lack the type of classifications and methodical advancement of ideas that we see in the early Indo-Buddhist tradition. Very much like the Talmudic corpus, it is impossible to find a portion in the Analects that systematically deals with a specific topic. Instead, ‘pronouncements’ about politics (政), ritual (禮), filial piety (孝), humanity (仁), and other themes are scattered throughout the text with no apparent logical order. Robert Eno claims that “the style of this [Confucian] philosophy is fundamentally different from what we have grown to expect from the

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analytic schools of the Western tradition. It was not analytic, and it made no categorical distinction between the spheres of theory and practice.”¹²⁴ In his introduction to Zhuxi’s commentary on the Four Books Peng Lin (彭林) notes that together with their archaic and inaccessible terminology, the Confucian Classics lacked the systematic structure that helped Buddhist texts circulate among a broad audience.¹²⁵

Even a central classic like the *Yijing*, in spite of its intricate classificatory system, doesn’t exhibit an organization that is essentially logical in the analytic sense. Joseph Needham used to refer to this Classic as a ‘desk with a drawer for everything,’ but on a closer inspection we see that there is no attempt to systemize different categories according to rules of logic.¹²⁶ According to Graham in spite of the existence of logical thinking in China, especially in the domain of practical inventions “piecemeal causal explanations do not add up to a cosmos, or even to single organized science. He points to the Chinese “contentment with piecemeal explanations, acceptance that nature is inherently untidy and that it is useless to demand the complete resolution of anomalies.”¹²⁷ It has generally been agreed among Sinologists that Chinese philosophy, before the arrival of Buddhism from India:

> shows no impulse to metaphysical system building….thinkers as Mencius and Chuang-tzu show little tendency to stand back and make an organized whole of their revised

¹²⁵ Wang Jie, *op. cit*.
¹²⁶ Consider the *Yijing’s* correlative association between the *four* seasons (四季) and the *five* elements (五行); in order to overcome the discrepancy between the number of seasons and elements, the ‘redundant’ element of wood is understood to be a neutral component that functions as an energetic median between the four seasons. This is only one example of the synthetic capacity to deal with anomalies and a-symmetrical features.
world-picture. Ancient Chinese thinking at its most logical, as in kung-sun-Lung and the Later Mohists, concentrated on specific problems…. we have to correlate a lot of piecemeal evidence and work out the scheme for ourselves.  

The open ended non-systematic approach of Chinese philosophers was completely alien to the analytic search for cohesion and unity.

Turning to Judaism, Oona Eisenstadt notes that “The “Greek” is the ontological mode that seeks to describe the whole…. The “Hebrew” is the dialogical mode that is never complete and preserves dissent.” In contradistinction to the Greco-European stress on strict rules of logic and systematic wholes, Neusner claims that Western readers “…will be puzzled by the chaos of the Talmudic dialectic, its meandering and open-ended character. And they will miss the formal elegance, the perfection of exposition that characterizes Plato’s writings…. The fact that the rational mind demands a ‘bottom line’ that will lead to a conclusive insight led many non-Jewish readers to approach the Talmud with the seemingly natural expectation of detecting final decisions

128 Ibid., pp. 204.
130 Neusner, Reader’s Guide, p. ix. (my italics). Neusner holds the opinion that the Talmud is actually “systematic and orderly, once properly decoded” ibid. Much like the treatment of many 19th century German historians of the Rabbinical tradition, Neusner believes that the Bavli was a rationalistic document par-excellence, composed by people who sought to interpret the world using rational terms and systematic methodologies. His argument goes against the majority view represented by Adin Steinsaltz who sees the Talmud as a document led by associative organizing principles. These polar views are also known in terms of ‘Systematic’ vs. ‘Traditional.’ Neusner also attacks the traditional and majority opinion that sees the Talmud as a corpus that evolved through a multi-layered and ‘sedimentary’ process, a view best represented by J.N. Epstein and Ezra Zion, *Mevo’ot Le-Sifrut Ha-’Amoraim: Bavli Vi-Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem: Hotsa’at sefarim Magnes, 1962). According to Neusner the Talmud Bavli was edited and redacted by a “single, cogent and rhetorically consistent discourse…. the creation of single-minded geniuses of applied logic and sustained analytical enquiry,” for more on this debate and different opinions see Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud*. pp. 194-223.
and a self-contained system; instead, they were confronted with a non-linear and open-ended literature that seemed inferior in its inability to yield meta-conclusions. Adin Steinsaltz notes that:

> the organization of the Talmud is not systematic and does not adhere to any normal (familiar) pedagogical rules, it is also not organized from easy themes to more difficult ones or according to any other logical principles. Nevertheless, the Talmud has an order, regardless of the fact that it is very different than what we are accustomed to.

While we can point to a general organization that is based on the six Orders of the Mishnah (Sedarim - סדרים), sub-categorized into sixty-three tractates (masekhot - מסכתות) there is nevertheless no linearity to the content and no logical progression of a distinct argument. One can begin studying the Order Nezikim (Damages - נזיקין) where topics that are loosely related to criminal and civil law are discussed, and then quite naturally move to a tractate in a different Order. In fact, reading all the tractates of a specific Order chronologically makes very little sense. Beyond the Talmud, Midrashic literature is a good example of what Passmore termed “piecemeal pronouncements;” Much like Chinese commentary, the Midrash interrupts the canonical narrative with an interlinear commentary that seeks no resolution and shows no finality.

Beyond the structure of literary formats we can also see a clear divergence in fields of interest between synthetic and analytic traditions. Instead of systematic

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cosmologies as in Greece and Buddhism, both rabbis and Confucians were far more concerned with historical analysis and its ethical implications. Here too, we witness a reality that discloses a general order but not one that can be finalized or captured statically through constant rules. The preoccupation with history in the form of stories, biographies, and experiences are all examples of a ‘narrative thought’ in which intellectual discourse lacks a clear chronological and self-enclosed structure.

2.1.4 Conclusion

This section has highlighted the similar ways the Chinese and Jewish traditions interpreted reality in contradistinction to analytical traditions. I showed that the cognitive strategies I referred to as synthetic are qualitatively unlike those adopted by the Greco-European and Indo-Buddhist worlds. While similarities in modes of perception between the Greek and Indian traditions have long been noticed, a similar joint appreciation of the Jewish and Chinese traditions has been far too scarce. One reason for this scarcity can possibly be attributed to these traditions’ lack of a common evolutionary ancestry. In other words, since Judaism is seen as an integral part of Western monotheism, detaching it from its “natural” intellectual environment and comparing it with a tradition to which it is not genetically related seems arbitrary. But it is precisely for this reason that I believe such a comparison is important. The synthetic/analytic distinction allows us to re-configure some of our most basic cultural categories and detect similarities that precede phenotypic differences. Contrasting synthetic traditions with the analytic nature of Greek
philosophy and Buddhism helps us highlight the structural similarities that lurk behind different developmental trajectories.

The data I use to support my argument has been mainly drawn from the humanities, but important support comes from the sciences as well. Research in the fields of cognition and cross-cultural psychology has clearly confirmed the analytic/synthetic distinction. In their study of Asian and Western forms of perception Yuri Miyamoto, Richard Nisbett, and Takahiko Masuda have demonstrated that while Westerners tend to focus on “salient foreground objects” and their attributes, Asians are more inclined to focus on relationships and context. The focus on objects and central attributes among Westerners can explain their general tendency towards identifying autonomous and irreducible substances. In one experiment East Asians and Americans were presented with various kinds of visual data and asked to comment on what they saw. When students from both groups were shown a video clip depicting fish, small animals, various plants, and rocks, Americans overwhelmingly focused on the large and distinct fish in the foreground, while Asians paid more attention to relationships between different focal points in the scene. Multiple other studies have supported the view that East Asians perceive the world in holistic terms while Westerners perceive it analytically.133

If Rabbinical Judaism and Confucianism both belong to the same synthetic mode of operation, we would expect similar results to show up in Judaism as well. Although studies that support these distinctions are extremely scarce, personality psychologist Zacharia Dershowitz has demonstrated that field-dependence, or attention to context and relational factors among Orthodox Jews is substantially higher than those among secular Jewish boys and even more so in relation to Protestant boys. This is relevant because the exceptionally conservative worldview of Ultra-Orthodox communities has managed to preserve many of the thought patterns, tightly knit family units, and cultural dispositions of ancient Jewish communities. In contrast, modern Jews and more so Protestants are mainly nourished by the analytic ethos of Western civilization. Of further interest, is the correlation Dershowitz draws between synthetic or holistic cognitive dispositions and social structures. His research demonstrates that high field-dependence shows up in societies in which role relations are explicit and social constraints are dense. Protestant children raised in a more flexible social reality in which higher levels of autonomy are tolerated demonstrated a more atomistic and analytical perception of reality (low field-dependence). These and various other studies strongly suggest that cultural

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134 Secular Jewish populations in Israel as well as in the U.S. are brought up and educated according to the assumptions and methodologies of the Western tradition. Therefore, the analytic/synthetic divide can clearly be seen between secular and orthodox populations within Judaism.

variations between synthetic and analytic cultures in terms of perceptual processes indeed exist.

This is only one example of the kind of symbiotic relationship between the various morphological levels. In this case we see a commensurability between the cognitive and social levels. As I will argue in the following chapters, the symbiotic interaction of a culture’s cognitive orientations—synthetic or analytic—with an additional set of commensurable and reinforcing features such as social structures and cultural indoctrination lead to “symbiotic clusters” and the emergence of robust homeostatic cultural systems. The next step will be to explore the social level of the synthetic and analytic modalities and how it reflects substantially different views of the relationship between the individual and the community.
2.2 THE SOCIAL LEVEL

The following sections will look at different approaches towards the inter-relationship between the individual, family, and society. I will argue that the main difference between the synthetic and analytic modes of operation in terms of social classifications is that synthetic traditions perceive the family unit as the most fundamental building block of society, while analytic traditions see the individual as the most irreducible social category. I will attempt to clarify the far-reaching implications of these different classificatory schemes and their possible impact on cognition and cultural indoctrination.

2.2.1 Social Classifications: Individual vs. Family

In order to illustrate the different social realities that characterize the analytic and synthetic modalities I will make a distinction between two types of social structures: individual-based (analytic) and family-based (synthetic). The former structure is used in traditions that perceive individuals as having a unique access to ultimate reality, reflected in the devout Christian’s search for a personal relationship with God, the Greek philosopher’s rational contemplation of eternal forms, and the Buddhist practitioner’s meditative penetration of consciousness as a gateway to liberation. In all these examples we witness a similar introspective procedure that bridges between the individual and a higher reality. Hypothetically, women and men can engage in such practices in their solitude without any dependence on social institutions or a mediating priesthood; I will
refer to this as cognitive individualism.\textsuperscript{136} The synthetic modality is fundamentally different; there is no stress on the correlation between an internal private sphere and a transcendent reality. Instead, the individual is deeply embedded in social networks beginning with the family unit; religious fulfillment in this model requires ongoing communal engagement that is relational. The family-based model stresses public engagement and communal responsibility rather than mentalistic procedures that are private.

It is worth noting that although all traditional societies were family oriented, the synthetic modality reserves an exceptionally central role for the family in the process of indoctrination. Sociologist Basil Bernstein developed a model of social control that can help us appreciate the type of dynamic that characterizes the synthetic model or what he terms the positional model. According to Bernstein the positional model represents a social structure in which “the individual is encouraged to fit in with the group… one is controlled, therefore, on the basis of one’s position.”\textsuperscript{137} In this model we see the devaluation of the individual as a discrete agent in favor of a greater focus on relational

\textsuperscript{136} There is an important distinction to be made between what I referred to as ‘social individualism’ and ‘cognitive-individualism.’ The former refers to the peculiar type of Western individualism one associates with the Enlightenment and later with Western democracy and capitalism. In this type of individualism society is seen as a collection of autonomous persons that enter a social contract designed to secure their rights and freedom. ‘Cognitive-individualism,’ on the other hand, refers to the way an individual in analytic traditions is granted access to ultimate truths through private and internal means. Although all analytic modes of operation, by definition, exhibit some form of cognitive-individualism, they do not necessarily endorse forms of social individualism. As the Greco-European and Indo-Buddhist experiences demonstrate although both adhered to different forms of cognitive-individualism, the development of social individualism was confined to the West at a fairly late stage. I will nevertheless argue that cognitive individualism diminishes the role of the family unit and therefore entails fewer structural restrictions on the individual, especially in one’s search for religious fulfillment.

networks for the construction of identity. The group is prioritized since it is only within the collective context that members establish their identity. In contrast to the positional approach, Bernstein offers the *personal model*, which I associate with the analytic worldview. The personal model refers to families in which “the range of decisions, modifications and judgments was a function of the psychological qualities of the person rather than a function of the formal status.”

Similar differences between two opposing social structures have been noticed by social psychologists as well. Shalom Schwartz, among others, has offered a general distinction between *social autonomy* and *social embeddedness*:

In autonomy cultures, people are viewed as autonomous, bounded entities… They are encouraged to cultivate and express their own preferences, feelings, ideas, and abilities, and find meaning in their own uniqueness… In cultures with an emphasis on embeddedness, people are viewed as entities embedded in the collectivity. Meaning in life is expected to come largely through social relationships, through identifying with the group, participating in its shared way of life, and striving toward its shared goals. Embedded cultures emphasize maintaining the status quo and restraining actions that might disrupt in-group solidarity or the traditional order. Important values in such cultures are social order, respect for tradition, security, obedience, and wisdom.

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138 Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, p. 153. Although Bernstein’s project was mainly focused on local urban communities, thinkers such as Mary Douglas have recognized the relevance of his work to the sphere of culture. See Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England; New York: Penguin Books, 1978).

139 Shalom Schwartz, “A Theory of Cultural Value Orientations: Explication and Applications.” *Comparative Sociology* 5, no. 2-3 (2006): 137-82. An important point to stress is that although both Bernstein and Schwartz developed their theories in a modern context, their *positional* and *embeddedness* categories are helpful in better appreciating the nature of traditional societies. In contrast, the type of realities they are pointing to in their *personal* and *autonomy* categories are predominantly modern and therefore not as suitable in describing classical cultures such as ancient Greece, Hinduism and Buddhism. This is mainly because the traditional societies I am concerned with rarely enabled the type of individualism we are familiar with today. The term embeddedness was coined by economic historian Karl Polanyi as part of his “Substantivist”
Schwartz’ distinctions adequately capture some of the basic social sensibilities that Confucianism and Judaism shared in contradistinction to Greek and Buddhist thought. The point to stress is that scholars from different fields have acknowledged the existence of two different models of social control; my aim is to demonstrate that these two models conform to the social temperaments of the synthetic and analytic traditions. In what follows I will look at how these divergences were reflected in the Chinese/Hindu-Buddhist and Jewish/Greco-European distinctions.

2.2.2 Conceptions of the Self

Although the early Christian movement was very much part of Judaism in the early first century CE, Christianity’s subsequent evolution on Greek and Roman soil led it down a religio-philosophical trajectory that gave it its distinct non-Hebraic physiognomy. The Greek features of Christianity led to a process in which monotheism was gradually transported form a synthetic mode of operation to an analytic mode. These changes were first apparent in Pauline Christianity but later reached a culmination in the Augustinian project in which the final formation of Western culture transpired in the synthesis of Hellenic, Hebraic and Roman institutions. See Hall and Ames, Anticipating China, Ch.1 pp.1-109 passim. Similarly, John E. Smith contends that the emergence of the Western Jewish/Greek distinctions can be traced back to Augustine’s theology. See Smith “The individual and the Judeo Christian tradition,” in Charles Moore, The Status of the Individual in East and West (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), pp. 251-267.

approach. Economic Sociologist Mark Granovetter applied the concept of embeddedness to market societies, demonstrating that even there, "rational" economic exchanges are influenced by pre-existing social ties. See Granovetter, M. (1985). "Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness". The American Journal of Sociology 91, no. 3: 487. [140]
private relationship with God.\textsuperscript{141} In other words, under Greek influence, monotheism began to disclose an increasing concern with personal faith. These new dispositions entailed a shift towards the growing importance of the individual as the primary object of investigation in theological discourse. The analytical Greco-Christian approach atomized the world such that:

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it belongs to the nature of reality to be segmented or differentiated….On this view the individual is not reached as the result of a process of dialectic; the individual is, rather, the presupposition of all intelligible discourse. It is that with which we begin, and, if we cannot begin with the individual, we can never reach or derive it by specification from universals.\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

Christian theologians, beginning with Augustine and all the way to Aquinas saw the individual as a distinct and autonomous “finite substance.” This line of thought was later intensified by subsequent thinkers, from William of Ockham and Duns Scotus all the way to modern thinkers such as William James.\textsuperscript{143} Common to these theologians was the

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\textsuperscript{141} John E. Smith, ibid., pp. 256-7. The philosophical tangent Christianity followed can be traced back to Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} and \textit{Soliloquies}, where an increasingly individualistic tradition emerged. Wilfred Cantwell Smith stresses Christianity’s alliance with rationalism in its attack on paganism and the strong Platonic features of Augustine’s theology where man’s goal is to rise from temporal good (sense perception) to eternal good (intellectual and spiritual perception). \textit{The Meaning and End of Religion}. (London: S.P.C.K., 1978), pp. 28-9; Rudolf Otto talks about the rational foundations of Christian theology, \textit{The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine, and Its Relation to the Rational}. (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), esp. ch.1 “The Rational and the Non-Rational.” In all these cases there is a clear stress on the individual believer.


\textsuperscript{143} Thomas Aquinas characterizes the individual as a “finite substance.” For Scotus: the indivisible individual is not merely negatively so, by virtue of not being someone else, instead, there is a positivistic affirmation of the individual, an unprecedented reification of her ontological value. For Ockham, as for many Christian theologians, all existent realities are utterly particular “Genus is not something common to many things because of some identity in them, but because of a certain community of the sign…. Each individual is what it is and not another thing for universal structure is no longer in nature but in thought.” See John E. Smith ibid., pp. 257-262.
conviction that the individual represents an ultimate trait of reality and an irreducible entity that stands at the foundation of knowledge.

The unprecedented autonomy that the Greco-European tradition invested in the individual gradually escalated and evolved into the Cartesian understanding of humans as secluded units of consciousness. In such a worldview the radically subjective philosopher inspects the external world through the increasingly solipsistic window of consciousness. Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* was a natural outcome of this gradual reification of the discrete person in which we find an intense conviction that the thinking “I” is the foundation of knowledge. Such inclinations towards subjectivity and introspection led Mary Douglas to argue that modern philosophies such as Existentialism could have only evolved in the personalized model of the Greco-European tradition. In the biography of Sartre’s early years, Douglas detected the young philosopher’s alienation: “… from infancy he [Sartre] was tormented with the consciousness that his existence had no justification. There was no society organized in general categories of age, sex and hierarchy in which his developing role could be seen as necessary to some overall pattern.” Douglas goes on to claim that Bernstein’s ‘positional child,’ who I associate with the synthetic modality, “knows the pattern in which he belongs, [and therefore] cannot understand the anguish which Sartre has described so poignantly.”

Existential alienation is therefore an outcome of the individual’s increasing detachment from the fabric of society and human relations. Although family-based traditions present their own set of problems, individual alienation was certainly not one of them. Jews could feel

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144 Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 33. Douglas claimed that Bernstein’s personal model is one in which “ideas about morality and the self get detached from the social structure.”
alienated as a group but rarely as individuals within their communities. Both Chinese and Jewish individuals were deeply embedded in the family structure, in the social organism, and in a cultural memory that infused them with an intense sense of belonging and a distinct position within a matrix of relationships. It is clear that the positional model does not entail a lack of individualism; on the contrary, the individual remains an extremely important part of the Jewish tradition, but as opposed to the Hero of the Greek epics, the antagonism between individual and social interests in the Jewish traditions is practically absent. Lenn Goodman notes that Judaism adheres to a form of socialization where “the zero sum game between community and individual is not shared…. Normative Judaism sets a complementarity of interests between community and individual.” The different cultural icons of the Greek and Jewish traditions can help us better understand their conceptions of the ideal individual. The Greek Hero of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* does not necessarily conform to altruistic ideals; on the contrary, he frequently displays anti-social and highly selfish

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145 In Judaism this was reflected by the halakhic stress on securing the rights and the freedom of people. In fact, Jewish individualism goes all the way back to the formation of the tradition, Lenn Goodman notes that “The defining experience of enslavement led individual freedom and the dignity of the individual to be central.” Similarly, basic Jewish customs were devised to secure certain inalienable rights; the Sabbath, for instance, can be seen as an expression of individual autonomy and the irreducibility of a person to his work. Goodman convincingly argues that the “Mosaic phase is actually characterized by the rise of the dignity, privacy, and freedom of the individual…” Although the positional model does not deny the individual’s rights and dignity, one is nevertheless understood and defined within a relational/positional framework. Rabbis, unlike Greek philosophers, did not seek to explore the individual as distinct from society. Lenn Goodman in Daniel H. Frank, *Autonomy and Judaism: The Individual and the Community in Jewish Philosophical Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp.72-3; 79.

146 Ibid., pp. 71-2. Goodman’s statement is equally applicable to Confucianism where the family represented the prototypical model for social behavior. Such complementarity between the family and the establishment is hardly detectable in the analytic mode of operation where the individual frequently finds himself in tension with familial and social commitments.
tendencies. The Hero was venerated by the tradition as a unique individual who is both part of the community but nevertheless distinct and separated from it by virtue of a rare personality. The courage, strength and radical autonomy of the Greek Hero were substantially different from symbols of glory entertained by the Hebraic imagination in which the persona of the intrepid individual was rarely entertained. In Judaism there is no “celebration of the heroic ego for the same reason that there is no explicit portrayal of the personality.” The nation of Israel, in spite of its great kings and fearless prophets, remains the central focus of the biblical drama. The story is ultimately about how Jews behave as a collective, and their dynamic communal relationship with God. The collective aspect of Jewish religiosity is especially apparent in the unique experience the Israelites had at mount Sinai; unlike the encounter of the individual prophet, nun, saint, rishi, or monk with the divine, here we have a miraculous encounter between God and a nation – hundreds of thousands of individuals experiencing a communal and

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147 Erwin Rhodes shows that the Greek hero cult evolved from a tradition of family and clan ancestor veneration but eventually transformed into a distinct civic phenomenon practiced within the polis. This led to a reality where families stopped tracing their lineages back to specific heroic individuals; instead, heroes came to represent city-states and the community at large. The old hero/family relationship was now replaced by a hero/community culture where the extraordinary person was placed on the pedestal of communal glory detached from family-based lineages. Erwin Rhodes, *Psyche: the Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks* (London, Harcourt, Brace: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950). For another good overview of the Greek hero cult see Karl Kerenyi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997).

148 John E. Smith notes that “Although we tend to think at once of the towering importance of the great individuals – the Patriarchs, and especially Moses – in the founding Hebraic religion, the fact remains that it is originally the people or community with which the divine covenant is made…. At this point in the development, the individual is related to God only insofar as he is a member of the covenant community,” see ”The Individual and the Judeo-Christian tradition,” pp. 253.

149 Jacob Neusner notes that one of the predominant concerns of the Mishnah is the distinctiveness of Israel from the rest of humanity by virtue of its communal holiness. Neusner, *A Short History of Judaism: Three Meals, Three Epochs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 81.
simultaneous epiphany.\textsuperscript{150} Such social inclusiveness does not negate the existence of important figures, leaders, prophets, and role models but it certainly tends to integrate them into a narrative in which the community is prioritized and individual/society tensions are reduced.

One way the family-based model diminished individual/society tensions was by avoiding a reified characterization of the individual. Goodman notes that although individualism was a central concern in Judaism “… no ‘definition’ of the human individual emerges… no expression like \textit{zoon politikon} can be expected to emerge.”\textsuperscript{151} Said differently, Aristotle’s ‘political animal’ can be seen as a natural outcome of the way Greek thinkers investigated the essence of individual life and their clear articulation of what the individual universally represents. The cognitive inclination to clearly distinguish each component in the overall system represents an intellectual disposition that the Greeks shared with Hindu and early Buddhist thinkers. The proclivity of these traditions to capture the essence of secluded substances stands in clear contrast to the classical Jewish and Chinese stance in which a radically detached autonomous agent is absent.

The tendency towards social embeddedness in synthetic traditions is also related to their stress on context. Rabbis and Confucians understood humans as an open-ended biography of real experiences and acts; human essence is not pre-determined but rather constructed as life unfolds. Rabbis therefore adopted a ‘silent’ or ‘negative’ strategy which “doesn’t ultimately define God and not individualism, it lets it construct itself….

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., pp.125. “No one had ever imagined that the Jews would define their lives other than together, other than as a people, a political society, with collective authority and shared destiny and a public interest.”

\textsuperscript{151} Smith, ”The Individual and the Judeo-Christian tradition,” p. 84.
Defining the individual is tantamount to defining the limits of freedom so there is no need to tackle the individual specifically.”

Turning our attention to China, Hall and Ames contend that if we were “to be strictly limited to the interpretative categories associated with Western theories of the self, the Chinese are, quite literally, “selfless”. Countless scholars of Chinese civilization have insisted that “selflessness…is one of the oldest values in China… The selfless person is always willing to subordinate his own interests, or that of some small group (like the village) to which he belongs, to the interest of a larger social group.”

Livia Kohn notes that “groups predominate in all respects over individuals in Chinese society. That means that anyone is first a member of a family, clan, village, or state before he is an individual with needs and wishes.” The strong stress on context and particulars created an individual typified by a unique and irreplaceable biography, and most importantly in the Confucian hierarchical context, a particular and unique position. Hall and Ames argue that “in the model of the unique individual, determinacy lies in the achieved quality of one’s multivalent relationships.” The dichotomy they draw between the Western individual, characterized by agency, and his Chinese counterpart, unique by virtue of his positional relationship is highly reminiscent of Bernstein’s positional system of classification. In both cases one’s position rather than discrete personality will

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152 Ibid., p. 84. This clearly changed with the rise of philosophy and Kabbalah in which Judaism, under Greek influences, defined God with greater analytic detail.
153 Hall and Ames, *Thinking From the Han*, p. 23.
156 Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 25.
determine one’s individuality. Agency is not absent but rather actualized in coordination, and with sensitivity, to one’s social surroundings. The Chinese worldview focused on social acumen where consolidating, preserving, and extending social relationships (guanxi- 關係) functioned as the main channel for self-determination. It is therefore a grave mistake to look at Chinese forms of individualism through the seemingly natural Western distinctions between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres; the essentialist dichotomy between the individual and society simply does not appear as forcefully in the Chinese and Jewish contexts.

The Indo-Buddhist tradition offered a social model that was fundamentally different from the one practiced in traditional China. Buddhism’s approach towards the individual finds its roots in Hinduism where we see a typical case of what I call cognitive individualism. In this model the individual is encouraged to explore his spirituality in solitude away from the traditional household. Much like the Greeks, Hindus treated the secluded person as a discrete entity, offering a conceptual model that was very alien to the Chinese worldview. The Indian individual was frequently interpreted through a tripartite model of Tamasika (tamas), Rajasika (raja), and Sattvika (sattva). Each represents an ascending detachment from the material aspects of the Self, with the stage of sattva epitomizing the ability of the individual to operate on a purely mentalistic level that transcends materiality and one’s emotional entanglement in the world.158 In other

157 Ibid., p. 25.
158 Interestingly the Sattva level was further divided into two: the lower level entailing sociomoral activity while the higher, more sublime level, was that of spiritual actions. See “The status of the individual in Indian metaphysics,” in Charles Moore ed., The Status of the Individual, pp.
words, the ‘mental individual’ was elevated over and above social engagement (Dharma). An important example of Hindu priorities can be seen in the traditional life phases of the *ashrama* system, available to the three twice-born castes. This classification begins with study, proceeds to social and familial responsibility but then takes a typically analytic turn towards the exploration of the intimate self; an exploration that should ideally take place in the forest in seclusion. The articulation of spiritual realization as a process of detaching the self from culture, society, and the family would have been inconceivable in the Jewish and Chinese traditions.\(^{159}\)

Kalidas Bhattacharyya notes that the overwhelming majority of Indian schools of philosophy agree that the individual needs to realize the self as an autonomous agency.\(^{160}\) Both Hinduism and Buddhism shared the basic idea that understanding the inner workings of the autonomous individual was a prerequisite to arriving at *Moksha* or *Nirvana*. In both traditions we see forms of cognitive individualism in which humans are perceived as secluded units of consciousness that strive to unite or blend into a greater ultimate reality. Their spiritual methodologies are interested in the individual’s psychological and cognitive mechanisms, while social institutions, including the family, were theoretically undermined.

One of the most noteworthy distinctions between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions is that the Buddhist individual, detached from a specific ethnicity, caste, or *jati*,

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48-9. The overwhelming majority of Indian schools of philosophy agree that the individual needs to realize the self as an autonomous agency.

159 Although not all Indian householders abandoned their family for a spiritual life in the wilderness, the very fact that this took place and was socially condoned is sufficient to indicate a real dissimilarity with the Jewish and Chinese traditions.

was free from the particularistic social constraints of the Vedic model. Perhaps more than any other religious tradition, Buddhism directs our attention to the inner structure of the universal individual consciousness. In spite of the many social concerns that Buddhism raises, the Buddha was predominantly interested in the individual as the root for eliminating suffering. Paradoxically, proving the illusionary status of the self in Buddhism requires an initial detailed explication of the structure of consciousness.\textsuperscript{161} The Buddhist stance, even in its Chinese manifestation, is almost antithetical to the traditional Chinese perception of the individual, who was construed in terms of conduct, reciprocity and social positioning. The dissimilar sensitivities towards the individual in these cultures represents one of the enduring points of contention in Buddhism’s long and gradual assimilation into the Chinese matrix. The family unit, so fundamental to the Chinese picture of life, was challenged by Indian monastic practices where believers were encouraged to seek liberation away from the family. In fact, As Gananath Obeyesekere points out “it should be remembered, form the Buddhist viewpoint, the life of domesticity is also a kind of prison.”\textsuperscript{162} Such socially oriented discrepancies, even after the intense sinicization of the Buddhist tradition, were never entirely dissolved and remained at the heart of an ongoing tension between the Confucian and Buddhist traditions.

\textsuperscript{161} Wolfgang Bauer, “The Hidden Hero: Creation and Disintegration of the Ideal of Eremitism,” in Donald Munro ed., \textit{Individualism and Holism}, p. 184. Bauer hints at this irony when he claims that the Chinese Buddhist tradition represents the “rising interest in the structure of the inner self and its various components. Buddhist meditation whether practiced in monasteries or home was apparently based on a much more active attitude than one might expect. It tried systematically to discover the features of the self, like landmarks of an unknown continent, even while simultaneously denying the very existence of this continent.”

In conclusion, both the Jewish and Confucian traditions never offered the individual formal channels for avoiding family life as in the case of Buddhist and Christian monasticism. In spite of many differences between the Jewish and Chinese individual, an important generalization needs to be made: human fulfillment and self realization takes place within a social and relational reality which begins with the family unit. The individual in synthetic traditions such as Judaism and Confucianism is not an autonomous entity but rather embedded in a matrix of relationships.

2.2.3 Conceptions of the Family

I the following section I will explore the very different relationship between the individual, family, and society in analytic and synthetic traditions. I will argue that the analytic modality’s marginalization of the family unit in favor of individual autonomy led to greater tensions between individual and social interests. Synthetic traditions, on the other hand, prioritize the family such that it becomes complementary with social institutions and a central institution in its own right. The Jewish and Chinese family, in other words, functions as a medium for the maintenance of social stability and order.

C.K. Yang notes that the “emphasis on hierarchical harmony in the Chinese family inevitably tends to place structural constraints on the individual.”\textsuperscript{163} The question that comes to mind is what kind of constraints can the family potentially exert on members and by what means are such constraints enforced? Yang notes:

the Western concept of individualism… runs directly counter to the spirit of the traditional Chinese family and is incompatible with the traditional loyalty to it…Self cultivation, the basic theme of Confucian ethics traditionally inculcated in the child’s mind from an early age, did not seek a solution to social conflict in defining, limiting, and guaranteeing the rights and interests of the individual or in the balance of power and interests between individuals. It sought the solution from the self-sacrifice of the individual for the preservation of the group.164

As Yang suggests, what sets the Chinese tradition apart from the Western model is the way it anchors conceptions of the individual in communal life beginning with family relations. Traditions of social embeddedness tend to devise strategies of order that locate the *sumnum bonum* of spirituality within the communal sphere. Cultural role models promoted by the Chinese and Jewish traditions represent beacons of familial ties and communal involvement. The family inhibits the possibility for individuals to develop in separation from dense networks of relationships; the individual is ‘implicated’ in a matrix of duties and loyalties to which the tradition expects her and him to conform. It is only through such conformity that one can gain prestige and social recognition. The Chinese and Jewish worldviews refuse to establish a tension between the individual, the family, and the social sphere; the family *is* the tradition, it is where traditional values are inculcated and experienced in daily life, rituals, and holidays.165 Galia Patt-Shamir argues


165 Christian Jochim notes that in China the most fundamental religious obligations were practiced in the house where one could most probably find the family altar dedicated to specific ancestors. Therefore not only is the family the most fundamental economic unit it was also the most fundamental unit for religious practice. In the Confucian tradition all of society even government can be run according to the model of the family. The emperor is the son of Heaven and the ministers treat their emperor as a father. Jochim, *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective*, pp.
that the concept of the Way (Dao and Halakha), as elaborated in the Analects and the Talmud is rooted in a family ethics. According to her, both the Confucian and rabbinic worldviews treated the family as the most fundamental domain of ethical and religious activity.¹⁶⁶

Traditions that prioritize the family over the individual reserve a very important function for the family unit in the preservation of political and social stability. Conflicts between selfish individual goals and the community are generally moderated due to a subdued sense of autonomy in family members and a relative concordance between familial and social interests. In both family and society there exists the basic assumption that human relationships and communal solidarity are an essential prerequisite for stability. Consequently, social demands do not seem to clash with the family rationale as much as they do with the private and potentially anti-social tendencies of the individual in analytic traditions.¹⁶⁷ This is reflected in the type of religious virtuosos we encounter in

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¹⁶⁷ The Chinese family-based model represents a social structure that countered both egoistic and universalistic tendencies. Mencius (孟子, 385-303 BCE), the Confucians philosopher to which all dominant schools of Neo-Confucianism traced their lineage, was very much aware of the destructive qualities of individualism and universalism. By positioning himself between the egoism of the early Daoist Yang Zhu (楊朱, 440-360 BCE) and the universal love (jian ai, 兼愛) of the philosopher Mo Zi (墨子, 470-391 BCE), Mencius convincingly argues for the merits of a social order based on the family framework. He warns his followers against the destructive ramifications of Yang Zhu’s egoism where the individual “would not pluck a hair from his body to benefit the world,” (拔一毛而利天下不為也). Similarly, he points to the lack of filiality and respect for the family institution advocated by the Mohist demand that one love all fathers, mothers, and sons as much as he loves his own. Egoism and universalism, which seem apparently oppositional, share at least one important feature. Although the Mohist utopian vision of love without distinction is communal to the extreme, it nevertheless represents a ‘contract’ between disparate individuals. The family, as in the case of Yang Zhu’s egoism, is marginalized in favor
the Greek, Christian, and Indo-Buddhist traditions, where instead of social engagement the individual frequently seeks a personal contact with ultimate reality within the solitude of the monastery and temple. Even the young Siddhartha, the prototype of the Buddhist tradition, left his wife and child in favor of a personal spiritual quest. Self-transformation away from society and the family unit implies the secondary status of communal ties in analytic traditions, in which converts are ideally expected to renounce, or at least subordinate, their tribal, ancestral, and familial affiliations to the Church or the Sangha.\textsuperscript{168}

The type of cognitive individualism we witness in the analytic modality invests the individual with a special significance that might clash with social interests. Since social constraints imposed by the family institution are relatively low in analytic traditions there emerges a higher probability for revolutionary changes that are subversive to, and in tension with central authority.

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of an individual-society relationship. By undermining the Confucian ideal of love-with-distinctions (爱有差等), Mozi comes full circle to a reality composed of distinct individuals. Mencius therefore promotes the family unit as the ideal between the extremes of egoism and universalism. In both cases he is attacking an individual-society model in favor of the Confucian family-society relationship. \textit{Mencius 7:A 26.} Mencius states: “Yangzi (Yangzhu) advocates the theory of each one for himself. He would not pull out a hair from his body for the benefit of the world. Mozi advocates the theory of love without discrimination. He would do anything for the benefit of the world even though he wore himself out from top to toe. Zimo took the middle course to avoid going to either extreme. 孟子曰: 楊子取為我, 拔一毛而利天下, 不為也. 墨子兼愛, 摩頂放踵利天下, 為之. 子莫執中, 執中為近之.

\textsuperscript{168} Bernstein attempts to show how family environments in the personal model (which I associate with analytic traditions), might encourage the development of autonomous agents. He argues that individuals in the personal model are to a great extent classified according to merit and their unique psychological qualities; those that excel in a particular activity will tend to take the lead in that field regardless of their age and gender. The Individual in such settings comes to realize that her future is to a great extent an outcome of her own efforts, such an approach is likely to further encourage members to express their uniqueness rather than conform to pre-established role stereotypes. Bernstein, \textit{Class, Codes and Control}, p. 153.
One of the points I want to stress about family-based traditions is the co-evolution of the family and social institutions in a way that the two reinforce each other’s legitimacy. While it is common to stress the extension of family relations towards the political sphere, especially in the Confucian case, it is equally true that both the Jewish and Chinese traditions extended the function of the ruling institutions into the family. This is an efficient way for ruling institutions to “outsource” supervisory responsibilities to the family institution.\footnote{This was most probably not a deliberate or planned process, but rather a gradual co-evolution that proved extremely efficient as a structure for social control.} In agreement with this assessment, Christian Jochim argues that the Chinese family as the basic social unit of Chinese religions did not let religious organizations evolve to high degree.\footnote{Jochim, \textit{Chinese religions: a Cultural Perspective}, p. 21.} The greater concordance between family and political and religious institutions meant that social control in synthetic traditions was less dependent on civil law imposed from above and more forcefully oriented towards self-regulation from within the family.

The Jewish family, much like its Chinese counterpart, was established as an extremely important component of social and religious life. Neusner claims that the family unit was the place where Jews were infused with the strong sense that survival is only possible as a communal effort.\footnote{Neusner, \textit{op., cit.}, p. 62.} According to David Biale the Jewish family has been a major safeguard against extinction and assimilation, “perceived as one of the few stable and enduring elements in the tumultuous insecurity of Jewish history; without it,
Jewish survival would have been far more problematic and difficult."\textsuperscript{172} Robert Goodkind highlights the function of the family as a source of indoctrination: "Throughout Jewish history the family has been the center from which all else emanates: Jewish education, involvement with the community, religious celebrations and observances and Jewish identity and continuity."\textsuperscript{173} Finally, Goodman draws our attention to familial activity as a channel for sanctification: 

\textit{[Jews] seek to observe the laws of Levitical purity as a kind of reenactment of the old priestly function, laying claim to a spiritualized and intellectualized successorship to the priests, and making every family table a ritual surrogate of the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem."}\textsuperscript{174} The family sphere, due to its unique function within the tradition, was the place where Jews made life holy. The Jewish family is a transmitter of tradition through early and ongoing instruction and it perpetuates the tradition through procreation and marriage.

Judaism, like the Confucian tradition, is an excellent example of the family-society model where individualism is seen as a potentially destructive force, and is therefore subdued and controlled. The Jewish and Chinese systems tapped into the inherent characteristics of their social structures, using the family and its potent foundation of biological relations, affection, and authority as a microcosm for social and political stability. The synthetic model outsources social control to the family sphere thereby relying on its stabilizing effects while simultaneously constraining the potentially


\textsuperscript{173} Robert E. Goodkind, Introduction to \textit{The Jewish Family and Jewish Continuity}, p. vii.

\textsuperscript{174} Lenn Goodman, “The Individual and Community,” p. 96.
subversive effects of individualists. Stability is based on pre-arranged roles that to a great extent eliminate dilemmas and confusion that originate in the free choice of the individual. Below, I will look at two family-based mechanism for social control that are central to synthetic traditions.

2.4.4 Family and Procreation

Procreation is perhaps one of the most fundamental ideals in the Jewish and Chinese traditions. Although marriage, as the first step towards establishing a family and bearing children, is seen as a sanctified act by most religious traditions, there is a particular stress on child bearing in synthetic traditions. The differences between various traditions regarding procreation may be subtle but they are nevertheless real and important. As mentioned earlier, one way of establishing the family as an indispensable part of social order was by designating it as a primary domain for religious activity. Huguette Wieselberg points out that “an unmarried man is unable to fulfill many of the Jewish laws regarding marriage and child rearing.”\textsuperscript{175} This meant that self-realization could hardly be achieved outside the family unit where procreation became the most fundamental demand of a married couple. Being such a central factor of religious life it is clear that there was an intense pressure on individuals to marry and bear children. The Jewish demand to be fruitful and multiply elevated marriage and child bearing to an extremely central level. Rarely did rabbis feel compelled to justify or explain why procreation was important; childbearing was seen as good in and of itself and sexual

relations within the confines of marriage were advocated as a desirable act which was sanctified by God.  

Family-based traditions see success as a communal enterprise rather than an individual one. When the family is seen as the main unit through which members can gain social recognition and rise to power, it is more likely that there will exist an interest to establish large families. Procreation can enhance the chances of family networks to project their influence more efficiently. Procreation, when it is emphasized in such an exceptional way, becomes a strategy for reinforcing and perpetuating the function of the family as a central social institution. In synthetic cultures bearing children is not merely a strategy for survival but a positive act and religious duty. It is no wonder that few major rabbis during the Talmudic era remained single, and those who did were not considered role models. Biale notes that the sanctification of the family and marriage led to the absence of celibacy in Judaism. According to him it is quite amazing that “the only case

176 Bayme and Gladys, The Jewish Family and Jewish Continuity, p. 263.
177 In both the Jewish and Confucian traditions, a large number of male children increased the probability of reaching distinction in scholarship, the most efficient channels to increase family prestige. Males who did not excel intellectually could perhaps disclose resourcefulness by excelling financially. Daughters, especially attractive ones, were an effective channel for climbing the social ladder and marrying into more prestigious families; they were also an important workforce in running large traditional households. Although such disturbing gender roles seem offensive in a modern context, they were nevertheless crucial in all pre-modern societies. See Peter Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours’: Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China (esp. Ch.2 “The Transformation of the Shih”). Bol shows that before the Tang-Song transition promotion in government was almost exclusively confined to clan and family background while beginning in the early 8th century there was a gradual shift to an escalating reliance on scholarly merit. In both cases the family was seen as the unit of success. Official court hierarchies were of clans and not of individuals (eg. The Great T’ang Record of Clans.” Clans (Zu) were composed of collections of families (Jia) with a common Choronym. “Those families that failed to place successive generations of males in bureaucratic careers and had to live off the land…tended to lose their presence in the clan until they regained official careers,” Ibid., p. 38.
for celibacy cited in the Talmud is that of the second-century rabbi, Ben Azzai, who declared “my soul is in love with the Torah,” but his example was rejected by the rabbis and was rarely regarded as a model for the behavior of others.”¹⁷⁹ This can be clearly contrasted with the Christian advocacy of monasticism as a desirable religious ideal.

The Chinese and Jewish experiences disclose striking resemblances. Monasticism was one of the most problematic obstacles in Buddhism’s acceptance into China where the idea of severing the genealogical chain of the family was highly unpopular. Individual seclusion in Confucianism was extremely rare and was mainly a way for expressing one’s dissatisfaction with political corruption. Such forms of seclusion were mainly practiced by married men and seen as a temporary act that would ideally end with the reintegration of the individual into an active social life. More importantly, Wolfgang Bauer shows that Christian and Buddhist forms of monasticism ideally included celibacy while Chinese forms of seclusion never categorically expected one to abandon family life and the ideal of procreation. According to Bauer, Christian and Buddhist celibacy reflects a pessimistic worldview:

¹⁷⁹ David Biale, “Classical teaching and historical Experience,” pp. 134-5. (Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 63b). Interestingly “celibacy was evidently practiced by some of the Essenes in the late second temple period, but their practices had more of an impact on early Christianity than on normative Judaism.” Such an example is illuminating as it demonstrates how certain practices that did not conform to the basic tenets of Judaism, found a fertile ground in the more analytically inclined Christian world. The ability of celibacy to prosper in the Christian tradition is most likely related to its world-negating tendencies as well as to its more individualistic characteristics, which enabled members to forge a path outside the conventional family unit. Celibacy in Christianity is also a continuation of a Greek moralistic strand of thought that can be clearly detected in Plato’s idea of directing sexual energies to the ideal world in the Symposium, as well as in Plotinus’ mystical philosophy that showed clear tendencies towards celibacy and different forms of abstinence so clear in Porphyry’s De Abstinentia. See more in Wallis, R. T. Neoplatonism (London: Duckworth, 1972), esp. pp. 9-10.
With few exceptions, under the influence of these two religions, both monasticism and eremitism include celibacy as a conspicuous characteristic. Abstention from reproduction is the most radical expression of existential pessimism. In Buddhism and Christianity, a recluse or a monk raising a family is a contradiction in terms. In contrast, for the indigenous Chinese hermit, regardless of which philosophy he starts from, lifelong continence is never at issue.  

In conclusion, synthetic traditions promote a worldview in which the failure to establish a family would entail severe social inconveniences. Yao Xinzong notes that: “In the Confucian classics, incomplete families were taken as a shame on the society and ‘old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, young children without parents’ were considered to be the most destitute and had to be properly taken care of.” As in the Chinese case, the failure to establish a family in Judaism wasn’t even a rejected possibility, in fact, unmarried or childless individual were frequently perceived as being in a state of sin. The stigmas attached to those who failed or refused to bear children, were a strong reason for members, even those that were not naturally inclined towards marital relations and childbearing, to conform to tradition. Procreation, when elevated to such an important position can be seen as a structural feature that is designed to restrict possibilities that are potentially detrimental to social stability. One of the most obvious functions of early marriage and procreation is that once a couple establishes a family and raises children there in much less incentive to challenge social conventions and undermine stability. The centrality of the family, early marriage,

181 Yao demonstrates that both the Confucian and Jewish traditions constructed metaphysical systems that were related to the family order. See his Wisdom in Early Confucian and Israelite Traditions, p. 148.
and procreation should therefore be understood as efficient strategies of control that eventually evolved into central theological concern in synthetic traditions.

2.2.5 Filial Piety

Reminiscent of the fifth commandment where Jews are instructed to “honor thy father and mother”, the Classic of Filial Piety (孝經) placed the ideal of honoring elders “at the very center of personal, family, and social existence.” Galia Patt-Shamir notes that “many systems of thought advocate respect for one’s parents, yet in Confucianism and Judaism this virtue is made into a basic tenet in the whole structure of human relationships.” The early twentieth-century philosopher Hu She (胡適) claimed that the centrality of filiality led to the complete submergence of the individual in familial ethics thereby striping persons of an independent existence. The ideal of filial piety, so central to both Judaism and Confucianism highlights the family as the locus of ethical behavior, and although honoring one’s parents may feature in all traditions, when it occupies such a central position as it does in Confucianism and Judaism it is not unreasonable to consider it as an efficient method for control. In Analect 4.18 Confucius declares, “In serving your father and mother, remonstrate with them gently. On seeing that they do not heed your suggestions, remain respectful and do not act contrary, although concerned, voice no

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182 Ambrose Y.C. King, “The individual and Group in Confucianism” in Donald Munro ed. Individualism and Holism, p. 58.
183 Galia Patt-Shamir and Yaov Rapaport “Crossing the Boundaries Between Confucianism and Judaism,” p. 55.
resentment.” Analect 1.11 goes as far as declaring that after a father’s death “if three years later, the son has not veered from the father’s way, he may be called a dutiful son indeed.” The Confucian son, like his Jewish counterpart, is not encouraged to insistently advance new ideas; reverence for one’s parents is simultaneously an acknowledgment that tradition should not be aggressively challenged and that the perspective of elders should take precedence over unrestrained change. In their comparative work Patt-Shamir and Rapoport argue that:

respect for parents must be shown throughout their lives, as well as after their deaths.

Reminiscent of the Lunyu [Analects] attitude, we read in the Talmud: that “A person must honor his father in life and in death” (Kiddushin 31.2)… One should respect parents even when provoked by them, exercise restraint, and do nothing disrespectful.  

The Talmud’s interpretation of Leviticus 19:3 “You shall fear your mother and your father” is that "fear" means not sitting or standing in a parent's designated place and not

\[\text{Analect 4:18. 子日: 事父母幾諫, 見志不從, 又敬不違, 勞而不怨. Roger T. Ames, and Henry Rosemont trans., } \text{The Analects of Confucius, p. 93; James Legge’s famous translation interprets this analect differently: “The master said: In serving his parents, a son may remonstrate with them, but gently; when he sees that they so not incline to follow his advice, he shows an increased degree of reverence, but does not abandon his purpose; and should they punish him, he does not allow himself to murmur.” James Legge, } \text{The Four Books: Confucian Analects, the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the Works of Mencius (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), pp. 170-1. More recent translations such as Simon Leys’ tend to agree with Hall and Rosemount: “When you serve your parents, you may gently remonstrate with them. If you see that they do not take your advice, be all the more respectful and do nor contradict them. Let not your efforts turn to bitterness.” Simon Leys trans., } \text{The Analects of Confucius (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co. Ltd, 1997), p. 17.} \]

\[\text{Analect 1.11: 子曰: 父在, 観其志; 父没, 観其行; 三年無改於父之道, 可謂孝矣.} \]

\[\text{Galia Patt-Shamir and Yaov Rapaport op. cit., p. 56. In a similar vein, the Book of Ben Sira (3:13) says “Even if He [your father] is lacking in understanding, show forbearance.”} \]
contradicting a parent. The establishment of filial piety as a central concern of a tradition, so clearly the case in Judaism and Confucianism, provides a model of order that establishes the family unit as the focal point of the tradition. The central importance of respect for parents, beyond its clear ethical value, is simultaneously a stabilizing factor that decreases possibilities for self-actualization and anti-social activity. In other words, young, energetic, and possibly unrestrained individuals are more strongly domesticated and subordinated to a conservative generation of elders. Showing signs of disrespect to parents in such cultures could be extremely problematic and even heretical.

Yao Xinzong notes that “Confucian and Israeliite families shared a number of features. A family was a place where the tradition, both religious and ethical, was maintained, the young were educated, and the old were respected as the embodiment of traditional values.” Yao goes on to claim that in the Jewish case “parents represented the authority, wisdom and tradition, whose instruction was believed to enable children or the young in general to ‘gain insight’.” The establishment of such a strict a family-based ethic enables a tradition to locate social control within communal bonds rather than impose those laws form above. This meant that digressions and disobedience by individuals could be dealt with on a more local level. Confucius was very clear about

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188 Babylonian Talmud, Kidushin 31b.
189 Kenneth Abbott makes a helpful distinction between self-actualization as a spontaneous and personal form of improvement and expression in the West, as opposed to the Chinese concept of self-cultivation (修身) where the individual seeks to improve the self through an ordered and preconceived method. Harmony and Individualism (Taipei: The Orient Service, 1970).
190 Yao Xinzong, Wisdom in early Confucian and Israelite traditions, p. 147. [my italics].
191 Ibid., p. 149.
192 This ideal is strongly echoed in Proverbs 4:1: “Hear, ye children, the instruction of your father, and attend to know understanding. For I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law. For I was
the relationship between filial piety and political obedience, his disciple Master You (有子) states: “A man who respects his parents and his elders would hardly be inclined to defy his superiors. A man who is not inclined to defy his superiors will never foment a rebellion. A gentleman works at the root. Once the root is secure, the Way unfolds. To respect parents and elders is the root of humanity.”193 Both the Jewish and Confucian worldviews share the idea that the basic relationships within the family unit are the source of our relationship with society at large. Both traditions agree that once the “root is secured” within the family, one will foster a sense of obedience that stems from sentiments of love, reverence, and respect rather than conformity that stem from fear of punishment and retribution. When Confucius was asked why he refused to join politics he referred his students to the Book of Documents (書經): “Only Cultivate filial piety and be kind to your brothers, and you will be contributing to the body politic. This is also a form of political action…”194 The type of filial respect that the Jewish and Chinese traditions demand is not merely a local familial matter, it carries social and political ramifications that stand at the core of stability and order. The integrity and importance of the family unit is continuously supported by theological, social, and political discourses where

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familial ideals are presented as the foundation for ethical behavior and cosmological order.

The weight that the Chinese and Jewish traditions lay on honoring elders, as well as those who symbolically represent elders such as teachers and rulers, represents the tradition’s demand for the prioritization of communal needs over those of the individual. Here again, the family, in practice and in symbol, is used as a devise for the organization and legitimation of an official social order. A central idea in the rabbinic and Confucian visions of order is that caring for one’s parents is perhaps the child’s most fundamental and sacred duty. There are numerous examples in Confucian literature such as the *Book of Rites* (禮記), the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi* where the ideal of caring for one’s parents is presented as the pinnacle of ethical virtue. Beyond respect, there is a demand to pragmatically care for our parents’ material needs, a demand that is simultaneously a warning against abandoning one’s parents at old age. The Confucian and Jewish child was expected to care for his parents’ shelter, cloths, and food, a duty that would become practically impossible without physical proximity. Entrusting children with their parents’ welfare explains the emergence of the Chinese ideal of ‘three generations under one roof’ (三代同堂) and similar attitudes in Judaism. The Talmud’s interpretation of Exodus 20:12 “Honor thy father and mother” explains the word “honor” as feeding parents, clothing parents and helping them in and out of the house; certainly duties that necessitate a physical proximity between children, parents, and grandparents. In analect 4.19 the master declares: “when your father and mother are alive, do not
journey afar, and when you do travel, be sure to have a specific destination."\[195\]

Abandoning the family, even as an adult, is frowned upon; members are encouraged to remain together and care for each other. Hence, filial piety and family-based social welfare were established as fundamental ethical ideals in cultures that adhere to the synthetic modality.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the potentially subversive tendencies of analytic traditions - tendencies that can possibly entail a rebellious attitude towards one’s own family. Such anti-social features find their roots in the way the individual bypasses the familial and social spheres in favor of private modes of spirituality. Analytic universal traditions such as Christianity and Buddhism claim that siding with the truth might entail turning one’s back upon one’s own family and tradition. In Matthew 10:35-37, Jesus announces:

For I have come to set a man against his father, and daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son and daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Such a proclamation, in spite of its possible non-literal meaning, is extremely unlikely to feature in the Jewish or Chinese context. Similarly, Buddhism’s demand to leave the household and dedicate oneself to the quest of liberation reflects the same analytic,

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\[195\] Analect 4.19: 子曰: 父母在, 不遠遊. 遊必有方. Confucius adds that filiality must be accommodated by a sense of respect, he states: “Nowadays people think they are dutiful sons when they feed their parents. Yet they also feed their dogs and horses. Unless there is respect, where is the difference?” Leys ibid., p. 7. see Analect 2.7: 子游問孝. 子曰: 今之孝者, 是謂能養. 竟於大馬, 皆能有養; 不敬, 何以別乎？
autonomy-based model. In order to justify the problematic Indian custom of leaving the family, the famous Chinese Buddhist polemicist Mouzi (牟子) argued in his *Lihuolun* (理惑論- Master Mou's Treatise Settling Doubts) that Buddhist filial piety is concerned with the parent’s soul rather than the parent’s material well-being in this world. Although this is a good example of how Buddhism’s mentalistic proclivities were creatively fused with native Chinese sensibilities, the differences remain obvious. The Buddhist idea that filial piety could be practiced away from one’s household in favor of the soul in the afterlife was undermining the family unit as a central social institution.

As I shall attempt to show throughout this study, the differences between the individual-society (autonomy) and family-society (embeddedness) models of social control are related to a large host of dichotomies between the analytic and synthetic modalities. Sociality is intimately interrelated with cognitive dispositions, strategies of communication (codes), theological beliefs, and attitudes towards the body. These complementary relationships are supported by scientific data as well; through a series of experiments, social psychologists Shinobu Kitayama and Hazel Markus have demonstrated that members of societies that conform to social embeddedness do not only perceive individuals as integrated parts of the social body, but they also tend to perceive other events and objects in a synthetic and organic way. In other words, the fluidity between the individual, the family, and social institutions in synthetic traditions is also

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reflected in a non-atomistic perception of events and objects, words, and symbols.\textsuperscript{197} As demonstrated in the last chapter Ultra-Orthodox communities disclose a similar relationship between social embeddedness and holistic field-dependence. Yet another symbiotic relationship exists between social embeddedness (social level) and particularism (cultural level). In a series of experiments, social and personality psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper have demonstrated that groups that conform to social embeddedness tend to disclose more hostility to out-group members. Such in-group empathy and external hostility is more likely to give rise to a particularistic cultural ethos.\textsuperscript{198}

\textbf{2.2.6 Individual and Community in Literary Formats}

Before proceeding to the cultural level it is worth looking at how the unique qualities of literary formats reflect the ideal of social embeddedness. A dominant feature of pre-Kabbalistic rabbinical literature is its emphasis on a communal and inclusive discourse. It is not so much the dialogical format that gave Talmudic and Midrashic literature its communal characteristics, but rather the type of dialogue it endorsed. Indeed, Platonic philosophy is undoubtedly dialogical, but it lacks the strictly communal features of rabbinical literature. In other words, although Plato’s dialogues take place between multiple participants, they are ultimately structured towards revealing the truths that

\textsuperscript{197} On more about the fluidity between the individual and society, especially the household in the Confucian tradition, see William Theodore de Bary, \textit{Learning for One’s Self: Essays on the Individual in Neo-Confucian Thought} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 29.

Socrates, as an individual thinker ventures to promote. His companions function as a literary device for advancing a univocal perspective of reality that continually refutes the naïveté and shortcomings of his associates. As one scholar points out, the Socratic dialogues found in Plato’s works are more of a “covert treatise” than a joint communal effort at exploring the truth. Talmudic discourse, on the other hand, refuses to prioritize a particular rabbi’s opinion over those of others. William Scott Green notes that “rabbinic literature has no authors. No document claims to be the writing of an individual rabbi in his own words, and all contain the ostensible sayings of, and stories about, many rabbis, usually of several generations…. Rabbinic literature is severely edited, anonymous, and collective.”

The communal character of rabbinic literature stands in stark contrast to the Greco-Christian models in which individuals engage in philosophical and theological polemics, advancing their ideas vis-à-vis contending opinions. The communal nature of the Talmudic corpus is not merely an outcome of a pluralistic participation but rather a product of a highly egalitarian dialogue in which opinions interact and blend but are rarely excluded or rejected. The methodological assumptions of the Jewish tradition are such that the interaction between ideas is relational. Of paramount importance, is not simply the content of a particular opinion, be it correct or wrong, but rather the ability to harmonize and integrate different views into a coherent consensus. H.L. Strack stresses

200 Scott W. Green, “Storytelling and Holy Man: The Case if Ancient Judaism” in Jacob Neusner Take Judaism, for Example, p. 30.
201 Green notes “This massive labor of homogeneity suggests that devotion to individual masters played little role in the motivations of the men who made up the texts…” Ibid.
the anonymity of the classical Jewish corpus: “in late midrashim the names of the rabbis become less and less frequent, and finally disappear almost entirely.” These non-individualistic forces in Judaism represent one of the most salient characteristics of the tradition. The structural and methodological nature of Talmudic literature is a reflection of the pervasive prioritization of the communal organism over the secluded individual thinker. The written tradition represents “a literature of contention without victors, in which the sense of separate existences is minimal.”

The anti-individualistic features of the synthetic modality are reinforced by the centrality of commentary as the preferable form of religious discourse. Although all major religions rely on commentary to some extent, this form of discourse is exceptionally dominant in Judaism and Confucianism. The Chinese commentarial tradition was established as the foundation of the imperial examination system. The Five Classics, which represented the locus of the examination system, were printed together with a close and officially accepted interlinear commentary in the body of the text. In other words, the Classics were rarely open to the spontaneous interpretation of an individual reader. These conservative impulses safeguarded the tradition’s exclusive

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202 Strack, op., cit, p. 239.
203 Green, op. cit., p.34. Trying to explain Talmudic literature in terms of content is problematic since the participatory element is absolutely crucial for grasping its essence. The great joy of studying the Talmudic text, so often alluded to by its towering students, is related to actually ‘doing it.’ The rabbis engage in a type of intellectual acrobatic as they leap through the pages, parade their imaginative virtuosity, and offer creative solutions to new and changing circumstances. Non-Jews frequently misunderstood the true essence of the Talmud since without engagement the text remains incomplete; its potential and telos unrealized. I think the human component is indispensable in a very different way than an unread Shakespearian masterpiece. While Macbeth remains complete with or without a reader, the Talmud requires a unique set of human interactions in order to infuse it with the kind of dynamic necessary for its full actualization.
authority while names of authors and commentators were marginalized in favor of an anonymous communal voice. Similarities between the Jewish and Chinese commentarial traditions can be seen on several levels, it should therefore come as no surprise that Daniel Gardner chose to use Jewish Midrash to explain the nature of Chinese commentary; he claims that “what mediates between the text of the classic and the interpretive community in a sense, is not the single authoritative voice of any particular commentator but the multivocality–expressed in the voice of a particular commentator–of the received commentarial tradition.”

Commentary is a literature of constant engagement, this is clearly discernible in the Confucian tradition where selected commentaries were themselves established as classics and were made subject to further commentaries and even third layer commentaries. Gardner highlights the ‘elasticity’ of commentarial methodologies: “reading the range of commentaries on any one of these texts quickly reveals that there is no one shared ‘right’ reading of the text, that different commentators lend different “reasonable” meanings to words, phrases, lines, paragraphs, and chapters, resulting in fundamentally different readings.” Again, the synthetic mode of operation tends to downplay confrontations in favor of harmonizing conflicting interpretations. Unlike the

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204 Even when a commentary is known to be authored by a certain individual i.e. the famous Zuo, Gong Yang and Guliang commentaries, it is accepted by virtue of a communal consensus and official legitimation.


206 Gardner, Zhu’s reading of the Analects, p. 5.
polemical legacies of Christians and Indian Buddhists, the ultimate concern is not to prove that one’s own truth prevails over all others, but rather to integrate divergent opinions into a coherent worldview. Traditions in which commentary is the central mode of religious discourse exhibit communal patterns that are less apparent in cultures in which individuals write personal monographs and engage in confrontational polemics. Indeed, in contrast to such individualistic trends, it is quite amazing that in Judaism for instance, there are no books authored by individual rabbis prior to the tenth century, precisely when Greek-influenced Jewish philosophy emerged.

2.2.7 Differences within Similarities

The basic sociological orientation a tradition falls into, whether it is social autonomy or social embeddedness, can have a wide variety of manifestations. One example is the two very different ways social embeddedness was practiced by the Jewish and Chinese traditions. While rabbinic Judaism adhered to a form of egalitarian embeddedness, the Chinese tradition promoted a typically Confucian hierarchical embeddedness. Such variations notwithstanding, the Chinese and Jewish approaches both disclosed a clear social bias towards an embedded and communal ethos that obstructed the type of autonomy so characteristic of analytic traditions. In the concluding fifth chapter, I will return to explore how traditions that belong to the same cultural model, be it synthetic or analytic, can express their common morphologies in a substantially different manner.
2.3 THE CULTURAL LEVEL

The following chapter will be concerned with some of the cultural ramifications of operating under the assumptions of the analytic and synthetic modality. I will focus on four dichotomies that I see as central to the morphology of the cultural level:

a) Orthopraxy vs. Contemplation

b) Particularism vs. Universalism

c) This-Worldliness vs. Other-Worldliness

d) Non Indo-European languages vs. Indo-European Languages

Generally speaking, these cultural distinctions reflect the different ways synthetic and analytic traditions treat the relationship between a) humans and their bodies, b) humans and other humans, c) and humans and the world/cosmos. The fourth, linguistic dichotomy transcends the realm of culture *per-se*; I chose to add it to the cultural level in order to highlight the interrelationship between language and the domain of ideas and behavior, but language clearly has implications that are relevant to the cognitive and social levels as well.

2.3.1 Orthopraxy vs. Contemplation

On the most fundamental level, the distinction between orthopraxy and contemplation focuses on dissimilar approaches towards the body. One of the most apparent features of traditions that operate within the synthetic modality is their
affirmative and even reverential attitude towards the human body. In Judaism and Chinese culture one's physical and material existence occupies a positive and central function. In both traditions ritual activity had a far more dominant position than activities such as meditation and contemplation. In the introduction to his book titled the *People of the Body* Howard Eilberg-Schwartz attacks what he sees as the distorted image of Jews as ‘People of the Book:’

…the image of the Jew (who is always a male) pouring over a book is misleading. He appears to be involved in an elevated, spiritual pursuit. But if we could peer over his shoulder and see what his text says, he may in fact be reading about matters as mundane as which hand to use in cleaning himself…”People of the Book” is thus a deceptive image. It directs the gaze to the thinker but not to the subject that is tantalizing his imagination.207

Talmudic themes are frequently concerned with the biological aspects of reality. In fact, as Daniel Boyarin suggests, numerous scholars argue the Talmud’s “thematics of the material body, the body of reproduction, is its major emphasis.”208 Graphic and detailed discussions of highly intimate physical and sexual matters in the Talmud have been a source of embarrassment for many contemporary Jews who sought to present their tradition from a less carnal perspective: “the designation “People of the Book” is thus one

207 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz ed. *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism form an embodied perspective*, p. 3.
of the visible expressions of a larger modern strategy that attempts to disembody Jews and Judaism in hope of spiritualizing them.  

Perhaps the most apparent reflection of the centrality of the body in the synthetic modality can be seen in its strong stress on ritualization. Although the rituals performed by Rabbis and Confucians were radically different and enacted in substantially different cultural contexts, both traditions saw ritual as the most central religious activity. Judaism is in many ways a tradition of sacred action; movement and deeds, as prescribed by the Torah and elaborated upon in the Talmud, are a fundamental feature of being Jewish. Unlike the rationalist worldview, classical Judaism did not lay a strong stress on contemplation, meditative techniques, and otherworldly themes. Talmudic discourse is to a great extent an investigation of how to act here and now. The strong stress of the rabbinic tradition on orthopraxy functions to sanctify and regulate life in all its domains. According to Gershom Scholem, Judaism was predominantly concerned “with a religious practice which seemed to be concentrated almost exclusively on the practical, physical performance of material deeds. Jewish religious law seemed to decide one's level of religious attainment solely by one's physical and bodily behavior, and not by recourse to any inner spiritual element.” In his Enchanted Chains, Moshe Idel asks scholars to pay greater attention to the centrality of observance and rules of ritual in their analysis of religious traditions, especially Judaism. He offers to reorient our methodological approach from one that stresses theological content—ideas, and beliefs— to a more ‘technical approach’ focused on practices and techniques which are more detectable,

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209 Eilberg-Schwartz, op. cit., p. 3.
recognizable, and distinct. Although scholars such as Scholem and his student Isaiah Tishby were very much aware of the centrality of ritual in Judaism, according to Idel their work was strongly influenced by the Christian concern with ideas and beliefs rather than concrete activities characteristic of Judaism. One example of the Christian detachment from concrete activities is Rudolf Otto’s notion of the “Holy” as that which is separated and distant from the human sphere. Idel suggests that in the Jewish experience the Holy is part and parcel of action and ritual technique. The ritualization of life and the sanctification of performative acts entail a type of holiness that is intimate and connective rather than distant and radically transcendent. Idel goes as far as contending that the recognizable and punctilious performance of ordered sequences of action represents the possible “deep structure of classical Judaism.”

According to John E. Smith:

…the Hebraic religion generally came to understand the self as requiring embodiment. In keeping with their high estimation of the visible world and of natural things, Hebraic thinkers were opposed to identifying the person merely with an “immaterial” aspect of its being. The self needs a body of some sort as a medium of expression; the self is not an ethereal spirit that is without localization and definite involvement in created, visible things.

Why Jews were obliged to perform the complex set of rituals prescribed by the tradition is not always clear, but the fact that they had to perform them was never seriously challenged until the modern age.

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Turning to the analytic mode of operation, we can make a safe generalization: analytic traditions downplayed the role of the body and shifted their attention to the mental world of ideas and faith. The contemplative features of the Greek tradition, so obvious in Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, as well as in Christianity, are particularly obvious in contrast with Judaism and Confucianism. When Augustine was asked in the *Soliloquia*, “What is it that you chiefly desire to know?” his answer was “God and the Soul”. This reply reflects the emphasis on the abstract and intangible concerns of the Greco-Christian tradition where the body was gradually marginalized and at times explicitly attacked.\(^{214}\) St. Augustine highlighted the idea of spirituality as an intimate affair between the individual and God, it was in the meditating self that one could embark on his quest for God and Truth. This became a shaping force in the Christian world where in order to recover the presence of the divine, one was encouraged to reflect on his inner nature: “Each individual self must carry out the meditative process for himself, and, in so doing he comes to an understanding of himself not to be gained from *external* observation.”\(^{215}\) Monotheism, as never before, began to take place within the private contemplative jurisdiction of the individual. Such mentalistic approaches became highly influential in shaping Christian theology as well as the European philosophical tradition.\(^{216}\) Kenneth Seeskin shows that “Kant's emphasis on the supremacy of reason calls into question the need for ritual. In fact Kant looks forward to the day when

\(^{214}\) Ibid., p. 257.

\(^{215}\) Ibid., pp. 256-7. [My Italics]

\(^{216}\) Ibid., pp. 267. Anslem, for instance, was reluctant to commit his famous ontological argument to writing, as he feared it would become objectified and thus prevent people from going through the necessary meditative process. See ibid., n.6.
“religion will gradually be freed from all empirical determining grounds and from all statutes which rest on history.” 217 This led to a shift from the Jewish deed-based tradition where ritual was mainly a public affair to an ethos that glorified accessing the divine through reason and the mental apparatus of the secluded subject.

The experiences of the young Martin Buber provide us with a telling example of the discrepancy between the two modalities of religious engagement. After experimenting with ecstatic forms of meditation, Buber came to feel that the pursuit of mental states “took a person away from the human world of encounter, and that it is only through our encounters with the human that we can encounter God.” Buber’s distinction between Judaism and the Greco-European tradition touches at the heart of the morphological distinction between orthopraxy and contemplation: “Jewish spirituality centers on the authenticity of human encounters and not on the cultivation of special feelings of holiness or ecstasy… Judaism is a call to unity, not dualism, one that demands a Judaism of deeds, not mental states.” 218

217 Seeskin, Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy, pp. 15-16. Seeskin notes: “Kant considered Judaism the archetype of a statutory religion, which means, in effect, that it is not a true religion at all. Even the Ten Commandments, whose moral validity is obvious, “are directed to nothing but outer observance.” In Kant’s opinion, it is only with Christianity that we get a religion containing moral teachings that require no other proof than that afforded by reason. Kant’s anti-clericism and frequent appeals to the freedom of conscience leave little doubt that if Christianity is a more advanced religion than Judaism, Protestantism is a more advanced form of Christianity than Catholicism.”

The Chinese tradition, in all its major religious strands, discloses the same stress on the biological human sphere so characteristic of the synthetic modality. The three major native religious systems of China; Confucianism, Daoism, and the diverse set of practices known collectively as popular religion, all treat the body in positive terms. Central notions regarding self-preservation, longevity, procreation, ritualism and embodied spiritual techniques such as Qigong and Taiji all point to this common interest. Buddhism, in its Sinicized form, was to a great extent transformed in order to meet such sensibilities towards the body. Philosophically, classical Chinese thought adheres to a form of materialism; the most foundational ontological substance known as Qi (氣) functions as a metaphysical common denominator of all schools of thought. Idealism was predominantly an Indian innovation that in spite of its unquestionable influence, never managed to divert Chinese thinkers form their basic affirmative stance towards the human body and material reality. In contrast to the Indo-European distinction between mind and body, Chinese thought sees our physique as a natural extension of the world and nature: “Human beings are part of the universe and function in exactly the same way as all other existing things: they are not separated from natural existence, they are not created special, and they are not different in structure or organizing principle.”

Although humans may be distinct by virtue of their unique consciousness, even consciousness (Jue, 覺) and Mind (Xin, 心) were never drastically separated from the material world, but rather seen as a purified form of the same force that constitutes

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material.\textsuperscript{220} Scholars have frequently highlighted the absence of the Mind/Body distinction in Chinese philosophy; they also constantly stressed the embodied nature of the notion of Mind.\textsuperscript{221} In other words, for the Chinese, the Mind and body “…cannot be dichotomized. The “purity” of mind abstracted from context, therefore, cannot be maintained.”\textsuperscript{222}

There exists a clear action/contemplation contrast between Confucianism and Buddhism. Confucians strove to radically ritualize life; the great sage claimed that “Giving yourself to ritual that is humanity (ren, 仁)…never look without ritual, never listen without ritual, never speak without ritual, and never move without ritual.”\textsuperscript{223}

Reminiscent of Idel’s argument against the presentation of Judaism in Western theological terms, Herbert Fingarette in one of the most influential books on Confucian ritual opposes the presentation of Confucianism from a biased Christian and Buddhist perspective. His argument supports the general ritualism/contemplation contrast between the synthetic and analytic modes of operation:

Buddhist ideas, however different from European ideas in so many respects, share with the latter certain fundamental biases: they favor the individualistic and subjectivistic view of man. It is individual mind, the inner life and reality of the individual, which is focal in

\textsuperscript{220} The Chinese sage, for instance, is characterized by his pure qi (qing qi, 清氣) which is contrasted with the turbid qi (zhuo qi, 濁氣) of common people.
\textsuperscript{222} Hall and Ames, \textit{Thinking through the Han}, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{223} \textit{The Analects}, 12:1: 子日：非禮勿視, 非禮勿聴, 非禮勿言, 非禮勿動.
understanding man as viewed throughout the main course of Buddhist and European thinking.\textsuperscript{224}

Fingarette mentions at least two of the morphological features that I argue for, namely, individualism and introspection. He contrasts these with the communal and externalized nature of the Chinese traditions so apparent in the \textit{Analects}.\textsuperscript{225} Fingarette attacks the biased mentalistic interpretations of Confucius, claiming the sage never considered the inner contemplative facets of the individual. He also points to the non-pessimistic dispositions that accompany such a perspective:

Confucius’s vision provides no basis for seeing man as a being of tragedy, of inner crisis and guilt; but it does provide a socially oriented, action-oriented view which provides for personal dignity….we see then that the images of the inner man and of his inner conflict are not essential to a concept of man as a being whose dignity is the consummation of a life of subtlety and sophistication, a life in which human conduct can be intelligible in natural terms and yet be attuned to the sacred, a life in which the practical, the intellectual and the spiritual are equally revered and are harmonized in the one act – the act of \textit{li} [ritual – 禮].\textsuperscript{226}

It seems so natural and even appealing to imagine Confucians and rabbis operating according to the assumptions of the analytic mindset; the individualism that dominates our modern world makes it counter-intuitive to think of religion in terms that are not contemplative and spiritualized. But this is exactly what Fingarette is arguing, and it

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{225} Fingarette is cautious to focus of the more authentic and earlier strata of the Analects, books 1-15 (16-20 are considered to be a later addition with distinct influences from the school of Legalism). He especially highlights the centrality of books 2-9 as the most reliable words of Confucius’ own circle.
\item \textsuperscript{226} Ibid., p. 36.
\end{itemize}
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seems that the data is in his favor. Prior to the emergence of the philosophical traditions of Greece and India there is very little indication that ancient religions entertained contemplative dispositions towards the divine. It seems that only with the advent of analytic axial traditions did mentalistic approaches begin to overshadow many ancient worldviews in which sacred existence found expression in community and action. Fingarette argues that “when we take into account Confucius’s stature as a moralist and his insightfulness into human nature, his failure to see or to mention the problem of internal moral conflict can only be accounted for by supposing that his interests, ideas, concerns, in short his entire moral and intellectual orientation, was in another direction.”

A good example of the Western bias towards introspective interpretations of synthetic traditions can be seen in the understanding of the central Confucian notion of *Humanity (ren – 仁)*

…one of the chief results of the present analysis of *jen* [ren] will be to reveal how Confucius could handle in a non-psychological way basic issues which we in the West naturally cast in psychological terms. The psychological, subjective use of *jen* in Chinese is a later development, a use whose import is exaggerated both by the profound psychological bias of Buddhist commentators and by Western, Greco-Christian outlooks of translators. The truly novel aspects of Confucius’s doctrine of *jen* are precisely what we need to see but fail to see because they are novel and hence not easily formulated in the psychologically biased language we have ready to hand.

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227 Ibid., p. 24. *Confucius: the Secular as Sacred* stirred considerable debate in Sinological circles, as it challenged some of our most basic Euro-centric assumptions regarding the essence of religious practices.

228 Ibid., p. 37.
Fingarette contends that *ren* is achieved in terms of ritual (*li*), especially ritual that is enacted in a reciprocal and communal sense. In other words, ritual “directs our attention to the traditional social pattern of conduct and relationships…” while the virtue of *ren* directs our attention “to the one who pursues that pattern of conduct and thus those relationships…the thing we must not do is to psychologize Confucius’s terminology in the Analects.”

In their collaborative work, Adam Seligman et al. propose a distinction between *ritual* and *sincerity*, which has some bearing on the contrast between the synthetic and analytic modalities. As in so many other books that explore the notion of orthopraxy, *Ritual and its Consequences* is predominantly focused on Confucianism and Judaism as showcases for ritualistic modes of operation:

In any ritual, as with saying please, performing the act marks acceptance of the convention. It does not matter how you may feel about the convention, if you identify with it or not. In doing a ritual the whole issue of our internal states is often irrelevant. What you *are* is what you *are in the doing*, which is of course an external act.

On the other hand:

[Sincerity] criticizes ritual’s acceptance of social convention as mere action (perhaps even just acting) without intent, as performance without belief. The alternatives it often suggests are categories that grow out of individual *soul-searching* rather than acceptance of social conventions. Sincerity thus grows out of abstract and generalized categories *generated within individual consciousness*. The sincere mode of behavior seeks to replace

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229 Ibid., pp. 42-3.
the “mere convention” of ritual with a genuine and thoughtful state of internal conviction.\textsuperscript{231}

The acquisition of truth is a product of a correlation between one’s inner being and objective reality, a spiritualistic disposition that is common to both Christians and Buddhists.\textsuperscript{232} When authenticity becomes a central concern and the uniqueness of the individual is highlighted, it becomes increasingly problematic to construct communal modes of operation that are equally valid for different people. Consequently, contemplation on the cultural level works in concordance with cognitive individualism on the social level; the two reinforce each other in a way that they will naturally arise in concert. Said differently, it is highly unlikely for traditions that promote individual autonomy to be predominantly oriented towards rituals, just as it would seem logically absurd for communal traditions to foster an ethos of seclusion and introspection. Ritual and contemplation are therefore two distinct strategies for engaging in religious activity, and each approach is emblematic of traditions that adhere to different structural characteristics. While the body and ritual performance are seen as fundamental to the synthetic worldview, analytic traditions prefer to highlight an introspective form of religiosity, which marginalized and even openly attacks the biological facets of existence.

\textsuperscript{231} Ibid., p. 103 [My italics].
2.3.2 Particularism vs. Universalism

There is a striking discrepancy between the inclusive universal message of Buddhism and Christianity and the particularism of the Chinese and Jewish traditions. Although both Judaism and Confucianism promoted many universal ideals, for the most part they did not actively invite foreigners to join their tradition nor did they develop a vision that was meant to be practiced outside their local cultural orbit. 233 Jewish particularism was already hinted at in my discussion of the non-individualistic, communal, nation-based perspective of the biblical narrative and Talmudic discourse. It is clearly reflected in the exclusive function the nation of Israel played in the divine drama and the special relationship between God and the Jews. Jewish particularism was consciously nourished and was vital for survival in the hostile and increasingly universalistic environment of the Hellenic and Roman world.

Many scholars have highlighted the universalistic message of central Jewish prophets. This study aims to demonstrate that although Judaism certainly contained the seeds of universalism, it was actually Christianity that most explicitly evolved as a continuation of the universal ethos of the prophetic tradition. As Tomoko Masuzawa has shown, central thinkers in the study of religion such Abraham Kuenen, C.P. Tiele, Chantempie de la Sausaye, and others have all traced the roots of Christianity to the Hebrew prophets. In her study of the emergence of the concept of ‘world religions’ in the

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233 Judaism was preached and promoted in the Hellenic world prior to the rise of Christianity, which replaced it as the main proselytizing monotheistic tradition. The ‘victory’ of Christianity in the Greek and Roman worlds may have been the central reason for the development of Judaism into a quintessentially synthetic tradition with strong particularistic features. Although it is true that the Jewish prophetic period gave rise to a universalistic ethos, the way the tradition unfolded must be seen in relation to Christianity and the greater Greek and Roman worlds.
West, Masuzawa convincingly demonstrates that in the eyes of nineteenth century intellectuals, Christianity and Buddhism were seen as the only full-fledged universal religions. Even Islam, which is usually categorized as universal, was seen as tainted by a form of tribalism that was diametrically contrary to the message of advanced world religions.\(^{234}\) It is not a surprise that Christianity and Buddhism caught the attention of scholars; these traditions disclose a type of urgency to disseminate their forms of spirituality that was simply absent in the Jewish and Chinese contexts.

Chinese forms of particularism are less apparent but nevertheless real. Due to the strong political and demographic dominance of the Han ethnicity, the Chinese never felt an acute danger of extinction or mass assimilation. Such realities notwithstanding, China never managed to develop the type of universal vision and proselytizing ideologies that we see in Buddhism and Christianity. As Edwin Reischauer points out, “The Chinese clearly recognized universal principles, but tempered them with strong particularistic considerations.”\(^{235}\) Chinese particularism was rooted in a very strong sense of cultural superiority; this meant that universalism was accepted to the extent that foreigners adopted the Sinitic way of life. The Chinese never felt compelled to aggressively promote their culture beyond the borders of the empire; instead, they took pride in their exclusive cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis non-Chinese groups who they condescendingly referred to as barbarians (夷). This changed dramatically with the introduction of Buddhism, which introduced into China a Universal Mind that was allegedly shared by all human


beings. This meant that salvation and spiritual realization were unrelated to a specific ethnic origin, but rather attainable by virtue of humanity’s shared mental and cognitive faculties. Although Mencius famously argued that “all people can become a Yao or a Shun” (人皆可以為堯舜), it was still within the constricted context of the Chinese tradition that sagehood could be attained. Unlike Buddhism and Christianity, Chinese spiritual and philosophical systems were not easily transportable to foreign contexts. Unsurprisingly, a more universal Confucian paradigm began to emerge with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, when a process of adopting Buddhists characteristics enabled Confucianism to cross ethnic and cultural borders more easily. In other words, once philosophical and religious concepts were cosmologized, as they were in the Neo-Confucian project, their former context-based and historically specific significance was translated into terms that were universally applicable. These universalistic tendencies notwithstanding, even after the Song Dynasty, Confucianism never managed to develop the universal thrust so characteristic of Buddhism and Christianity. In analyzing Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism, I will look at how both these traditions shifted towards an increasingly universalistic worldview while insisting on preserving many of the particularistic features of synthetic traditions.

2.3.3 This-Worldliness vs. Other-Worldliness

Rabbis and Chinese thinkers strongly affirmed the centrality and legitimate status of the mundane world. As opposed to the ‘epistemological pessimism’ of analytic

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236 Mencius, 6b:2.
paradigms, rabbis and Confucian literati shared an optimistic approach towards the human sphere, believing that the world that we experience is a reliable reflection of reality. Other scholars have pointed to similar distinctions; Lee Yearly and Jonathan W. Schofer follow J.Z. Smith’s distinction between locative and utopian traditions. Schofer contends that both rabbinic Judaism and Confucianism are examples of locative traditions that affirm and celebrate a cosmic order “that is created by bounding the chaotic. Such religions charge humans with finding a “place” that harmonizes with that order.” Livia Kohn claims that the human condition in Chinese culture “is an overwhelmingly affirmative mode: it is good to be alive, it is most precious to be born human, it is not only desirable but possible to realize oneself humanity in and through this world.” Kohn’s description can easily be applied to the Jewish experience where signs of suspicion towards the human sphere are extremely rare. In his famous Halakhic Man the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik states:

237 Bryan Van Norden, Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2011), pp. 231-32. Van Norden borrowed these terms from Thomas Metzger who sees philosophical optimism as a possible solution to an incurable Western skepticism. See Metzger “Western Philosophy on the Defensive” in Philosophy Now: a magazine of Ideas, Vol. 26 April/May (2000). Metzger himself borrowed these terms form Karl Popper who used both negatively as flawed approaches towards thinking, in contrast with the correct ‘critical rationalism.’

238 Jonathan Schofer, The Making of a Sage, p. 204 n.64. Yearley’s distinction is between Smith’s locative and what he terms “open” traditions in which “fulfillment occurs when people transcend any particular culture.” The locative for is where “fulfillment occurs when people locate themselves within a complex social order that is thought to be sacred.” (see his Mencius and Aquinas, p. 42). Here too one can detect the clear relationship to the distinction between world-affirming and world-negating traditions. See more on J.Z. Smith’s distinction in “The Influence of Symbols on Social Change,” in Smith, Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 129–46.

239 Livia Kohn “Chinese Religion,” p. 21. In the Chinese matrix Kohn includes all major religious traditions including Confucianism, Daoism, Sinicized Buddhism or the variety of practices known as popular religion.
Halakhic man does not long for a transcendent world, for “supernal” levels of a pure, pristine existence, for was not the ideal world – halakhic man’s deepest desire, his darling child – created only for the purpose of being actualized in our real world? It is this world which constitutes the stage for the Halakhah, the setting for halakhic man’s life. It is here that the Halakhah can be implemented to a greater or lesser degree, it is here that it can pass from potentiality into actuality. It is here, in this world that halakhic man acquires eternal life!\textsuperscript{240}

As I will show in the following pages, the Greco-European and Indo-Buddhist traditions treated the human sphere with various degrees of suspicion, which led to the construction of transcendent spheres that humans strove to reach by escaping the shackles of concrete existence. In the monotheistic tradition we see these distinction manifest in the different soteriological approaches of Jews and Christians. Unlike the early Christian focus on the advent of the Messiah, Jewish thinkers of the same period “did not present a richly developed doctrine of salvation and therefore did not assign to the Messiah seen as Savior an important place in its larger system…They worked out issues of sanctification rather than those of salvation…”\textsuperscript{241} In later stages of its development when Judaism came under increasing Greco-Christian influences, we witness a greater focus on salvific themes, especially in the late portions of the Talmud. Nevertheless, the stress on sanctification in this world remained an indisputable hallmark of the tradition. Even in its later soteriological narratives, Judaism promoted a messianic message that suggests a


\textsuperscript{241} Neusner, 	extit{A Short History of Judaism: Three Meals, Three Epochs} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 80-81.
worldly vision of the reinstatement of the Davidic lineage and the renewal of Temple sacrifice. The differing messianic visions of Judaism and Christianity reflect substantially different attitudes towards the mundane world, where Christianity is theologically oriented towards a separate and sublime sphere of existence while Judaism strives towards a this-worldly political renaissance.

Attitudes towards salvation are also related to the issue of embodiment. Traditional Judaism believed that after death the body remains significant, as it will eventually be resurrected; non-physical resurrection was not a possibility since a human devoid of physicality lacks the fundamental bodily apparatus to operate in the world, especially by following the commandments. This is also a testimony to the fact that the advent of the messiah was not seen as the transportation of humanity towards a separate sphere but rather the reestablishment of an ancient past. One of the biggest controversies in Jewish history erupted around this exact point, where anti-rationalist thinkers such as Samuel ben Ali and R’ Meir ben Todros Abulafia (The Ramah) attacked the controversial Maimonidean theory of spiritual resurrection in which the body was marginalized in favor of an eternal rational soul. Although Christianity adopted beliefs of bodily resurrection from Judaism, the Greek component of mental immortality endured as a

\[\text{242 Theodore Steinberg, Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages, p. 54. As Steinberg points out “To Jewish belief, the concept of a messiah who had died verged on the oxymoronic. After all, how could a dead messiah lead the people to political independence?”}\]

\[\text{243 Menachem Kellner, Must a Jew Believe Anything? (Oxford; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), p. 13. Kellner notes that in Judaism faith means “faith in” while in the more elaborate theology of Christianity, faith is mainly “faith that;” the general thrust of the Christian tradition was such that belief and faith have certain implications and are therefore oriented towards the future.}\]

\[\text{244 Maimonides changes his view in the Epistle on Resurrection “Igeret tehi’yat ha’metim” 1173. In spite of this change he claimed that after a period in which the body and soul unite there will be an additional separation of the two in which the soul will remain alone.}\]
prevalent feature, beginning with Paul and more forcefully with Augustine. In spite of the Christian ideal of the resurrection of the entire human being, body and soul, the Aristotelian and Platonic separation between matter and spirit made a strong impact on the tradition and led it down a path in which the entire monastic institution prioritized the mind over matter.

Such mentalistic dispositions are even more obvious in the Indo-Buddhist tradition. Kalidas Bhattacharya argues that the central common features of all Indian philosophical schools are that a) every individual has a spiritual side, b) the spiritual side is more important than the material side, c) the autonomy of the spiritual needs to be fully realized, and d) that this realization happens through progressive detachment. These religious proclivities are clearly contrary to the Chinese engagement with the world. Moshe Idel’s contrast between Jewish and Hindu mystical techniques is helpful in highlighting the common synthetic mindset of the Jewish and Chinese traditions, in contrast to the analytic world-negating stance of the Indo-Buddhist traditions. According to Idel, whereas the Indian “arresting” or static practice of Yoga strives to enhance the capacity of concentration and the radical transcendence of ordinary life, Jewish mysticism seeks to intensify ordinary modes of activity. He also associates the yogic worldview with the “anticipation of death,” highlighting some of the central distinctions between the analytic and synthetic modalities: the pessimistic, trans-mundane,

245 More on Paul’s body/spirit dualism see Daniel Boyarin, A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1997), esp. ch. 3. According to Boyarin Paul doesn’t negate the body but he represents the beginning of an increasingly Platonic process in which the body is subordinated to the soul.

246 Julia Ching, Chinese Religions, p. 86.

contemplative features of Hinduism on one hand, and the affirmative, this-worldly, and action-based qualities of Judaism on the other.\textsuperscript{248} “Arresting” Hindu concerns find a continuation in Buddhism where the detachment from the material world and physical activity reaches a new climax. The Buddhist denial of the Vedic caste system and especially its audacious challenge to the Hindu notion of Atman represented an additional stage in the Indo-European development towards the ‘abolition’ of reality. Such illusionism gives believers a greater impetus to disregard the world of human activity and thus focus on mentalistic channels for liberation – that is, liberation from the Samsaric world, the world of human activity. It should therefore come as no surprise that such Indian qualities were completely transformed in the synthetic world-affirming Chinese context. This was accomplished by bringing the sublime, static sphere of nirvana down to the province of everyday life; instead of escaping the world, Chinese Buddhists sought to discover bliss within the domain of human activity. The world of materiality was no longer characterized in terms of contamination or ignorance, instead, it was argued that enlightenment could be found in its midst, in the quotidian realm of everyday action.

This-worldly themes run through native Chinese thought like a red thread. When asked about the proper way to serve spirits and gods Confucius famously retorted: “you are not yet able to serve men, how could you serve the spirits?” when asked about death he replied in similar vain: “you do not yet know life, how could you know death?”\textsuperscript{249} Even the Daoist religion that became increasingly other-worldly under Buddhist

\textsuperscript{248} Idel, \textit{Enchanted Chains}, p. 75.
influences, devised forms of self-transcendence that were very different from the Indo-European tendency towards the abolition of experience. Perhaps the most obvious example of this difference can be found in the way the Daoist Immortals (xianren, 仙人) and Worthies (xianren, 賢人) remained in constant contact with the human sphere; they might dwell in exotic realms of vapor, wandering between clouds, constellations, the moon, and the sun, but they never completely depart or cease to operate vis-à-vis the world. Immortality was a supreme concern but it was a biological form of immortality in which people sought to extend life through alchemical and internal processes rather than abolish it. Instead of escaping the world, the Chinese spiritual virtuoso strove to remain in it for as long as possible: “There is no immortality without the physical basis of the body” and such immortality was reached in the human sphere or in constant contact with it rather than in an abstract Buddhist paradise. As Livia Kohn points out, in all Chinese religious traditions, including sinicized schools of Buddhism, those who attain access to a higher sphere can always return to this world. In popular religion and various forms of Daoism the celestial sphere is a crisp reflection of the bureaucratic structure of this world. Therefore, even when trans-mundane spheres of existence are imagined they remain in conformity with, and analogous to the mundane imperial order. The sublime, both for the Chinese as well as for Jews, is never unrelated to the dynamic and tangible world of “here and now.”

250 Kohn, op. cit., p. 22.
251 Ibid., p. 36. See also Julia Ching, op. cit., p. 86.
253 Kohn, op. cit., p. 37.
2.3.4 Monasticism, Asceticism, and Celibacy

Celibacy and monasticism were briefly mentioned in my discussion of the non-individualistic family-oriented dispositions of the Jewish and Chinese traditions; here I will say a few more words about their relationship to our current topic. The world affirming inclinations of the Confucian and Jewish traditions meant that in both cases a well-developed monastic tradition and ascetic practices never emerged. Moshe Idel notes that “rabbinic Judaism developed as a religion of communities in which there was an implicit and explicit rejection of forms of individualism. Perfection was achieved not by secluding oneself from the community but rather by joining it.”254 Traditions operating within the synthetic mode devised forms of self-cultivation and actualization that necessitated a communal context based on human interactions. In terms of the physical world, the Chinese and Jewish body was always perceived as a precious asset. As opposed to being defamed, deliberately injured, portrayed as a cage of the soul, or subordinated to sublime conceptual ideals, the body was valued as the vehicle and paramount medium for actualization and spiritual fulfillment.255 Unlike the Christian and Buddhist traditions in which celibacy and monasticism were perceived as extreme forms of devotion, holiness, and purity, the classical Jewish and Chinese traditions harshly attacked practices that went against social engagement, procreation and the body.

In the Western sphere we see a fundamental opposition between Jewish and Greek-influenced Christian approaches to religious transformation and spiritual

255 See Plato’s *Phaedo* in which the body is seen as the soul’s tomb.
fulfillment. Modes of ascetic seclusion and monasticism in Judaism never came to symbolize a desirable religious prototype. Monastic tendencies in the Jewish Essenes movement for instance, were more influential on early Christianity than on rabbinical Judaism. While Christianity was attracted towards world-negating practices rabbinic Judaism developed as a tradition that attacked forms of escapism. Paula Fredriksen contends that in spite of many points of dispute between different Christian denominations, celibacy remained one of the predominant shared feature of the tradition: “Celibacy for all these different Christians was a way to transcend existence *kata sarka*. To renounce sexual activity – as renouncing normal family ties to enter into a new fictive family of choice, the Church – was to escape the human condition…” Christian monastic practices represent a choice to go against one’s inherent and deeply embedded biological drives; this is a type of self-inflicted violence that is sometimes magnified to full-fledged ascetic practices. Frequently, celibacy is closely associated with asceticism and both are related to the acquisition of power where it is believed that taming natural urges can channel the energies of desire to more spiritual domains. Similarly, pain is often associated with transcending mundane considerations and the ability to tap into forces that are otherwise inaccessible. It is for this reason that some of the greatest religious figures in the Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions were secluded celibates admired by the community for their unique social position, purity, and spiritual powers. The virgin birth of Jesus and the Buddha’s unusual birth from his mother’s side indicate a basic cultural disposition that perceived celibacy in positive terms of purity and holiness.

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256 Paula Fredriksen, in *The Human Condition*, pp. 147-8.
The Buddha himself renounced sex when he left his palace and although he already had a child, his only son became a monk and thereby ended the family line. Jesus was also believed to have led a celibate life while theories about his possible marital relationship tend to stir anger in many Christian communities.

Such phenomena were practically absent in Judaism and Confucianism, where power is more often associated with being a member of a productive family unit. Unlike traditions that promoted asceticism and construed sexual activity in terms of the dissipation of power, Chinese and Jewish views see procreation as the very essence of power and continuity. Eliezar Diamond reminds us that rabbis equated celibacy with sinfulness; they saw sexual abstinence as highly problematic since it was in conflict with creation.257 The emergence of Jewish practices with ascetic and monastic undertones such as ‘Hitbodeduth’ (היתבודדות) or religious titles such as ‘Perushim’ (Celibates - פרושים), ‘Nazir’ (Monk - נזר), ‘Hasid’ (Pious One - חסיד), and ‘Kadosh’ (Venerable - קדוש) came to the fore fairly late during the emergence of philosophy and Kabbalah, a clear indication of Greco-Christian individualistic and introspective influences that began to infiltrate the traditional Jewish worldview between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.258

257 Eliezer Diamond “And Jacob Remained Alone: The Jewish Struggle with Celibacy,” in Carl Olson, Celibacy and Religious Traditions (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 3 pp. 41-64.

The case of the Chinese confrontation with Buddhist notions of celibacy shows just how acute the tension between the indo-Buddhist and Chinese minds was. John Kieschnick argues that Buddhism introduced:

a new repertoire of deities, rituals, and vocabulary that were eventually incorporated into Chinese culture. But perhaps no idea was so strange or faced so many obstacles to success as the notion of celibacy, embodied in the Buddhist reverence for an order of trained religious professionals with shaved heads and distinctive robed who swore to renounce all sexual activity.²⁵⁹

Examples of Confucians harshly criticizing Buddhist monastic and celibate practices are abundant. Pre-Buddhist Chinese medicine advocated regular sexual activity, including in old age, as a way to extend life, settle the blood and steady the heart. Elaborate manuals presented sex as a useful exercise and fundamental in staying healthy, there were also explicit attacks against sexual abstinence as detrimental to the body.²⁶⁰ As Buddhism consolidated its position in China, celibacy and monasticism were partially accepted, but constant suspicion towards these institutions never ceased. Indeed, Chinese history is replete with violent and non-violent attacks against Buddhist communities; the main target of these attacks was the lack of productivity and social involvement on behalf of monastic orders.

Finally, the absence of monastic orders, celibacy, and asceticism in the Jewish and Chinese traditions is a reflection of their refusal to rebel against the human sphere. The synthetic mode discloses cultural tendencies that are based on an affirmative

²⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 226-7.
appreciation of materiality, both in terms of the human body, procreation, ritualistic action, as well as in regards to humanity’s natural sphere of existence in this world.

2.3.5 Historical Narratives vs. Synchronic Cosmologies

The following section will look at the synthetic modality’s stress on historical analysis in contrast with the tendency of analytic traditions to focus on the sphere of metaphysics. I chose to conclude this chapter with this analysis since these diverging concerns adequately convey many of the most basic distinctions between the analytic and synthetic worldviews.

In their comparison of the Chinese and Western traditions, Hall and Ames describe the Chinese perspective as “acosmological in the sense that the particularities defining the order are unique and irreplaceable items whose nonsubstitutability is essential to the order. No final unity is possible in this view...”\(^\text{261}\) Therefore, according to Hall and Ames, what I call the synthetic modality is concerned with the uniqueness of historical experience in which particulars such as human interactions, national experiences, or natural phenomenon are scrutinized in great detail and are expected to yield meaning. Following the social psychologist Edward I. Hall, such a worldview can be termed *high-context* where instead of brushing away experience in favor of discovering underlying static structures, there is an ongoing concern with analyzing the nature of dynamic events. Such strategies never reach a convenient or comfortable conclusion; thinkers are constantly engaged in a never-ending exploration of a reality that

refuses to conform to a single repetitive and self-enclosed pattern. From the perspective of high-context traditions, life is an impulsive and erratic affair and it is in history that one finds data that yields insights into the nature of reality.

In Judaism, understanding history is a method of better appreciating the subtle and mysterious nature of God and His expectations of humans. In fact, one of the main innovations introduced by the early Israelite religion was the way it replaced Mesopotamian mythological narratives with concrete historical events and real human experiences. This shift represented a groundbreaking move towards a more diachronic, and realistic time frame that humans can relate to experientially. Understanding history within a divine narrative never occupied a similar position in the Greek tradition where historical analysis emerged as a secular form of objective documentation, best represented by the work of Herodotus. In his The Origin and Goal of History Karl Jaspers contends that: “Christians have not tied their empirical conceptions of history to their faith. An article of faith is not an article of empirical insight into the real course of history. For Christians sacred history was separated from profane history, as being different in its meaning. Even the believing Christian was able to examine the Christian tradition itself in the same way as other empirical objects of research.”

The Greeks, especially after Socrates, were more concerned with a-temporal metaphysics; Levinas and Derrida had an ongoing dialogue about the unique interplay between the Jewish and Greek facets of Western civilization. The Greek search for perfection stressed the immutable facets of reality, reflected by Aristotle’s un-moving mover and Plato’s eternal

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Forms. In Judaism on the other hand we see a focus of change; Derrida claimed that in judaism “there is no merging, but instead an infinite tension in which Greek identity is challenged by Hebrew difference; history is a patternless set of events, each meaningful in itself and not as part of a whole.” The Hebraic sense of rapture treated history as a story with unexpected twists and turns, making the perfect and harmonious cosmos of the Greeks seem very unlikely.

Greek motionlessness and Jewish dynamism represent a constant tension in the midst of Christianity, the former stressing synchronic structures, the latter focusing on the significance of human events. Although the Judaic sacralization of history remained central to Christianity, it was nevertheless qualified and tempered by the Greek stress on a-temporal cosmologies. The early Neoplatonic and later Aristotelian currents of the Christian tradition promoted rational cosmological structures in which the Hebraic obsession with the intricacies of history gave way to a more purified picture, in which history was narrated in broader brush strokes and focused on secluded major events such as the life of Jesus, his crucifixion, resurrection, and our expectations for redemption. According to Robert Neville:

…Christianity finds unity only within God and in a divine life of heavenly world that transcends history in the ordinary sense… Christianity thus involves as essential dualism in which ordinary history is taken to be at odds with the full reality in which human beings are existentially unified with God… In Christianity, there is no existential unity within history in the ordinary sense, as there is or ought to be for Judaism…”

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With the Greek synchronic temperament lurking in the background it is no wonder that Deism became a growing trend among European intellectuals who sought to free history from the deterministic shackles of divine intervention and thereby open new horizons for human agency.

Turning to the Chinese case, history was a politicized and cosmologized domain that functioned as a template for ethical behavior, righteous rulership, and the ongoing attempt to reach cosmic harmony. The famous *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋－ Chun Qiu), the *Classic of History* (書經－ Shu Jing), the *Classic of Poetry* (詩經－ Shi Jing) and their subsequent commentaries together with the imperial historiographical tradition pioneered by Sima Qian (司馬遷) all reflect the unique position history occupied in Chinese culture. The Chinese believed in the method of *ji gu* (稽古) “studying the ancient ways,” in which truth was to be found in the past. According to this approach, history presents humans with the drama of the rise and fall of dynasties giving us unique access to the inner workings of Heaven and Earth. “Learning about the world and the great men of the past causes people to become more virtuous, raises their awareness of social and natural harmony, and thus provides the necessary knowledge of how to do the right thing at the right time and the right measure.”

In agreement, John Berthrong claims that “Confucianism is a resolutely historical tradition that affirms the importance of history for the cultivation of a just society and even for the nurture of a refined mind-heart. History is a mirror that the past holds up in order to remind us that we, too, will be judged

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worthy or at fault.”

To say that the Chinese did not engage in theoretical thinking is clearly an exaggeration; they too speculated on the ultimate nature of reality and they too constructed over-arching, universal categories. However, it is worth noting that most of their abstract categories were ethical in nature and therefore could be verified and examined both through human interactions at the present as well as by historical analysis. This is what E.R Hughes seems to suggest when he argues that “one indispensable method of achieving reliable knowledge was the historical method. It was as if a man’s contemporaries said to him, “speculate, theorize, as much as you like, but check up on your speculations by finding out what has happened in the past”…. According to this approach, the object of knowledge was not abstract and changeless, not a logical entity. It was shot through and with a sense of the particular.”

The Chinese tradition can be contrasted with the disregard for historical documentation in the Indo-Buddhist worldview in which mundane events were marginalized to an extremely negligible position. Considering the analytical characteristics of the Indian mind and its peculiar form of abstract cosmology this should come as no surprise. Throughout the ages both Western and Chinese intellectuals visiting India were perplexed by the lack of local interest in rigorous historical documentations. The characteristic ‘tyranny of universals’ in Hindu thought deemed historical events

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267 E.R Hughes “Epistemological Methods in Chinese Philosophy,” in Charles A. Moore ed., *The Chinese Mind*, pp. 78-79. In another instance Hughes claims that “the impression I get is that greater importance was attached to the functional side. The center of interest lay there, so that the logic at work in these thinkers’ minds led them to concentrate more on categories of relationship than on categories of substance,” p. 86.
illusory and therefore undeserving of serious consideration. Arvind Sharma contends that in “Hindu metaphysical illusionism,” historical events were not only pushed to the backgrounds but often perceived as unreal.\footnote{Arvind Sharma, \textit{Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 76.} In his \textit{Ancient India}, R. C. Majumdar contends that “one of the gravest defects of Indian culture, which defies rational explanation, is the aversion of Indians to writing history. They applied themselves to all conceivable branches of literature and excelled in many of them, but they never seriously took to the writing of history…”\footnote{Vidya Dhar Mahajan, \textit{Ancient India} (Delhi: S. Chand, 1968), p. 236.} Here again, even more so than in the case of the Greco-European tradition, we see a characteristic Indo-European inclination towards low-context interpretations of reality; the more detached things are from the contingencies of mundane affairs the more infused they are with ontological reality.

The prominence of history in the a-cosmological worldviews of China and Judaism is to a great extent one of the most important channels for the interpretation of reality in these traditions. Wars, exiles, victories, defeats, earthquakes, and the life of emperors and kings all functioned as fingerprints of an elusive reality. In other words, the way rabbis and Confucians “did metaphysics” was by contemplating the significance of actual events. This approach should be distinguished form the way history is done in specialized secular traditions. Although in its modern form historiography certainly teaches us moral lessons, the Chinese and Jewish traditions accentuated the extramundane qualities of historical narratives. According to Kohn “the major salvific
activity of the [Confucian] tradition consists in conscious and historical learning.” As for Judaism, Levinas, like many others, believed that “history, rather than what is outside it, becomes the arena for the spiritual life.” The cosmological and spiritual significance of history functioned as a Rosetta Stone for deciphering a higher level of reality. As opposed to metaphysics as a speculative and highly abstract field of inquiry, “cosmology” in the Chinese and Jewish traditions was often part and parcel of historical analysis and the exploration of particular situations.

In conclusion, the distinction between historical analysis and metaphysics reflects many of the fundamental contrasts between the synthetic and analytic worldviews:

a) Contextualization vs. De-contextualization: the synthetic modality’s concern with historical analysis reflects the tendency towards contextualization on the cognitive level. In contrast the analytic focus on universalistic cosmologies with cross-cultural applicability reflects the cognitive disposition towards de-contextualization.

b) Open-endedness vs. Systematicity: historical analysis as an ongoing process of exploration means that such modes of discourse will remain open-ended rather than closed and conclusive. In contrast, a-historical cosmologies are not constrained by

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270 Kohn, op. cit., p. 33 (my brackets).
271 Oona Eisenstadt, op. cit., quoting Susan Handleman on Levinas, p. 149.
272 As in all generalizations made in this dissertation it is important to bear in mind that these distinctions regarding history and metaphysics are mainly a matter of general stress rather than absolute contrasts. In Judaism, for instance, early Heikhalot and Merkavah mysticism was more synchronic and cosmologically oriented than it was concerned with historical themes. Similarly, the Yin Yang and Five Elements schools from which Confucianism borrowed, were mainly interested in cosmology. Nevertheless, in both the Jewish and Chinese cases historically oriented analysis was clearly prioritized over low-context, synchronic metaphysical models.
evolving narratives and therefore have the capacity to offer self-contained metaphysical visions.

c) Action vs. Contemplation: history is the realm of action and behavior. By following the commandments, Jews are expected to be obedient both as individuals and as a nation. Similarly, the Chinese follow the ritualistic patterns of Heaven in order to reach social stability and cosmic harmony. In contrast, the analytic tendency to construct static and structured worldviews offers the possibility to postulate a potential correspondence between the psychological and cognitive apparatus of the individual and the structure of the universe, one that exists above and beyond the particularities of a specific history or personal experience.

d) Particularism vs. Universalism: the inclination towards context in the synthetic modality leads to the stress on dynamic historical narratives, which in turn lend themselves to a particularistic ethos that highlights a specific group’s own biography. Therefore, the disposition towards contextualization on the cognitive level operates in concordance with particularism on the cultural level. In contrast, the timeless metaphysical structures that analytic traditions advance are oblivious to ethnic background, thereby having the ability to bring people with disparate historical experiences under one universal paradigm.

e) This-worldliness vs. Other-worldliness: Finally, historical analysis is concerned with this world. The essence of reality is believed to be found in the sphere of human events and daily reality. In contrast, the emphasis on cosmology and static structures
assumes that there is a superior world the humans should strive to reach by escaping the problematic world of material.

2.4 STRATEGIES OF MEANING: COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

The following section will explore the very different approaches Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures adopted towards language and communication. As a reminder, the Chinese and Jewish traditions belong to the non-Indo-European rubric while the Greek, Christian, Indian and early Buddhist traditions belong to the Indo-European category. I will use Basil Bernstein’s theory of linguistic codes in order to highlight the differences between analytic and synthetic strategies of meaning. Although Bernstein’s work was primarily concerned with differences in language used among working and middle class families in London, his model of linguistic codes is valuable as an explanatory framework for creating broader distinctions between cultures; Mary Douglas’ *Natural Symbols* was the first important step in that direction. In this study the central goal of applying Bernstein’s code theory to the domain of culture will be to further establish the distinctions between the synthetic and analytic morphological models. Paraphrasing Huntington’s “the West and the rest”, I will argue for an “Indo-European and the rest” distinction; such a generalization makes it possible to classify

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273 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology.* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England; New York: Penguin Books, 1978). Bernstein’s project in the sociology of education attempts to highlight the type of difficulties that children confined to the restricted code could be facing in middle class education systems that are based on a pluralistic elaborate code. While Bernstein is referring to groups within the same society speaking the same language it is hard to ignore the resemblance of his code theory to distinctions made between Indo and non-Indo-European language groups or analytic and synthetic cultures.
languages as dissimilar as Chinese and Hebrew under the same non-Indo-European rubric. Following Merlin Donald and others, I will contend that such a generalization is helpful due to the distinct characteristics of the linguistic group known as Indo-European. Indeed, this group of languages gave rise to highly influential systems that were efficient in creating discursive models of analysis, and religio-philosophical paradigms with universal applicability.

2.4.1 Basil Bernstein and Linguistic Codes

The central distinction Bernstein draws is between what he calls the restricted code and elaborate code. The former points to a linguistic world where speakers draw on shared assumptions that create a sense of communal exclusivity. This type of code affirms and strengthens the boundaries of a community and protects a certain discourse from foreign participation. In Bernstein’s words:

the most general condition for the emergence of this code is a social relationship based upon a common, extensive set of closely-shared identifications and expectations self-consciously held by the members… The speech is here refracted through a common cultural identity which reduces the need to verbalize intent so that it becomes explicit… The meanings are likely to be concrete, descriptive or narrative rather than analytical or abstract. In certain areas meanings will be highly condensed….The major function of this code is to define and reinforce the form of the social relationship by restricting the verbal signaling of individual experience.

274 Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*. For the elaborate vs. restricted code distinction see pp.123-137.
275 Ibid., pp. 127–128.
The *elaborated Code* on the other hand is a form of discourse in which there is no presupposing of any shared cultural assumptions among participants. The explicitness of the elaborate code facilitates a situation in which different people from diverse cultural backgrounds can understand and relate to each other using a *transparent* universal discourse. According to Bernstein this code will arise when:

> the intent of the other person cannot be taken for granted, with the consequences that meanings will have to be expanded and raised to the level of verbal explicitness. The verbal planning here, unlike the case of a restricted code, promotes a higher level of syntactic organization and lexical selection. The preparation and delivery of relatively explicit meaning is the major function of this code… The code will facilitate the verbal transmission and elaboration of the individual’s unique experience. The conditions of the listener unlike that in the case of a restricted code, will not be taken for granted…

My main goal will be to demonstrate that the basic characteristics of the elaborate and restricted codes reflect the same cultural sensibilities that are typical of the synthetic and analytic modalities respectively. Perhaps one method of better understanding these differences is by recognizing their most extreme manifestations: the elaborate code, when developed to its full potential, will express itself through an abstract and hypothetical discourse that we can loosely term ‘theoretical thought.’ The restricted code, in contrast, moves away from the world of cognitive abstractions towards escalating forms of concrete communication, the most extreme being ritualism. In other words, the elaborate code, which is distinguished by its clarity and explicitness, leads to the development of a type of specialized conceptual language that has become the hallmark of the Greek and Indian philosophical legacies. Both these traditions are famously recognized as

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276 Ibid., pp. 128–129.
developing discourses, that in their extreme forms, were highly theoretical, abstract, and universalizable. On the other hand, thinkers such as Bernstein, Roy Rappaport and Mary Douglas have suggested that ritual behavior, so dominant in Judaism and Confucianism, is representative of more 'concrete' restrictive discourses. In other words, ritual is seen as concrete since it operates upon para-verbal and embodied signals that have localized meanings that are restricted to local groups. Ritual, the most concrete form of restricted code is highly particularistic and oriented toward the establishment of social distinctions.

We can imagine a spectrum of strategies of communication that ranges from analytic cultures’ proclivity towards theoretical abstractions on one extreme and concrete ritual behavior on the synthetic extreme; forms of communication such as analogy, association, and symbolism represent the subtle continuum between these two extremes.

Diagram 2: The Axis of Communication

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Theory/Math   Logic   Science   Association/analogy   Symbolism   Ritual
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I will begin my discussion by suggesting that the Indo-European language family possessed certain qualities that provided the earliest conditions for the emergence of

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277 Once Buddhism abandoned the particularistic Hindu caste system it was free to evolve towards a universalism that transcended class and ethnic distinctions.
analytic thought and the reliance on modes of communication that were disembodies and abstract.

2.4.2 Indo-European Languages

I have already discussed the peculiar characteristics of analytic thought and its reliance on objectification and system building based on logical and formal relations. I showed that this became especially central in specialized strategies of argumentation such as the Abhidharma recursive method, Greek dialectics, and the scholastic argument in Europe. The fact that these analytic forms of discourse emerged in Indo-European cultures suggests the possibility that language played a role in biasing such traditions towards certain strategies of communication. In recent years research in cognitive science has offered interesting insights into these topics. Neuropsychologist Merlin Donald traces the emergence of analytic thought to the distinct attributes of the Greek language, which he contrasts with the common narrative cultures inclined towards storytelling and symbolism.279 Indeed, both the Confucian and Jewish discourses were based on paradigms that were rooted in official narratives. In both cases there was no dominant intellectual trend that sought to explore man’s internal psychic mechanisms, be it the structure of consciousness as in Buddhism, or the correlation between our cognitive faculties and the cosmic order as in Greco-European rationalism.

Chinese and Jewish thinkers were exploring very different facets of reality, using more concrete or condensed linguistic mechanisms such as metaphor, analogy,

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279 Donald, Origins of the Modern Mind, p. 343.
association and symbols but certainly not the conceptual language of the Indo-European kind. Following Jerome Bruner, Donald’s distinction of the two modes of thinking in modern humans correlate with what I termed synthetic and analytic thought:

One is sometimes called narrative thought, and the other is variously called analytic, paradigmatic, or logicoscientific. In modern culture, narrative thought is dominant in the literary arts, while analytic thought predominates in science, law, and government. The narrative or mythic, dimension of modern culture has been expressed in print, but it is well to keep in mind that in its inception, mythic thought did not depend upon print or visual symbolism; it was an extension, in its basic form, of the oral narrative.280

Reading the above quote one is led to assume a certain superiority of the analytic mode over narrative thought. Certainly, Donald suggests that the emergence of analytic thought represents a new phase in human cognition, but this advantage was temporary rather than permanent. Recognizing the inherent advantages of analytical thought, non-Indo-European cultures gradually adopted many patterns and linguistic aspects that were initially confined to the Indo-European language family.281 At a later stage I will explore how Jewish philosophers and kabbalists, as well as their Neo-Confucian counterparts, invested unprecedented efforts in reinventing and refining their vocabularies in a quest to meet the strict demands of analytical reasoning. Although I am arguing with Donald that

281 Eric Voegelin’s notion of *Mytho-speculation* is helpful here as it points to a form of discourse in which theoretical speculation takes place within a mythic medium. This distinction is helpful in stressing how the new theoretical inclinations of synthetic cultures during the axial age could nevertheless retained a fairly mythic, symbolic, or narrative-based discourse. In other words, although all axial traditions showed a certain shift towards more evolved forms of speculative discourses, some remained anchored in historical narratives, or official stories, while others, emerging form the Indo-European world, began to develop increasingly ‘elaborate’ discourses based on the objectification of information.
Indo-European languages were distinct in their ability to establish highly analytic discourses, it is important to stress that the sustained and parallel development of non-Indo-European discourses, both oral and written, led to cultural discourses that excelled in penetrating aspects of reality that were frequently neglected by the analytic mode. Bernstein notes that “it is important to realize that a restricted code carries its own aesthetic. It will tend to develop a metaphoric range of considerable power, a simplicity and directness, a vitality and rhythm.” This special aesthetic and exceptional metaphoric range is exactly what makes discourses produced by Jewish and Chinese thinkers so profound and attractive in their own right. Indeed, the sort of ambiguity of symbolic language with its exceptional semantic range, colorful undertones, and imaginative power, has a unique capacity to say things differently from analytic discourse. When words are condensed with several meanings as opposed to being precise and specific, they have an immense suggestive power allowing for a greater imaginative range.

Robert Bellah raises yet another important advantage of narrative discourses; following Jerome Bruner he claims that domains such as ethics cannot be replaced by theoretical thought; all attempts to create a science of faith, politics, religion, and

\[282\] Bernstein, op. cit., p. 136.

\[283\] This is a topic Françoise Jullien beautifully explores in his book Detour and Access. Jullien points to the powerful ability to employ the idea of ‘suggestive language’ or ‘implicit language’ (Wei Yan - 微言); he shows how the Chinese have a habit of saying little in order to communicate more; their ability to detour (not to say things explicitly) but nevertheless access. This is known as Weiyan Dayi (微言大意) or, ‘suggestive language extensive meaning.’ Francois Jullien, Detour and Access: Strategies of Meanings in China and Greece (New York: Zone Books, 2000). The ability of Chinese to convey meaning in ways that are different to the Indo-European reliance on linguistic precision is also attested to in Shigehisa Kuriyama’s analysis of the different ways Chinese and European doctors describe their patient’s pulses. See Shigehisa Kuriyama, The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine. (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 62.
behavior have failed “because stories really have been replaced by theories in natural science, some have come to believe that this can occur in all spheres.” These important differences can help us understand the Chinese and Jewish natural tendency towards ethics and historical analysis, both of which rely on narrative discourses.

2.4.3 From Mythos to Logos

One might wonder how the Greek and Indian philosophical traditions managed to “detach” themselves from their earlier mythical roots and embark on a new philosophical path. After all, it is hard to imagine something more starkly mythological than Homeric and early Vedic narratives. In discussing the initial “detachment” of philosophy from its mythic roots, it is important to qualify the extent to which this occurred and to bear in mind that this process was gradual. On the other hand, it is legitimate to speak of such detachment, especially when we contrast it with traditions such as Judaism and Confucianism in which an analytic philosophical tradition never managed to consolidate itself as a major intellectual trend prior to the impact of ndo-European traditions.

How then did the Greeks and Indians manage to slowly develop forms of analytic discourse that were fairly distinct form their ancient mythological backgrounds? In his important article “Judaism and Myth” (יהדות והמיתוס) Yehuda Liebes offers a persuasive

285 In the Chinese case we have the schools of logicians and the later Mohists, but these schools were short-lived with a marginal impact on the tradition as a whole. It is important to bear in mind that although both the Greek and Vedic traditions managed to create discourses that were philosophical and relatively free of the dense mythological narratives that preceded them. Although both traditions retained varying degrees of ‘restricted’ cultural symbolism, their analytical philosophical intellectual currents played a crucial role in their historical development.
explanation of this historical shift in the West.\textsuperscript{286} According to Liebes pre-philosophical ancient traditions displayed a certain tension between the universal and the particular. Examples of the particular are local clan-based narratives, and personalized and anthropomorphic gods. Such local mythologies, Liebes believes, are oppositional to universalistic features of traditions that see the divine as an abstract and conceptual entity that is devoid of local qualities. What Liebes calls the ‘mythological tension’ is a balance between the concrete and the abstract, an endless dialectical tension between oppositional forces: emotional and rational, aesthetic and philosophical, personal and impersonal, material and spiritual, and mundane and holy. Myth oscillates between these polarities but never completely identifies with one or the other; such identification would lead to its demise.

As opposed to many scholars who promote the view that early Judaism was distinct in its cultural milieu by its rejection of myth, Liebes’ definition of myth leads us to a contrary conclusion: Judaism is characterized by a highly charged mythic tension which invests its God with a special ontological resilience.\textsuperscript{287} This is especially different from Greek mythology where the polytheistic diversity of deities led to a ‘dissipation’ of the mythic tension resulting in a laxity of narrative in which stories regarding the different gods changed and took on different versions. As opposed to the relative coherence and immutability of the monotheistic narrative, the multiplicity of stories in polytheism entailed a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations; accounts were not as

\textsuperscript{286} Nachum Arieli argues that the shift from mythos to logos took place between Thales and Socrates; a period in which Greek mythos disintegrated, especially apparent in the realm of Cosmology. Nachum Arieli, Ha’Machshava Ha’Yehudit, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{287} Peter Berger hints at this irresolvable tension in Judaism. See Sacred Canopy, pp. 73-4.
concentrated on one dominant theme and therefore lacked the same ontological significance that was invested in the God of Israel. This enabled the Greeks to break through the mythic dialectical gridlock and move towards the extreme pole of the universal, abstract, and conceptual. This becomes clear in Plato’s *Republic* where there is an attempt to introduce a new model of what the gods represent, an attempt to articulate the old Homeric gods in terms of logos rather than mythos.

Liebes’ argument seems to be relevant to the Indian case as well. The shared Indo-European origins of these traditions made the shift from crude anthropomorphism toward a hypostasized and impersonal depiction of nature more likely. Hajime Nakamura points out that the Indo-European roots of Sanskrit meant that it had an inherent propensity towards describing reality in terms of abstract universals, a feature that is certainly typical of Greek thought as well. Much like Greek culture, the Vedic tradition discloses a wide range of changing narratives regarding its gods; suggesting a similar lack of mythic tension that Liebes associates with ancient Greek culture. Nakamura seems to be arguing the same point:

> In the West, God is the center of the whole religious system. In the Indian religions, on the other hand, God does not hold such a prominent position as in the West. Indians have their own very richly and elaborately developed idea of God, but they never consider God as the Absolute Being… almost all the ancient philosophical schools of India [Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain] regarded the gods as being of no great significance.289

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The mythic laxity of Indo-European systems can be seen in the relatively smooth shift from the Greek Titans and the Vedic Asuras to the new generation of gods that replaced them. At a later stage even these gods are slowly transcended by a conceptual language that enabled an additional shift from mythology to philosophy – such a transition is apparent in Greek stoicism, which understood gods as different powers. Eliade argued similarly that Indo-European deities tend to represent cosmic energies; gods with anthropomorphic and anthropopathic characteristics gradually shift to represent natural powers such as thunder, fire, and the sky.\footnote{Eliade, “The Religion of the Indo-Europeans: The Vedic Gods,” in A History of Religious Ideas (London Chicago: Collins University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 187-214.} Later, even these natural powers become subordinated to more distilled abstractions and concepts such as Brahman, Rta (\textit{rita}), the law of dharma, Karma, Platonic Forms, and Neoplatonic emanations. This can explain the frequent phenomenon of \textit{Deus Otiosus} in the Indo-European world where gods slowly disappear or become relatively redundant.\footnote{This is very different from the Western \textit{deus absconditus}. The monotheistic god can seem ‘absent’ or unknown by the human mind but He certainly cannot become redundant.}

Indo-European languages are inherently inclined towards the conceptual depiction of reality; such conceptualism made it more likely for a plurality of gods to emerge, each vaguely representing natural and human forces.\footnote{It seems that the convergence of the propensity towards construing reality in abstract terms together with the lack of a mythic tension characteristic of Indo-European polytheism, created some of the necessary conditions for the emergence of analytic discourses in both these cultures.} In what follows I will discuss how communication and the distinctions between Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages pertains to many of the morphological features discussed in the cognitive, social, and cultural levels.
2.4.4 Language and Cognition

Benjamin Lee Whorf believed that the morphological, syntactic, and lexical features of a language determine the way speakers experience and interpret reality. In its relatively short and tumultuous history, Whorfianism, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, went in and out of vogue, some subscribing to strong versions of what came to be known as linguistic relativism (also known as linguistic determinism), others to weak versions, and yet others denying it altogether. Today there exists a fairly balanced consensus among linguists and cognitive scientists that language exercises ‘non-trivial’ influences on the way we conceptualize the world, with more attention directed to the interface between cognition, language, and culture.²⁹³ Without going into the details and different camps of this debate, in line with the more multi-layered approach we see today, I will argue that language is a significant factor in shaping the general perceptions of the synthetic and analytical modalities.

It is worth reiterating that both the analytic traditions this dissertation focuses on emerged in Indo-European cultures, a fact that I believe is not coincidental.²⁹⁴ Looking at the specific case at hand, I will attempt to demonstrate that the analytic mindsets that emerged from the Indo-European language group are a testament to the considerable role language occupies in the way traditions perceive reality. This assumption is strengthened

²⁹⁴ Paden notes that there is an Indo-European lineage that correlates with a certain family of religions. Religious Worlds, p. 42.
by the fact that the various common features that scholars have attributed to the Greek and Indian traditions have been overwhelmingly associated with their shared Indo-European origins, namely, their common linguistic ancestry. The same is true for cultures with non-Indo-European origins; especially those that reached a high level of cultural sophistication as a result of millennia of sustained growth and the emergence of elaborate literary formats. Such traditions, in spite of their substantial variations, operated according to certain biases and constraints that were inherent to the non-Indo-European physiognomy of their languages. In other words, the dichotomy I draw between two categories of linguistic orientation means that non-Indo-European languages, in spite of their significant differences, were similar in that the essential characteristics for the development of an objectified/analytic discourse were absent. I believe that such inherent biases towards one form of discourse rather than another are an outcome of their reliance on the more condensed, symbolic, or restricted side of the communication spectrum.

Let us turn to more concrete examples of the way Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages biased speakers towards distinct sets of cultural sensibilities. In the introduction to their translation of the Confucian Analects, Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont argue that Indo-European languages are substantive and essentialistic whereas classical Chinese is eventful; the former languages tend to construe reality in terms of ‘things’ while the latter in terms of a ‘procession’ of events. Ames and Rosemont attribute the Indo-European focus on ‘things’ and ‘substances’ to the structures of Indo-European languages. They mention several characteristic linguistic features such as the definite articles, a strong stress on nouns, and the unique use of pronouns as likely
reasons for such Western mindsets. According to Ben-Ami Scharfstein, the definite article is responsible for reifying adjectives such as ‘good’ into nouns such as ‘the Good;’ he provides an example showing how the definite article makes it much easier to transform a verb in the sentence “the man is conscientious” into an adjective “the man has a conscience.” Other scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith stress the overwhelming reliance of the Greek language on nouns, claiming this language is a “preeminently reificationist-idealist” language. In contrast to these Indo-European tendencies, Ames and Rosemont demonstrate that:

classical Chinese has no definite article (or any articles at all), and its pronouns do not function just as modern English pronouns do. Essentialism is virtually built into English – indeed, into all Indo-European languages….”

Ames and Rosemont point to the difficulties of translating Chinese Classics into an Indo-European medium in which the important concept of dao (道) almost inevitably transforms into “the Dao”, a move that reifies and objectifies the term and thus misleads the reader in fundamental ways. They note that the Chinese dao has as much to do with the subject’s quality of understanding as it does with the various aspects of the felt experience. Said differently, they claim that the notion of dao defies Aristotle’s

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295 It is important to stress that although Ames and Rosemont are particularly interested in English, the language of their translation, their contrast is between Chinese and Indo-European languages in general. Confucius, Roger T. Ames, and Henry Rosemont. The Analects of Confucius, pp. 20-65.


categories, being all of them at once.\textsuperscript{298} Such linguistic ambiguity entails a different type of intellectual discourse. In agreement, several scholars have argued that Chinese philosophy lacks structure and systematicity because of its linguistic foundations.\textsuperscript{299}

Indo-European languages are not only distinct from Chinese but also form Hebrew and other Semitic languages. Scharfstein shows that the “Indo-European copula be and its tendency to be confused with the be of existence, lead to the creation of substance-attribute distinction more easily.” He contrasts this with Chinese, and to a slightly lesser extent, with Semitic languages, which he sees as a middle ground between the two. In agreement with Scharfstein, Thorleif Boman claims that the differences between the Greek and Jewish conceptions of ‘being’ are substantial, a subject to which he dedicates a complete chapter in his famous comparative work on Greek and Jewish thought.\textsuperscript{300} The point to stress in Boman’s analysis is Hebrew’s lack of a strong reificationist tendency. Following earlier linguists, he notes that biblical Hebrew does not even possess a word for ‘a thing’, he argues that although \textit{Dabhar} (דבר), \textit{Keli} (כלי), and \textit{Hefetz} (חפץ) may come near to describing material and even an object, it is always in reference to some kind of practical use, never an ‘object’ as an abstract entity.\textsuperscript{301} The concrete aspect of ‘a thing’ in Hebrew, he argues, is related to the absence of a highly essentialist tendency in its linguistic structure.

\textsuperscript{298} Rosemont and Ames, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 20-65.
\textsuperscript{299} Carsun Chang [Zhang Junmai], \textit{The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought. Vol.1.} (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1957), pp. 39-40
\textsuperscript{300} Boman goes on to argue that \textit{hayah} has a less reificationist status in Hebrew and that it can mean different things such as ‘to become’, ‘to be’ and ‘to effect.’ Thorleif Boman, \textit{Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek}, pp. 38-9.
\textsuperscript{301} Ibid., pp. 184-5.
The lack of stress on the discreteness of objects and substances in the synthetic mode of operation has been discussed earlier; here it is important for me to highlight the relationship between language and what I termed synthetic thought. The inherent qualities of languages that operate as restricted codes pay less attention to delineating specific meaning to words. This phenomenon is related to what Mary Douglas calls condensed vocabulary, best exemplified in symbolic language, a communicative mechanism that is frequently used in synthetic traditions. Ames and Rosemont argue that:

…the heavy grammatical burden placed on the semantic component of classical Chinese contributes to what may appropriately be called “semantic overload” in the literary language. The average lexical item found in the literature (especially the basic 2500+ characters) is so rich in semantic content that meaning differentiation is difficult, with the consequences that virtually every passage is ambiguous, being subject to a multiplicity of readings until and unless a specific interpretation is given to it (which is then handed down in the form of commentary).  

According to Scharfstein, the precision of Indo-European philosophical terminology may seem over pedantic to outsiders: “from the Chinese stand point, the speakers of a European languages have to say too much in order to say anything at all.” As we can

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302 Rosemount and Ames, op. cit., pp. 42-3. Such obscurity should not be seen as a disadvantage. Those familiar with the type of vagueness that characterizes restricted codes appreciate their peculiar beauty. Ames and Rosemont explicitly attack the disadvantages of the obsessive precision of analytical discourses. They argue that “many Western scholars have of course called attention – often loudly – to this ambiguity and lack of precision in classical Chinese, seeing it as a liability. But perhaps their perception is biased. The lack of precision could be a decided communicative asset, a kind of “productive vagueness”…. [on the other hand] precision might be counterproductive because it could, for example, make the elements of the expression too discrete, and their interrelations too obscure.” Ibid.

303 Scharfstein, op. cit., p. 28.
see, the main distinction made here between Indo-European and Chinese strategies of communication clearly resonate with Bernstein’s idea of precision and ambiguity in the elaborate and restricted codes.

The next distinction I would like to point out is between the dynamic nature of Hebrew and Chinese and the static qualities of Indo-European languages. Boman points our attention to the dynamic character of verbs of inaction and verbs of condition and quality in Hebrew: “The verbs, especially, whose *basic meaning* always expresses a movement or an activity, reveal the dynamism variety of Hebrew’s thinking. When a verb is to express a position like sitting or lying, it is done by a verb which can also designate a movement.” As for verbs of condition and quality he notes that: “it is characteristic of Hebrew and the other Semitic languages that all of these verbs designate first of all the ‘becoming’ of the conditions and qualities in question.” Based on the research of former specialists in Semitic languages, Boman’s account spreads over forty pages, giving numerous examples of the way “movement is carried through to a standstill, or seen from the other side, standing is viewed as the result of a rising or a placing.” He concludes that

exceedingly great number of stative verbs in Hebrew (as well as in other Semitic languages) constitutes fresh evidence for the fact that the Hebrew (and Semitic) mind is directed to the dynamic and the active. The relationship of an action to its objects in Hebrew experience is apparently not of the same meaning as in our

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304 Boman provides several translations of biblical Hebrew in which different translators chose different alternatives of a single verb, some choosing a static version while others preferring a dynamic process-oriented version: אָהֳלוֹ פֶּתַח אִישׁ וְנִצְּבוּ, הָעָם כָּל יָקוּמוּ, הָאֹהֶל אל מֹשֶׁה as in Exodus 33:8: “…all the people rose up (qum), and every man stood (natsbh) at his tent door” as opposed to “every man stepped under the door of his tent.”

conception; plainly, it is the degree and kind of activity contained in the verb that counts.\textsuperscript{306}

In another instance he notes:

While the Hebraic kind of thinking was in the main dynamic, the kind of thinking employed by the Eleatic school of philosophers was not only diametrically opposite but contradictorily so. They considered being not only as the essential point, but even more, as the only one since they flatly denied the reality of motion and change. Only what is immovable and immutable exists…\textsuperscript{307}

Scharfstein stresses the linguistic origins of these different Indo-European and Semitic conceptions of being:

This joining of the existential and copulative functions in the same verb is characteristic of Indo-European languages… [which] are said generally to assign the different functions to different verbs, or even to ignore one or another function, as if there were no particular need to express it. Surely in Semitic languages, such as Hebrew and Arabic, there is no verb that combines the two functions. The most equivalent Hebrew verb (hayah) expresses meanings such as develop, become, be caused, and exist. It is not used, at least not in the present tense, as a mere link or copula. The English sentences, ‘The wind is strong’, ‘The house is here’, ‘He is a good man’, ‘This sand is white’, become in a Semitic language, ‘The wind (or, The wind it) strong’, ‘The house here’, ‘He good man’, ‘This sand white’.\textsuperscript{308}

With respect to China, Ames and Rosemont give examples of how dynamism is intrinsic to Chinese; they contend that this led to a metaphysics based on process in which philosophers are “not concerned with seeking the essence of things – that which

\textsuperscript{306} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{307} Ibid., p. 51.
\textsuperscript{308} Scharfstein, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 20-1.
remains constant throughout the changes manifest to the senses. On the contrary, they seem to have presupposed that the only constant is change itself….” Dynamism, in their eyes, is also related to a type of relational understanding of reality that is characteristic of both Chinese thought and language: “…the reader should expect to find in classical Chinese texts a more relational focus; not a concern to describe how things are in themselves, but how they stand in relation to something else at particular times… [a] process that requires the language of both “change (bian 变)” and “persistence (tong 通)” to capture its dynamic disposition”\(^{309}\)

The dynamic and correlational nature of Chinese thought is reflected in the peculiar structure of its classical language: “Imagine a language in which the words are unchanging root-words, which cannot be inflected or have prefixes or suffixes….while remaining the same, they can assume so many different meanings….the relationships between the words, and therefore their meanings, are established very largely by their order, which is to say, by their placement either before or after the word or words they are related to.”\(^{310}\) The prevalent idea of constant change (sheng sheng bu xi 生生不息) which features in all major philosophical schools in China, is to a great extent reflected in the nature of its classical language. This is opposed to the Indo-European foundations of Hinduism and early Buddhist thought:

Some special characteristics of this way of thinking can be found in the Indian usage of parts of speech. First, it can be said that the noun (or verbal noun) is more likely to be used than the verb in a Sanskrit sentence, because the noun expresses the more stable and

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\(^{310}\) Scharfstein, op. cit., pp. 22-3.
unchanging aspects of the thing. Secondly, the adjective which modifies a noun is used much more frequently that the adverbial form which is seldom used in Sanskrit.\textsuperscript{311}

Nakamura explains at length why such linguistic features, as well as others, contribute to the Indian propensity towards construing reality in terms of static universals. Such characteristics are essentially opposed to the Chinese and Jewish stress on change and the particular. Again, in spite of the differences between Sanskrit, Pali and ancient Greek Indo-European languages, as a group, tend to disclose clear structural affinities which bias them towards certain possibilities of conceptualizing the world. Linguistic properties create certain proclivities that make it easier and more probable for people to cognize reality in one way rather than another. The peculiar physiognomy of a language impedes or denies the likelihood of certain forms of expression, making it counter-intuitive for speakers to articulate reality in ways that may seem natural to speakers of a different language. This creates a certain focused range of possibilities of expression, or biases, that manifest in thought.

Although Bernstein was not concerned with cultures his characterization of the distinctions between the restricted and elaborate codes is strikingly reminiscent of differences scholar have highlighted between Hebrew and Chinese on the one hand and Indo-European languages on the other. Consider his description of the impact of the restricted code on perception: “Words and speech sequences refer to broad classes of contents rather than to progressive differentiation within a class. The reverse of this is also possible; a range of items within a class may be listed without knowledge of the

\textsuperscript{311} Nakamura, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 60-111.
concept which summarizes the class. The categories referred to tend not to be broken down systematically.” The lack of differentiation and categorization of family resemblances that Bernstein mentions reflects the type of ambiguity that scholars have associated with synthetic discourses. He contrasts these linguistic tendencies with the elaborate code, which tends to break down categories systematically.312

2.4.5 Specialized Linguistics

It is well known that both the Greeks and Indians invested much energy in investigating the properties of their languages, a trend that was practically absent in the Jewish and Chinese experiences:

Unlike the Greeks and the Indians, the ancient Chinese produced no works on grammar or syntax… Even though some Chinese pilgrim monks became acquainted with the Indian science of grammar, they did not attempt to establish a parallel science… grammar was very important in the history of Indian philosophy, whereas a scientific grammar was developed in China only after the impact of Western civilization.315

A.C Graham claims that the lack of inflections that “call attention to word classes and sentence structure” meant that Chinese thinkers were “to a considerable extent blind to the structure of their own language.” He notes that even the later Mohists, considered by many as the most analytical school of Chinese philosophy, began to pay attention to distinctions between sentences and strings of words only in very late works. The characteristic ambiguity of the Chinese language makes it difficult to parse its exact

312 Bernstein, op. cit., p. 134.
313 Nakamura, op. cit., p. 189.
morphology: “even with resources of Western linguistics it is proving very difficult to
analyze Classical Chinese syntax.”

Such facts suggest that there is something about the
structure and morphology of a language that makes it less susceptible to analysis or less
likely to pique one’s curiosity to study its inherent structure.

Merlin Donald agrees when he argues that Indians and Greeks focused much of their attention on language as a
strategy for refining their logical argumentations and philosophical analysis.

The question that is of interest is why is it that Indo-European traditions lay a
stronger stress on the study of grammar? What makes these traditions more inclined to
methodically investigate the properties of their language? Scharfstein claims that the
highly inflective nature of Indo-European languages led to a greater interest in one’s
thought structure. He notes that the presence or absence of word-inflection:

creates a different attitude towards logic and grammar and, in consequence, a different
kind of thought-structure. To be more specific, the necessary concern of the Indo-
European languages with grammatical structure helps to create an interest in thought
structure as such, or, in other words, in the correctness of the form of a statement
irrespective of its factual content.

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315 The Confucian notion of the *Rectification of Names* (正名 - Zheng Ming) reflects an interest in
the correlation between one’s official position and one’s actions rather than trying to penetrate the
structure of language. As in the famous case of “let the lord be a lord; the subject a subject; the
father a father; the son a son.” The Duke of Qi’s response is: “Excellent! If indeed the lord is not
a lord, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, I could be sure on
nothing anymore – not even my daily food.” The predominant concern of Confucius with
language is therefore related to its manifestations in everyday life and the ability to use it in a
manner that is conducive to social stability, ethical behavior, and proper governance. Just like the
Jewish case there is an absence of the analytical study of the structure of language and its relation
to the thought process. See Analect 12.11: 齊景公問政於孔子. 孔子對日: 君君, 臣臣, 父父, 子
cit., p. 57.
Scharfstein’s description reminds us of the Indo-European stress on formal relations, but this time from the perspective of linguistic analysis. The highly inflective nature of Sanskrit and ancient Greek almost invites analysis; is does so by virtue of its ability to emphasize the fact that change is subject to constant rules. Penetrating the rationale of these rules highlight what is changeless in language. The great emphasis the Indo-Europeans laid on linguistic analysis reflected their understanding that a deeper familiarization with grammar and syntax was a potent tool for philosophical inquiry and logical argumentation.\(^{317}\) It makes sense that only under the impact of Greek philosophy via Islam, did Jewish thinkers begin to attach more importance to grammar and linguistics.\(^{318}\) This age led to a sharp increase in works on grammar and language, especially among rationalist philosophers.

\(^{317}\) The emphasis on linguistics in analytic traditions does not mean language occupied a more important position in these cultures; on the contrary, one could argue that the ontological centrality of Hebrew in the Jewish worldview is unparalleled, but such importance never led to a specialized treatment of grammar as we see it in the Indo-European case. This difference is especially interesting if we consider the fact that in the eyes of Hindus, Sanskrit shares a similar ontological status to Hebrew; in both cases we are dealing with languages that were frequently conceived as divine and a-priori to humans and even creation. Interestingly, the similar normative nature of Sanskrit and Hebrew did not lead Jews and Hindus down the same path regarding language; this suggests that linguistic commonalities within the Indo-European language group (Greek and Sanskrit) were to a certain extent more influential than theological similarities (Hebrew and Sanskrit) in determining approaches towards language. The above distinctions are not unrelated to Moshe Idel’s discussion of various forms of ‘Ontic Continua,’ where he shows that although language is used in describing ontic structures in the Neoplatonic and Neo-Aristotelian worlds, language as an ontological reality is precluded from the system. In other words, language in the Greek case is a tool for verbal explicitness while in Judaism it represents the inherent foundations of reality. This is of course a highly “restricted” form of ontology since it assumes that the Hebrew language, one that is confined to a specific group, constitutes the core of a supposedly universal ontological reality. See Idel’s distinction between linguo-theology and linguo-theosophy as opposed to the onto-theology of Neoplatonism and Neo-Aristotelianism in *Enchanted Chains*, esp. pp. 24-25.

P.T. Raju highlights the pervasiveness of the study of language in various Indian schools of philosophy: “Sanskrit has its own philosophies, not merely one but many. Of them, the philosophy of the Grammarians is the most pertinent….Semantics was from the beginning of the systems a part of epistemology, for the word was recognized as a distinct means of valid knowledge by almost all the schools…” As opposed to Jewish thinkers who believed that the sacred status of Hebrew was to a great extent beyond human understanding, for Hindu thinkers “grammar was prescribed as an indispensable subsidiary study to the Veda…the philosophy of the grammar must be almost as important as the philosophy of Veda and has to support it…Thus, the interest in the nature of language, grammar, and semantics was intense from the very beginning.”

While both Jewish and Hindu thinkers believed their languages represented the most pristine and unadulterated linguistic form, only Hindus focused on the philosophical investigation of language, the goal of which was to reach the primordial patterns of human cognition. This peculiar understanding of the role of language is a rationalistic move *par excellence* as it postulated a correlation between human cognition and metaphysical reality. Such structure of reality, according to Hindu grammarians, could be accessed through the analysis of what they believed to be a “universal, inward language common to all men.” The analytic Indo-European mind gravitates towards the *logos*, and in India *logos* was perceived by many, notably Sankara, as indistinguishable from the “higher Brahman.” Language can reveal being and is therefore perceived as one of the most imperative fields of inquiry. In fact, in modern terms, many schools of early

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319 P.T. Raju, “Indian Epistemology and the World and the Individual,” p. 121; see more on the importance of grammar in Indian thought in Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking*, p. 150.
Hindu philosophy were radical Whorfians, for them “there is no cognition without a corresponding verbal sentence… The individual is ultimately a formation of the Logos and can have no separate Being of its own. The world consists of the formations of the Logos and is its manifestation.”

The term logos, is of Greek origin of course; the fact that it denotes both ‘language’ and ‘logic’ is a testimony to the intimate relationship these two fields shared in the Greek mind. Consequently, both Plato but especially Aristotle dedicated much attention to language. The latter constructed systematic theories of logic, rhetoric, dialectics, all of which were intimately associated with the structure and essence of speech. Like Hindu philosophers, Aristotle demythologized language in a quest to subject it to rational investigation. He also provided the first semantic analysis of propositions to facilitate his theory of truth as correspondence. An additional noteworthy contribution was his designation of nouns and verbs as word classes. Again, this interest in the structure of language represents an attempt to better understand the nature of cognition and being; it was a strategy for the refinement of logic, rhetoric and the art of dialectics. Aristotle was acutely aware “of the importance of grammar; not worrying over concepts so much, but getting down to the living molecule of thought…” indeed, he was interested in “the bear bones of syllogizing.” The Greeks were therefore responsible for the first systematic strides in the development of Western linguistics, but most importantly they

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320 Ibid., p. 128.
321 Aristotle distinguished between the two constituents of propositions, namely, the predicate (expressing properties) and the ‘remainder’ of the proposition pointing to the substance to which the property is assigned.
were the first Western thinkers to pay attention to the relationship between the formal structure of language and ultimate reality, a recognition that made the specialized investigation of language an indispensable tool for the advancement of knowledge, both epistemic and metaphysical.

### 2.4.6 Restricted and Elaborate codes and Sociality

The following section will explore the important social ramifications of the restricted and elaborate codes. As I suggested above, the restricted code coincides with traditions in which members share long-term and well-established common cultural assumptions. Whether such assumptions are shared on a conscious or sub-conscious level, they nevertheless function as a powerful medium for cultural cohesion. On a more specific level Bernstein notes that the lack of explicitness in the restricted code facilitates a communal ethos that strongly inhibits possibilities for individual self-expression. In other words, condensed forms of communication, symbolic and ritualistic, lack the linguistic explicitness of Indo-European languages and therefore limit possibilities for “signaling of individual experience.” Mary Douglas notes that the restricted code functions in a way that “every utterance is pressed into service to affirm the social order. Speech in this case exercises a solidarity-maintaining function…”

Appreciating the interrelationship between social realities and language helps us understand Bernstein’s theory in relation to his positional and personal social models. As Bernstein clearly notes, in the restricted code “individuals relate to each other essentially through the social

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position or status they are occupying… the concept of self will tend to be refracted through the implications of the status arrangements. Here there is no problem of self, because the problem is not relevant." The restricted code is oriented towards reinforcing relational dynamics in which social positions are mainly articulated in terms of relations rather than positions occupied by individual agents. The communal facets of condensed forms of communication are also reflected in the fact that “the perception of symbols in general, as well as their interpretation, is socially determined.” The restricted code is therefore a form of communication that is tailored towards a communal ethos in which human relations determine the position of individuals. Such a dynamic is precisely what characterizes family-based traditions such as Judaism and Confucianism in which extreme forms of agency are subordinated to the interests of the family and one's relative position to others. This can be contrasted with the elaborate code in which the shift away from ritualism and symbolism is simultaneously representative of a move inwards towards the “private internalizing of religious experience.”

The relationship between ritual and language is a point I will discuss in more detail in my analysis of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism; at this point it is enough to suggest the possibility that the different characteristics of Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages have social ramifications. The gradual Indo-European shift towards discursive and explicit strategies of communication was simultaneously conducive to a more individualistic mindset. The ability to express oneself more explicitely rather than

324 Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, p. 126.
325 Ibid., p. 132.
326 Ibid.
use communally determined symbols opens a space for a cross-cultural dialogue that undermines local communal cohesion. Douglas notes that “in its extreme forms anti-ritualism is an attempt to abolish communication by complex symbolic systems.”328 The abolishment of symbolic systems that have a mediating role between individuals is slowly replaced in Indo-European languages by a linguistic code “that has the primary function of making explicit unique individual perceptions, and bridging initial assumptions.”329

The similarities between Bernstein’s code theory and the way scholars have contrasted Greek thought with Chinese and Hebraic thought is quite extraordinary. The relationship between Indo-European languages, theoretical thought, the ability to ‘think about thought itself,’ as well as the construction of different forms of cognitive individualism, displays an uncanny resemblance to Bernstein’s characterization of the elaborate code. Consider the following passage: “an elaborate code user comes to perceive language as a set of theoretical possibilities available for the transmission of unique experience. The concept of self, unlike the concept of self of a speaker limited to a restricted code, will be verbally differentiated, so that it becomes in itself the object of special perceptual activity.” Indo-European languages, like the elaborate code bias speakers towards a more analytic theoretical discourse that is likely to take place in a less coercive social environment. The elaborate code, which I associate with Indo-European languages, is also conducive to the construction of forms of spirituality that place the individual at the center of religious fulfillment, or what I termed cognitive individualism.

328 Ibid., p. 21.
Such resemblances seem to support his Durkheimian position that linguistic codes emerge as a result of different social environments. Again, it is not my aim to explore whether social classifications impact language or vice versa, instead I want to highlight the co-dependency and concurrence of morphological features; in this case, language and sociality.

2.4.7 Restricted and Elaborate Codes with Respect to Particularism vs. Universalism, and This-Worldliness vs. Other-Worldliness.

In the second chapter, I discussed the Jewish and Chinese stress on commentary as a central form of discourse, in this section I will look at some of the linguistic aspects of this topic. The complex commentarial traditions that Confucians and rabbis constructed are good examples of how the restricted code operates. The condensed and culturally specific terminology commentary uses necessitated a close familiarity with a large range of background assumptions and central texts. Such characteristics constrain possibilities for foreign participation as well as safeguard the authoritative position of certain intellectual elites. William Scott Green’s description of the restricted features of rabbinic literature gives us a better idea of just how opaque this tradition must have seemed to outsiders:

Rabbinic documents do not introduce or explain themselves to their readers, and they provide no easy access for tyros and noninitiates. The literature as a whole, especially its halakhic content, presupposes not only considerable information but also codes for interpretation. Its terse and formulaic syntactic constructions and its lean and disciplined vocabulary constitute a scholastic shorthand. Even the most elementary halakhic statement presumes a tacit dimension of rabbinic knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and
motivations. Rabbinic literature virtually ignores the world beyond its own preoccupations…. Rabbinic writing addresses rabbinic specialists; it is parochial literature wholly obsessed with itself.\textsuperscript{330}

The restricted code is therefore oriented towards preserving a form of exclusivity that is extremely difficult to penetrate; this becomes especially apparent if we bear in mind that commentarial traditions are founded upon earlier strata of the tradition and therefore require constant reference to the past as well as a deep familiarity with a certain process of development from past to present. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese commentarial tradition’s constant reference to past resources led to a situation in which central commentaries on major classics became classics in their own account, leading to the formation of commentaries on commentaries. The strategy commentarial traditions use for legitimizing innovation is through reference to precedence. New interpretations of scripture can be extremely creative but they always point to the past by attributing new meanings to ancient terms and verses. This process “magnifies” the semantic field of certain terms thereby “condensing” them to include increasing layers of meaning. A familiarity with the genealogy of terms is therefore of great importance to the scholar; old layers of meaning are rarely jettisoned, instead, they are “stored,” so to speak, in the tradition’s memory and can always be reused for future hermeneutical needs. The commentarial dialectic between past and present, old and new, creates a certain linguistic depth that we can associate with the idea of implicitness typical of the restricted code.

\textsuperscript{330} Neusner, \textit{Take Judaism for Example}, p. 30.
The ongoing process of condensing traditional terminology with increasing layers of meaning is unlike the philosophical tendency of inventing or manufacturing new terminology. Bernstein detected a similar phenomenon in the societies he studied; in describing the kind of impact the restricted code has on speakers he claims that “The speech is epitomized by a low-level and limiting sentence organization and there is little motivation or orientation towards increasing vocabulary.”\textsuperscript{331} The process of “condensing” old terms with ever growing layers of meaning is opposed to the unique ability of analytic traditions to manufacture terminology to serve new needs. Nakamura reminds us of the wide semantic range of different terms in the Chinese language, an ambiguity that “explains why the exegesis of the classics has produced an immense variety of interpretations, many of which are directly opposite in sense to others.”\textsuperscript{332}

In contrast to the restricted code, elaborate or analytic discourses enable an accelerated advancement of knowledge by allowing a constant influx of new terms that adequately capture changing realities. Such a strategy simultaneously refrains from “encumbering” old terms with secondary meaning thereby preserving their relative stability and accuracy. This is a form of verbal precision characteristic, and indeed necessary, for the construction of efficient, publicly accessible, and pluralistic discourses. The type of literary output that emerge in Greek and Buddhist discourses, in spite of their great complexity, were far more accessible than the condensed commentarial traditions of Confucianism and Judaism. Both the Buddha and Socrates went into great extremes to be clear and explicit; the reader is asked to exercise her rational faculties but there is almost

\textsuperscript{331} Bernstein, Class, Codes and Control, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{332} Nakamura, Ways of Thinking of Eastern People, pp. 186-7.
no demand to be in command of information or assumptions that are not explicitly stated in the text. Although guidance is important, such forms of discourse are not as reliant on tutorship as they are on reason. Instead of guarding themselves from outside participation, as in the case rabbinic and Confucian discourses, the linguistic code of analytic systems is oriented towards transparency and broad participation.

Edith Hamilton stresses the democratization of knowledge as one of the main hallmarks of Greece during the age of the philosophers, but she does not treat the linguistic aspects of this accessibility to information. I would like to suggest that appreciating the function of language in the development of Indo-European systems may help us understand why a more universal discourse emerges in some cultures rather than others. The Indo-European inclination towards theoretical and disembodied discourses can help us better understand why it was more likely for Greco-Christian and Hindu-Buddhist traditions to develop a-historical cosmological systems that were detached from the particular background of a specific group. Universality is also related to explicitness; Bernstein notes that when “meanings are made explicit and are conventionalized through language, meaning may be called universalistic, whilst if they are implicit and relatively less conventionalized through language, meanings can be called particularistic.”

The universalizing effects of the elaborate code can therefore be related to the downplaying of

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333 Whereas Merlin Donald believes that new linguistic and cognitive capacities made information more accessible to the masses, Hamilton focuses on the absence of the “jealous” priesthods in Greece, typical of the old world. She claims that non-Greek cultures such as Egypt disclosed an elitist priesthood that obsessively guarded knowledge from the masses: “All they knew must be kept jealously within the organization. To teach the people so that they would begin to think for themselves, would be to destroy the surest prop of their power.” Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 20.

334 Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, p. 129.
condensed extra-verbal communication. Explicitness means democratization of knowledge and transparency, which in turn are conducive to the transportability of ideas to various cultural settings.

Scholar of religion Hans Jonas agrees with this characterization of the Greek mode of thinking; he offers an interesting account of the universal aspects of Hellenic culture with a special stress on the role its language played in this story. In his influential *The Gnostic Religion* Jonas points our attention to the linguistic contrast between the mythical-symbolic character of Judaism and the conceptual language of Greek philosophy. *Logos*, in his view, was the greatest contribution of the Greek tradition to the world, and the most unique and innovative characteristic of Hellenistic culture. The linguistic qualities of the Greek language were instrumental to the Hellenization of strangers, not by force, but through the power of a universally accessible culture. As Jonas points out, being Greek meant a certain type of education, language, and cultural affinity, rather than a specific ancestral affiliation (restricted code). Greek universalism enabled the conquered of the East to become real Greeks through education, without the need to prove an ethnic relationship to their rulers. This unique universalism was an immense power in drawing foreigners to join and ‘feel at home’ in Greek civilization, “where one of the central characteristics of becoming Hellenized was the adoption of the Greek language.”

Both Donald and Jonas agree that the Greek language (and in Donald’s case the Indo-European language family) contained the seed of theoretical thought; they associate such theoretical tendencies with a universalizable characteristic.

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that was absent in other cultures. It should therefore come as no surprise that both the Greek and Indian traditions were largely responsible for the emergence of the world’s first two universal religions: Christianity and Buddhism.

Finally, the restricted and elaborate codes are also oriented towards this-worldliness and other-worldliness respectively. The capacity to communicate in a theoretically sophisticated manner increases the probability towards the construction of idealized realities perceived as superior to quotidian life. As we have seen, Indo-European languages are structurally geared towards the expression of abstractions that in turn tend to prioritize mind over matter and therefore look at the body and the world of materiality with suspicion. The a-historical cosmologies that the Greco-European and Indo-Buddhist traditions constructed were therefore oriented toward a sublime sphere of existence. Languages that were not structurally oriented towards the de-contextualization of information did not encourage speakers to highlight the typical Indo-European distinction between phenomena and noumena.

Recent scientific experimentation seems to support the view that language directly impinges of forms of perception. Linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath has shown that American parents deliberately decontextualize language in their communication with children, this tendency is reflected by the Indo-European stress on nouns as well as its “subject-prominence” as opposed to the Asian “topic-prominence.”

As Richard Nisbett notes, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is “currently undergoing one of its periods of greater acceptance;” Nisbett argues that “there are in fact a remarkable number

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of parallels between cognitive differences and differences between Indo-European languages and East Asian languages.337

2.4.8 Restricted Code and Ritual

I titled this chapter “Strategies of Meaning: Communication and Language” because the notion of language fails to exhaust the wide range of available strategies of communication. Implicit forms of communication, or what Bernstein calls para-verbal communication can consist of local gestures, tones and pitches of speech, and most importantly to our discussion ritual. These non-verbal channels of communication represent ‘compact’ or ‘dense’ strategies of meaning that can be seen as forms of restricted code. Many scholars have highlighted ritual as a method for creating cultural boundaries; J.Z. Smith, for instance, argues that ritual is above all the assertion of differences.338 The Chinese were very much aware of this function, The Classic of Ritual (禮記) states that “similarity and union are the aim of music; difference and distinction, that of ceremony.”339 Thinking about ritual in terms of Bernstein’s code theory helps us appreciate different strategies of communication and the relationship of such strategies to different languages, especially the distinction I have called ‘Indo-European and the rest.’ Ritual does not necessitate complicated discursive abilities; instead it relies on bodily

performance and fairly simple and repetitive linguistic injunctions.340 Whereas taking part in the Chinese and Jewish commentarial traditions meant being part of an intellectual elite, ritual was a highly accessible and rudimentary strategy for the construction of identity among common people. As Roy Rappaport argues, ritual enables members to repetitively communicate and affirm their group affiliation.341 In other words, both the intellectual and ritualistic forms of communication that rabbis and Confucians devised were oriented towards safeguarding in-group boundaries. Just as “rabbinic discourse shields itself from intellectual penetration by others,”342 so does ritual play a similar role on a more popular level as an efficient transmitter of cultural DNA.343 The transmission of culture through the medium of ritual emerges in traditions that are under relatively tight social control.344 Therefore, ritual as a strategy for cultural transmission is much less likely to be applied by universal traditions with proselytizing ambitions. Consider Hellenic culture as it spread throughout the old world, Christianity’s dissemination in Europe, or Buddhism as it spread from India eastwards; these traditions downplayed ritualism in favor of strategies of communication that were more discursive and

340 Rappaport referred to such simple injunctions as *Ultimate Sacred Postulates*, e.g. “Hear O Israel the Lord your God the Lord is one.”
342 Arthur Green, “Religion and Mysticism: The Case of Judaism,” in Neusner ed., *Take Judaism, for Example*, p. 39. Full quote: “The content of rabbinic documents virtually certifies that they were produced for an internal audience. They are of rabbis, by rabbis and for rabbis; they constitute a rabbinic conception of rabbinic culture, composed for itself and addressed to itself …Rabbinic discourse shields itself from intellectual penetration by others; it is the work of a group bounded bad set apart.”
343 This is what Mary Douglas points to when she observes that applying Bernstein’s approach to the analysis of ritual can “help us to understand religious behavior if we can treat ritual forms, like speech forms, as transmitters of culture.” Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 23.
344 Mary Douglas contends that when a “social group grips its members in tight communal bonds, the religion is ritualistic; when this grip is relaxed, ritualism declines.” Ibid., p. 14.
universally applicable. Ritual, by all means, remained an important component of
universal systems, but instead of functioning as a medium for cultural and social
distinctions, it took on a more spiritualized role that did not inhibit the inclusion of new
convert from various cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, the Chinese and Jewish traditions, which I argue conform to the
synthetic mode of operation are more inclined to resort to restricted forms of
communication, both linguistic and ritualistic. In language this is reflected in dense
symbolism and terminology that is local, relatively ambiguous, and multi-layered. The
restricted code is an extremely efficient tool in safeguarding and consolidating forms of
particularism by which a tradition can highlight cultural boundaries through the
application of a linguistic shorthand inaccessible to foreigners. The use of restricted
codes enhances social solidarity at the expense of the verbal elaboration of individual
experience.\textsuperscript{345} The same setting of boundaries is applicable to ritualistic behavior. Ritual
can be seen as a restricted code taken to the extreme, such that language is reduced to
central religious propositions and non-verbal communication enacted through the
medium of the body. This becomes central in signaling the acceptance of social
conventions and the ongoing affirmation of one’s membership in a community.

Therefore, while analytic, Indo-European traditions overwhelmingly relied on elaborate
forms of communication, abstractions, conceptualism, theory, and allegory; synthetic
traditions resorted to various forms of a restricted code such as metaphor, association,
multi-layered terminology, and ritual.

\textsuperscript{345} Bernstein, \textit{Class, Codes and Control}, p. 147.
2.5 CONCLUSION: TRADITIONS IN HOMEOSTASIS

In this chapter I established the central distinction between the synthetic and analytic morphological modalities during a period stability, or homeostasis. The main goal was to demonstrate that the Jewish and Chinese traditions, in their classical phase, were both operating according to synthetic modes of operation in contradistinction to the foreign analytic traditions with which they came into conflict. I suggest that the distinctions between the two modalities consist of three rudimentary layers that can be roughly divided to the cognitive, social, and cultural. Not only do these levels interact symbiotically, but also each level is itself composed of a range of reinforcing morphological features. There exists a continuous synergetic relationship between these various constituents such that it is impossible, indeed misleading, to use reductionistic approaches or a causative hermeneutic to understand their emergence. Each modality displays an internal consistency in which its general structural characteristics and the totality of sensibilities that guide it, coalesce into a highly resilient and self-validating cultural system. Such inner coherence lent synthetic and analytic axial cultures their undeniable robustness and ability to persevere through the centuries.

An additional point to consider is that the internal symbiotic nature of cultural systems means they will rarely disclose a combination of synthetic and analytic characteristics. Systems self-organize into clusters of commensurable components that are destabilized by traits that are foreign to their internal logic. As an example, consider the synergetic relationship within the analytic modality; the atomization of data, social autonomy, introspective techniques practiced in seclusion, the distinction between matter
and spirit, asceticism, other-worldly perspectives, and universalism are all interrelated in various ways. Let’s assume that such a cluster of interlocking analytic traits were to interact with synthetic features such as a restricted linguistic code and ritualism. The dissonance becomes fairly obvious: a restricted code denies external participation which conflicts with the universalism of analytic traditions, it also impedes the type of self-expression conducive for individual forms of spirituality. Similarly, dense ritualism and the reliance on embodied forms of religious behavior will conflict with the introspective, world-negating, and mentalistic tendencies of analytic traditions. Numerous other examples can be used to show the discrepancies between analytic and synthetic temperaments, the point being that such internal conflicts will radically reduce the long-term resilience of a cultural system. Traditions tend to gravitate and spontaneously self-organize into coherent, self-enforcing, and self-validating matrices such that anomalous, social, or cognitive dispositions will not be likely to persist. The self-organization of components is never linear but rather multi-faceted; each morphological component reinforces, and is reinforced by several other components, which self organize into a coherent whole that works adaptively in relation to shifting historical and environmental circumstances. In order to better understand the fascinating internal dynamic of cultural systems in relation to their environments, in the following third and fourth chapters I will look at the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism in a historical context. This will help us revisit the topic of adaptive systems with more historical nuance in the concluding fifth chapter.
CHAPTER 3

TRADITIONS IN MORPHOGENESIS – KABBALAH
3.1 PERIODS OF CRISIS: FROM HOMEOSTASIS TO MORPHOGENESIS

The following two chapters will focus on a more specific historical period in Jewish and Chinese history. As opposed to my general examination of the Chinese and Jewish traditions as they functioned in relative stability prior to the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism, here I will look at the specific historical events that took place between the ninth and twelfth centuries in the Confucian case, and between the tenth and thirteenth centuries in the case of the Jewish tradition. My central claim is that during this period the Confucian and rabbinic paradigms were destabilized by similar factors, leading to a profound cultural crisis in both traditions. My goal is not only to support my argument regarding the analytic/synthetic clash with historical data, but more importantly, to show how the morphological approach can shed light on these historical events, helping us understand the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic phenomena from the more broad perspective of self-adaptive and self-organizing cultural systems.

This story can be told using Thomas Kuhn’s approach to the structure of scientific revolutions. I use Kuhn's theory more than metaphorically; I believe, in agreement with Hans Kung, Ian Barbour and others, that religious revolutions disclose many of the same dynamics that Kuhn detected in scientific revolutions. Before going into further detail

346 Ian Barbour, in his Myths, Models and Paradigms; the Nature of Scientific and Religious Language (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974), and Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues (New York: Harper One, 1997) was one of the first scholars to look at the possible links between scientific and religious revolution using Kuhnian concepts. Similarly, in Theology for the Third Millennium (New York: Doubleday, 1988) the theologian Hans Kung analyzed the evolution of the Christian tradition through a Kuhnian lens thereby providing an important foundation for the application of Kuhn’s ideas to religious communities. Other adaptations of Kuhn’s philosophy of science as it was reiterated and modified by Imre Lakatos’
there is a crucial question that begs an answer. Since it is clear that cultures constantly react to, and interact with their environments, what makes the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic phenomena a full-fledged revolution rather than mere change? I will try to answer this question in terms of information theory. I already argued that the most fundamental characteristic that deems a tradition a self-contained ‘unit,’ is its unique textual orientation or common informational foundation. In the case of cultural systems both whole (Judaism and Confucianism) as well as sub-traditions such as Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism, this informational aspect is most clearly represented by a group’s authoritative textual nexus. Consequently, I will argue that the rapid and abrupt shift in the textual orientations of the Jewish and Chinese traditions during the period under examination deems the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic phenomena distinct from ordinary change. In both cases, we witness a radical—and in historical terms—swift over-haul of the classical canons. Considering the magnitude of these changes, the degree to which Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah were accepted in their respective traditions is baffling. The Zohar established itself as one of the three pillars of the Jewish tradition alongside the Bible and the Talmud. The Chinese case is just as astounding; the Neo-Confucians led to a textual reorientation in which the venerable Five Classics, were surpassed by the newly edited and commented upon Four Books, which eventually became the new foundations for the imperial examination system. It is form this

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were applied to religion by Nancey Murphy in her *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

347 In both traditions, opposition is apparent and real but substantially overshadowed by a general acceptance of a new textual reality, which led to the eventual canonization of the Zohar and the Four Books (with Zhu Xi’s commentary).
textual/informational prism, so I believe, that the revolutionary and transformative nature of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah becomes most apparent. Never before and never again have such extreme textual revolutions occurred in the midst of the rabbinic and Confucian traditions.

The period of crisis I will explore in the following pages is one in which both traditions were confronted with a growing number of anomalies. As opposed to inconsistencies that could normally be brushed aside or dealt with by commentary, Kuhnian periods of crisis are characterized by a large host of incongruities that can no longer be ignored. Such were the historical conditions that foreshadowed the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah. This distinct moment in Jewish and Chinese history opened the gates for a more pluralistic and polemical cultural dialogue. Indeed, one of the central indications of periods of crisis is the spontaneous proliferation of contending schools of thought seeking solutions for the growing irrelevance of their traditions in face of external pressures. As in science, such periods are characterized by the audaciousness and range of solutions that are offered by contending voices. The period that led to the ascendency of theurgic Kabbalah and the Neo-Confucian School of Principle is a fascinating example of this type of cultural fermentation and intellectual heterogeneity. As in science, the victorious Kabbalistic and Neo-Confucian worldviews managed to attract the largest number of followers and become the leading candidates for the establishment of a new cultural paradigm. Not all contending schools had a similar

Kuhn claimed that ‘normal science’ suppresses novelties when they are subversive to its basic commitments. Scientific Revolutions, p. 5.
fate; those that did not manage to attract followers, authoritative support, or intentionally remained confined to small circles were marginalized or perished.

As I will try to demonstrate, the changes that swept over the Chinese and Jewish worlds were not confined to the domain of ideas, they must be understood in the broader context of substantially new social, demographic, economic and technological realities. Of particular importance was the emergence of new and more sophisticated cultural elites that had unprecedented access to education and knowledge. This is a situation in which old elites were no longer the only articulators of their tradition’s present and future agendas. Scholars have not been oblivious to the role played by new elites in the emergence of new cultural paradigms. In the Jewish case Moshe Idel, Hartely Lachter, and Bernard Septimus have pointed out the emergence of new elites during the period in which Kabbalah and philosophy rose to prominence. In China, Peter Bol, Dieter Kuhn, and others have shown that the collapse of the Tang aristocracy and the rise of the literati class was one of the central reasons behind the Neo-Confucian revolution. This is not a surprise if we look back at other large-scale cultural revolutions. As an example, one of the most powerful explanatory frameworks for the emergence of axial age traditions has been related to the crystallization of new intellectual elites. Bruno Snell, for instance contends that the emergence of philosophy as a replacement, or addition to mythological tradition reflects a transition from the Homeric age of ‘nobles’ to the rise of the

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349 Idel, “The Kabbalah ‘Window of Opportunities’, 1270-1290.” In Ezra Fleischer et al. ed., Me’ah She’arim; Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life, in Memory of Isadore Twersky (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001).
philosophically inclined commoners. Scholars have pointed our attention to similar social transitions that instigated, or at the very least accommodated, the emergence of other axial-traditions. I will discuss these topics with greater detail in what follows, for now I will only note that our understanding of the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic revolutions should not be confined to the history of ideas; the rise of new elites, technological breakthroughs, and economic changes were all intimately related to the historical changes that this study sets to examine. I will especially try to stress the relationship of these factors to information, the way it was accessed, stored, and transmitted by cultural systems in transition.

In the following pages I will argue that behind the substantial phenotypic differences that characterize the Confucian and rabbinic traditions, we can detect cultural systems that disclose similar structural dynamics. In their classical manifestations prior to the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism these two traditions generally conform to a synthetic physiognomy – this represents a phase in which both Confucianism and rabbinical Judaism consolidate themselves as stable homeostatic cultural systems. The period dealt with in this section attempts to look at how such systems were perturbed and destabilized, leading to their shift towards a prolonged adaptive phase of morphogenesis and adaptation. Once the process of responding to the destabilizing effects of the analytical modality was completed, reflected by the ascendency of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism, we witness a return to a new phase of

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351 Especially in Eisenstadt, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*.
homeostasis and relative stability. It is in this sense that I will refer to Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism as ‘defense theologies;’ I treat these schools as adaptive mechanism that complex cultural systems are able to launch at time of crisis in order to protect their traditional ways of life. In what follows I will try to show how the Chinese and Jewish worlds went through this process of adaptation and reformulation. I will discuss the Jewish and Chinese cases separately beginning with the story of Kabbalah.

3.2 JUDAISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF KABBALAH

In order to understand Kabbalah from a morphological perspective, the central development I will try to highlight in the Jewish medieval story is the intensification of rationalist philosophical tendencies, beginning with Saadia Gaon’s (892-942 CE) qualified Kalamic rationalism and reaching maturity with Maimonides’ (1138-1204 CE) more controversial Aristotelianism. 352 It is during the approximately two centuries between Saadia and Maimonides that we can trace how the Greek worldview managed to make inroads into the Jewish tradition. Being the two most influential philosophers in the medieval period, Saadia and Maimonides conveniently frame the two centuries between the birth of medieval Jewish philosophy and its culmination in the Maimonidean controversies during the first third of the thirteenth century. I will demonstrate how Greek thought led to the formation of a Jewish rational tradition characterized by many of the

352 Sarah Stroumsa, “Saadya and Jewish Kalam,” pp. 72-75. Kalam was attacked by philosophers as too theological and by conservatives as to rationalistic, thereby representing an initial middle ground between these two camps. Maimonides criticized Kalam as an aberration in which philosophical techniques are harnessed for the defense of religion. Instead of building one’s beliefs on rationality and science, Kalamists bent facts to fit their religious convictions.
morphological characteristics of analytic traditions, and then proceed to show how mystics began to counter philosophy using anti-rationalist methodologies which enabled them both to address the same set of questions raised by philosophers as well as provide creative solutions that were more congenial to the synthetic mindset. The timeframe under scrutiny will begin in the 930’s with Saadia’s philosophical work and ends with the victory of the school of theurgic Kabbalah and the appearance of the Zohar towards the end of thirteenth century.³⁵³

3.2.1 The Rise of Philosophy

The first signs of change in the Jewish world can be traced back to the Geonic period, especially the tenth century with the appearance of the first Jewish philosophers. This watershed moment, which eventually gave rise to diverse forms of contending intellectual currents within Judaism, took place at a time of unprecedented prosperity, flourishing of the arts and sciences, and the increasingly expanding geographical borders of the Muslim world. It is almost impossible to overemphasize the cultural implications of the first translations of Aristotelian or Neoplatonized Aristotelian philosophy into Arabic. It is probably not a coincidence however, that the crisis in Judaism that this study attempts to reconstruct, can be traced to the thought of Saadia Gaon who worked at the same time and place these translations first appeared.³⁵⁴ It is important to stress the kind

³⁵³ By Saadia’s philosophical work I am mainly referring to his commentary on the Book of Creation, and his magnum opus The Book of Beliefs and Opinions (הosophות והדעות), 931-933CE.
³⁵⁴ The Geonic era refers to a period between the seventh and eleventh centuries in Babylonia. The Geonim were the leaders of the Rabbinical colleges of Sura and Pumbetida. The “Translation
of urgency and sense of crisis that propelled central Jewish authorities such as Saadia to embark on the daunting task of reinterpreting Judaism. Generally speaking, Jews were experiencing an escalating sense of dissonance between their traditional worldviews and the rapidly changing reality they were living in. The new methods promoted by Muslim philosophers created a sense of confusion among rabbis who were becoming aware of the inevitability of confronting the dilemmas posed by rational philosophy.

Although philosophy was mainly an elitist occupation, it would be a mistake to assume that only highbrow intellectuals were aware of the new winds of change that were blowing their way. In other words, while philosophy as a specialized field of inquiry was confined to fairly small groups of progressives, the impact of an increasingly rationalist mindset went far beyond these groups and could be discerned in diverse domains of human activity such as commerce, science, the arts, and politics. The unprecedented prosperity and cultural confidence that marked the Muslim golden age was certainly part of the favorable reception of rational thought and the willingness of Muslims to subject their system of belief to the scrutiny of reason. As in the case of Hellenism more than a millennium earlier, this new rational mindset, with its universalistic thrust was conducive to the expansion of Muslim culture and religion beyond its native geographical borders. Indeed, as I will argue, the analytic mode of operation is a potent tool for cultural

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Movement” refers to a period approx. between 800-1150, a time when Arab intellectuals were actively searching to translate Greek philosophical works.

355 The Islamic golden age began with the ascension of the Abbasid Caliphate (mid-eighth century) where the Geonim operated. Toby Huff notes that "In virtually every field of endeavor—in astronomy, alchemy, mathematics, medicine, optics and so forth—Arab scientists were in the forefront of scientific advance.” See Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 48.
expansion and therefore in conformity with the interests of powerful empires. In Judaism, new rationalist tendencies were highly compatible with the prosperous and cosmopolitan Jewish elites that were in close contact with the ruling Muslim aristocracy in Bagdad and later in Spain, and yet later in Spain and France under Christian rule. But the seductiveness of rationalism and its corrosive effects upon orthodox narratives proved to be a double edged sword, one that was meant to strengthen Judaism but ended up dangerously threatening it. Before looking at the cognitive, social, and cultural levels, I will dedicate the following section to an examination of the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the cultural crisis Judaism faced.

The ascendancy of the Abbasid Caliphate represented the beginning of a glorious era of cultural self-assurance in which “the Muslim world became an intellectual center for science, philosophy, medicine and education as the Abbasids championed the cause of knowledge and established the House of Wisdom in Baghdad; where both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars sought to translate and gather all the world's knowledge into Arabic.” This monumental translation project is a typical example of how the systematic transmission of information from one cultural medium to another can function as a catalyst for profound cultural change. Technological progress is yet another important feature to consider. Owing to the establishment of the first paper manufacturing plant in Bagdad in 794 “literary creativity was stimulated to an

unprecedented degree.” Together with specialized translations, such technological advances represent important channels for the efficient transmission of information. The increase in literacy was certainly another important factor that contributed to the growing circulation of information, both in terms of people who could read written manuscripts as well as those who could reproduce manuscripts by copying them. Such shifts were all related to the radical socio-economic changes of the age. One substantial change in Judaism that I would like to highlight was the shift from a communal Talmudic discourse to the proliferation of monographs. I will explore this change in the section dedicated to the social level; for now it is worth noting that changes in formats of transmission reflect greater social mobility and the rise of a more individualistic ethos. Moshe Idel describes this as the “de-institutionalization of the regular mechanisms of transmitting and preserving traditional knowledge,” a phenomenon he associates with the decline in power of traditional elites and the rise of alternative ones. Although Idel focuses on the end of thirteenth century Spain, I will suggest that social and cultural changes in the tenth century already point to the rise of a new class of intellectuals that introduced modes of transmission that were destined to intensify during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

As mentioned, the new cultural dispositions of the age permeated society in pervasive ways that went far beyond the domain of the philosophical ivory tower. Signs of crisis were not confined to distinguished leaders of the Jewish community; rabbis began to sense a widespread dissatisfaction and confusion among common believers.

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‘Confusion’, ‘perplexity’, ‘uncertainty’ were terms frequently used by thinkers from Saadia onwards as euphemisms for a profound religious and cultural crisis. In *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* Saadia writes:

> For I saw in this age of mine many believers whose belief was not pure and whose convictions were not sound, whilst many of the deniers of the faith boasted of their corruption and looked down upon the devotees of the truth although they were themselves in error. I saw, furthermore, men who were sunk, as it were, in seas of doubt and overwhelmed by waves of confusion and there was no diver to bring them up from the depths nor a swimmer who might take hold of their hands and carry them ashore...

As Saadia suggests, the essence of this crisis was reflected in a new skepticism and decline of belief. Indeed, one of the central features of analytic thought is its ability to encourage suspicion towards conventional systems with normative claims. Saadia’s words reflect a period in which an increasingly secularized population looks down upon the dogmatism of devotees who followed old cultural conventions.

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360 Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Samuel Rosenblatt tr., (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1948), pp. 6-7; David Blumenthal, “Religion and the Religious Intellectuals: The Case of Judaism in Medieval Times.” in Jacob Neusner *Take Judaism for Example*, p. 123. In another instance Saadia writes: “What has prompted me to speak explicitly about this matter is my observation of the state of many people in regard to their beliefs and convictions… my heart was grieved for my species, the species of rational beings, and my soul was stirred on account of our people, the children of Israel.” Ibid.

361 See more on suspicion and rationalism in Ernest Gellner, *Reason and Culture: The Historic Role of Rationality and Rationalism* (Oxford UK; Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1992). Such suspicion towards traditional values is beautifully captured in the way Plato’s philosopher-king challenges traditional assumptions in *The Republic*: “They will take the city and the characters of men, as they might a tablet, and first wipe it clean – no easy task. But at any rate you know that this would be their first point of difference from ordinary reformers, that they would refuse to take in hand either individual or state or to legislate before they either received a clean slate or themselves make it clean.” Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns ed., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993). *Plato’s Republic* book vi. p. 736.
It was during the Geonic era, and specifically during the lifetime of Saadia, that we witness the emergence of Jewish philosophy as a dominant cultural force, a trend that gradually escalated and was seen by many as a real threat to the Jewish tradition. Like Philo centuries earlier, Saadia’s goal was to show that Greek philosophy was compatible with Judaism. But, as opposed to Philo, whose influence was almost exclusively confined to the Christian world, Saadia had an immense impact on the Jewish Babylonian community, and very soon afterwards, on the Jewish world at large; especially in the Iberian Peninsula and Germany. As we shall see, the evolution of rationalism in Judaism was carried by what came to be known as the Geonic-Andalusian tradition. Bernard Septimus notes that for many Jews, this developmental trajectory represented a real awareness of a coherent cultural thread that extended from Babylon through north Africa, to Andalusia in Spain. This lineage can be seen as unified cultural current, a rational lineage that began with Saadia and culminates with Maimonides.

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362 It is customary to present Saadia Gaon as the first Jewish philosopher in spite of the fact that he was preceded by Isaac Israeli and al-Muqammas. Sarah Stroumsa argues that as opposed to the latter two thinkers it is only with Saadia that this strand of thought reaches a level of maturity that merits the title philosophy. See Stroumsa *op. cit.*

363 Philo represented one of the first attempt to introduce Greek methodologies and content into Judaism but his work was mainly influential on Christian thought rather than on Jewish thinkers. David Shatz contends that “The founding of a systematic Jewish figurative interpretation of Scripture is usually credited to Philo of Alexandria (c 20 BCE-50 CE). Philo understood the Bible, particularly Genesis, as Greek philosophers troubled by Homer’s gods understood Homer: as an allegory to be construed via the principles of Hellenistic thought, in his case middle Platonic thought in particular” See Shatz, “The Biblical and Rabbinic Background to Medieval Jewish philosophy” in *Cambridge Companion*, p. 26.


The eruption of new mystical doctrines as a reaction to these new rational trends can be better understood if we come to appreciate the extent to which philosophy departed form anything that preceded it in classical Judaism. The Geonic period was the first time that Greek methodologies were adopted by towering rabbinic authorities on an unprecedented scale. David Shatz contends that in spite of the fact that Jewish rationalists often dealt with themes taken from rabbinic discourse, “a frequent noted feature of medieval Jewish philosophy is its prima facie lack of continuity with biblical and rabbinic Judaism…. the philosophical views advocated by the medieval philosophers entered Judaism via contact between Jews and other cultures…. The resultant views, however, do not seem to be characteristic of either biblical or rabbinic thought.”

The sudden introduction of a drastically new form of cultural discourse into Judaism had far reaching ramifications; suspicion towards old cultural conventions advanced through an extremely powerful, systematic and analytic procedure, forced Jews into a predicament. Said differently, if the Bible tells Jews what to do, and the Talmud tells them how to do it, rationalism demanded an answer to a much more disturbing question, namely, why should we do it in the first place? Why should we follow the commandments? Why is Judaism preferable to Islam, Christianity, and different forms of Greek philosophy? For the first time people were expecting reasoned and well-structured arguments for why Judaism was a valid system of belief. The irony of the matter is that while committed

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366 Shatz, “The Biblical and Rabbinic Background,” pp. 17-18. In spite of the clear discontinuity between classical Judaism and philosophy, Jewish philosophers were adamant in claiming a continuity with the past. Some of them argued that the original character of Judaism was lost as a result of ongoing persecutions. There were also radical conservatives, such as Shem Tov ibn Falaquera and to a certain extent Halevi, who advanced absurd theories about the Greek stealing philosophy form the Jews. Ibid., p. 18-19.
Jewish rabbis such as Saadia and Maimonides were trying to equip Judaism with answers to these disturbing questions, their agreement to play according to the foreign rules of Greek rationalism was implicitly undermining some of the most fundamental assumptions and ultimate concerns of the Jewish way of life. Kabbalah can be seen as a native counter ideology that sought to protect those ultimate concerns. The morphological approach attempts to analyze this historical dynamic in a comprehensive way, one that integrates both the historical background and the cognitive, social, and cultural aspects of this story. Understanding Kabbalah as a defense theology can also help us appreciate why its radical departure from rabbinical Judaism was accepted with so little resistance and why Kabbalistic theology took the specific shape that it did.

3.2.2 The Talmudic Crisis

One of the central developments that led Jewish authorities to acknowledge the inevitability of reform was the general sense that the Talmud, the encapsulation of the Jewish worldview, was incapable of responding to the new dilemmas of the age. A more concrete sign of this decline was reflected by the escalating attacks against the Talmud that came from several different sources. In the initial Geonic phase, “critics of rabbinic Judaism – from Karaites, to Christians and Moslem polemicists, to skeptical thinkers from within – assailed rabbinc thought as absurd.”\(^{367}\) The criticism of the Talmudic paradigm was not confined to the Geonic phase of our story; the ever-growing prosperity and expansion of Islam into the Iberian Peninsula in the following two centuries led to a

\(^{367}\) Ibid., pp. 30-31.
further weakening of the Talmud’s stature. Changing attitudes towards traditional knowledge were also reflected in skepticism towards the aggadic portions of the Talmud. The aggadah was inclined towards fanciful story telling, seen by many as an intellectual embarrassment, especially in regards to its anthropomorphic and anthropopathic characterization of God. As a result, aggadah was marginalized and treated by many as a non-literal and non-binding pedagogic device.\footnote{Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture*, p. 77. As Septimus notes for the French Tosafists disagreeing with an aggadah of a Talmudic sage was perceived as heresy.}

An escalation in voices advocating a broader intellectual program reached a climax during the highly progressive Andalusian period. So strong were the rationalist tendencies of the time, and so neglected the study of traditional themes, that some have referred to it as the “dark age of Spanish halakah.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 20-23. Septimus is referring to approx. 1150 and 1200 CE.} Septimus argues that the state of Talmudic studies reached an all time low in southern Spain, where people preferred to circumvent the cumbersome intricacies of Talmudic rulings by turning to the more accessible and abridged *Halakhot (rulings) of Rabbi Alfasi* (1013-1103), also known as the “Little Talmud.” At a later stage, Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* was another step in the same direction, representing a further escalation in the simplification of Jewish law, and the decline of the Talmud as an exclusive form of discourse.\footnote{The trend of simplification and the greater accessibility of Jewish lore can be detected as early as Saadia who omitted references to authorities in his discussion of laws of worship, realizing that his audience was composed of common people with practical needs rather than a circle of intellectuals. See more on Saadia’s simplification of Jewish thought in Judah Goldin, “The Period of the Talmud (135 BCE-1035CE)” in Louis Finkelstein ed., *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion* (London: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), esp. p. 198 onwards.} In fact, this process of making Jewish law more accessible can be traced back to Saadia, who realized that
common people were struggling to follow the intricate pilpul (sharp analysis) of the Talmud. Although Saadia, Isaac Alfasi, and Maimonides held the Talmud in the greatest esteem, their democratization of its contents was undermining the Talmudic monopoly over information and implicitly legitimizing the exploration of new domains of knowledge.  

Different approaches towards traditional studies became a dividing point of contention and an indication that classical Judaism was in need of a corrective. This conflict reached new heights in the Maimonidean controversies of the early thirteenth century, in which conservatives harshly attacked Maimonides for his departure from accepted Talmudic methodologies. As so many scholars have pointed out, the Maimonidean controversies had an unprecedented polarizing effect upon the Jewish world. As opposed to just any dispute, they touched at the heart of what it meant to be Jewish, making it very difficult for anyone to avoid taking a position. Such a rift was very uncharacteristic of “normal Judaism,” and I would like to argue that it is emblematic of unique periods of crisis that foreshadow historical paradigm shifts. As we shall see in the chapter on the Chinese experience, a very similar period of factionalism and social unrest preceded the rise of the Neo-Confucian paradigm. Most importantly, I will argue that in both cases these periods of crisis were instigated by the introduction of an increasingly analytic temperament into the Jewish and Chinese traditions. In both

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371 In the intro to his Mishneh Torah Maimonides states that “all of Israel are bound to follow everything found in the Babylonian Talmud, and we should force the Jews of every city and country to adhere to all customs established by the Talmudic sages.”

372 Here I use this word as Kuhn uses “normal science.”
contexts, pervasive partisanship and acute social instability were a reflection of a phase of morphogenesis experienced by the Jewish and Chinese traditions.

As in most traditions, societies usually give rise to conflicting conservative and progressive currents. In the classical rabbinic period between the first and tenth centuries these camps were to a great extent discernible by their divergent approaches towards textual authority. Conservatives believed that Jewish curriculum should be confined to the Talmud, whereas the more tolerant and progressive camp advocated the study of both the Talmud as well as external wisdom. This began to change beginning in the tenth century when both progressives represented by philosophers, and later conservatives represented by Kabbalists, understood that the classical Talmudic paradigm could no longer sustain the intellectual needs of the age. As Moshe Halbertal demonstrates, even medieval mystics were no longer comfortable with the reduction of Jewish curriculum to Talmudic studies. They, too, especially after they began to develop a more systematic and defensible position, believed that studying the Talmud without Kabbalah was tantamount to

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373 Moshe Halbertal quotes the Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 96b where Ben Damah, the son of R. Ishmael’s sister, once asked R. Ishmael, "May one such as I, who have studied the whole of the Torah, learn Greek wisdom?" He thereupon read to him the following verse: "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth but thou shall meditate therein day and night" (*Jos.* 1:8). Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night, and learn then Greek wisdom." Halbertal provides other sources that address the problem of "Greek wisdom" such as the Bavli’s *Sotah* 49b, where it says: "Cursed is the man who will teach his son Greek Wisdom." See also Mishnah, the end of Tractate Sota; *Tosefta, Avoda Zarah* 1:20; and *Tosefta, Sota* 15:8. Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 100; 171 n.31. Saul Lieberman tries to narrow the prohibition of the study of Greek wisdom in these sources to the prohibition against fathers teaching Greek wisdom to their young children. See S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), pp. 100-05. Maimonides and Meiri took a more tolerant stance towards Greek Wisdom, see Maimonides, *Perush ha-Mishnah, Sotah* 4:14; Meiri, *Beit ha-Behirah, Baba Kamah* 83a.
to focusing on the garment and the body rather than soul and the essence.\textsuperscript{374} In a more broadly comparative perspective, I will argue that both progressive and conservative camps in the Jewish and Chinese worlds understood their traditions could no longer be sustained upon the foundations of the classical textual corpus. In Judaism, the Talmud was not only attacked from within rabbinism, this period also saw the rise of one of the greatest internal threats to the authority of the rabbis. The Karaitic tradition was an emerging form of Judaism that distinguished itself from rabbinism by virtue of its categorical opposition to the Talmud’s authority.

### 3.2.3 Karaites against the Talmud

The Karaitic golden age between the tenth and eleventh centuries can be seen as a central component in the crisis in Judaism.\textsuperscript{375} During the Geonic period, the Karaitic challenge was so real that Saadia dedicated a major part of his career to vehement anti-Karaitic polemic, a trend that continued with thinkers such as Judah Halevi and Maimonides. By the time of Saadia, Karaism was a force to be reckoned with; one scholar estimates that up to forty percent of world Jewry disclosed Karaitic affiliations.

\textsuperscript{374} The sixteenth-century Kabbalist, Meir Ibn Gabai, wrote: "He who deals only with the garment and the body of Torah and claims that there is nothing but these, expels the soul and denies the essence of the Torah ... and it would have been better for him had he never been created.” Halbertal, \textit{People of the Book}, p. 119. Halbertal further notes that the anonymous fifteenth-century author of Sefer ha-Qanah ve ha-Plia'ah held a similar view. \textit{Sefer ha-Qanah} (Cracow, 1854), pp. 7b-8a. \textit{Sefer ha-Pliah}, Karetz (1744), p. 4a. See Halbertal, ibid., pp. 105-119. For more on this topic see Jacob Katz, "Halakhah ve-Kabbalah ke-Nosei Limud Mitcharim," in his \textit{Halakhah ve-Kabbalah} (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 82-83.

\textsuperscript{375} One of the most systematic assaults against the Talmud began with the Karaite Anan Ben-David around the mid eighth century, long before Karaism reached it apex.
and that heated debates between rabbis and Karaites were extremely common.\textsuperscript{376} The Karaitic attack was not confined to theological matters but also disclosed social dimensions that reflect the great changes and the increasing social stratification that Judaism was going through at the time. Many Karaites were concerned with the rabbinic monopoly over religious discourse, as well as its recurrent abuse of power.\textsuperscript{377} Socially, the Karaites were representatives of a wealthy and educated class, a fact that might explain their general attraction to rationalism. The Karaitic movement also led to an escalating individualism in matters of religious exegesis. This was perhaps a result of their principle to “search well in the Torah,” which legitimized different interpretations of scripture and led to what Salo W. Baron saw as a process of fragmentation similar to that experienced by Protestantism, in which “no two Karaites agreed with each other.”\textsuperscript{378} As an example, Halevi blamed the Karaites for relying on individual opinions rather than the communal voice of the Talmud. He argued that one of the merits of the Talmudic model was its transmission of knowledge from “many to many” instead of trusting the unreliable and distorted transmission from individual to individual.\textsuperscript{379}

\textsuperscript{376} On Karaite and Rabbinic polemics see Daniel Lasker, \textit{Form Judah Hadassi to Elijah Bashyatchi: Studies in Later Maedieval Karaite Philosophy} (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 7. Some scholars believe that the \textit{Kuzari} was written as a polemical book against Karaism. The final version contains a long refutation of Karaism. See Lasker, ibid., p. 12.

\textsuperscript{377} Salo Baron, \textit{A Social and Religious History of the Jews} vol. 1, pp. 343-352. In one instance an influential Karaite attacked the “students of the Talmud” who “permitted themselves to take advantage of money belonging to an Am ha-Ares.” The Karaites also disclosed a more ascetic and world-negating disposition that was fairly alien to the Rabbinic tradition but became increasingly popular among different strands of Jewish rationalism and mysticism.

\textsuperscript{378} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{379} Shilat \textit{Ben ha-Kuzari la Rmabam}, pp. 208-219. Halevi was also clearly opposed to Karaitic tendencies towards spiritual seclusion; other signs of individualistic tendencies among Karaites was their belief that a prayer quorum was not essential. See more on attacks against Karaitic asceticism, Lasker, \textit{Form Judah Hadassi}, pp. 151-157.
Germaine to my argument is the fact that the Karaites were to a great extent part of the rationalistic attack against rabbinical Judaism. Central Karaitic figures were strongly influenced by Mutazilite rationalism and represented some of the most prominent figures in the school of Jewish Kalam. As rationalists, the Karaites were staunch critics of rabbinic anthropomorphism, and myth. Their attack was one of the central wake-up calls for many rabbis who sought to downplay the mythological features of the Talmud. For the rabbis, the Karaites represented the growing dangers that new forms of exegesis and transmission posed to the tradition. In his *Mekor Hamitzvot ha’Shamaiyot* Saadia attacked the Karaitic exaggerated focus on logical analogy (ḥekesh). Whereas the Karaites believed that all the commandments should be interpreted rationally, Saadia was more conservative; he argued that some commandments were impressed upon our rational mind by God while others eluded rational explication. It is crucial to understand the cultural ramifications of the rise of new forms of exegesis during this period. One of the results of the Talmudic crisis was expressed by the growing need to explore more creative and flexible methods towards interpreting Judaism’s central religious corpus. *Hekesh*, therefore, freed believers from the exposition of law in the Talmud and offered a new opportunity for different people to reach diverging conclusions regarding the meaning and function of the commandments. The method of *hekesh* (Arabic: *Qiyaṣ*),

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380 Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth*, pp. 22-23. Also see Lasker ibid., pp. 6. Al-basir was the most important figure in shifting Karaism into a Kalamic mode of discourse. Later (fl. 1149) Judah Haddasi’s “Eshkol Ha Kofer” was a Kalamic work and summary of Karaitic law.
became one of the central features of Karaism and was attacked by rabbinical authorities as a highly problematic and at times heretical mode of interpretation.\footnote{Lasker, \textit{Form Judah Hadassi}, p. 133. Saadia, for instance, blamed this problematic trend on the Karaite adoption of methods that were foreign to the Jewish tradition. See Robert Brody, “Rav Se’adya Gaon,” pp. 164-166. See more on Saadya’s and Halevi’s anti-Qiyas approach in Diana Lobel, \textit{Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi’s Kuzari} (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 55-87.}

Unlike Jewish philosophers that were speaking from within the rabbinic tradition, the Karaites represented a rationalist threat aimed at the very essence of orthodox Judaism and its legitimizing literature, the Talmud.\footnote{Lasker, op. cit., pp. 137. Ironically, Karaism was attacked for using a similar type of Kalamic rationalism that was practiced by the Geonim, the difference being that the rabbis of Bagdad and Basra never attempted to undermine the Talmud.} In the minds of many rabbism the Karaites came to represent the rational method in its worst manifestation. According to this view, instead of trying to harmonize rationalism with the Talmudic tradition, the Karaites used rationalism to repudiate it. This must have been a clear warning signal against the potential devastating implications of rationalism. The Karaïtic phenomenon can therefore be seen as a reflection of the new reality that Jewish communities were experiencing. The rise of non-orthodox intellectual currents within Judaism, together with the increase in individualistic trends during this age were all showing their signs in Karaism, which to a great extent represented many of the features of an analytic mode of operation.

\subsection*{3.2.4 Rationalists against the Talmud}

An important point to bear in mind is that the discomfort with the Talmudic tradition was directly related to the emergence of rational thought and the introduction of
the analytic worldview into Judaism. This can explain why the Talmudic tradition remained strong and vibrant in places where philosophy was unknown, such as in Provence before the mid-twelfth century. Similarly, the northern French Tosafists, who were ignorant of philosophical rationalism, remained committed to conservative Talmudic studies untroubled by the dramatic changes that were taking place in the intellectually progressive communities of Spain. Another point to bear in mind is that rationalism was not confined to schools of thought that were strictly philosophical; Abraham Abulafia promoted a form of mysticism with rational tendencies that was directly influenced by Maimonides’ Guide, to which he wrote three separate commentaries. Abulafia claimed that those who are occupied with the Talmud “were seized by an incurable disease” and “were far inferior to those skilled in the higher Kabbala.” Therefore, rationalism, whether expressed through philosophy or mysticism was antagonistic to the traditional Talmudic paradigm that was founded upon the basic temperament of the synthetic worldviews.

One of the most characteristics implications of rationalism was the rise of public debates. Muslims, Jews, and Christians were confronting each other on various theological matters that frequently took place in royal courts with a large audience. The

383 As Bernard Septimus noted the French Tosafists didn’t really ‘get’ what the early Maimonidean controversy was about, it was only when they began to comprehend the full implications of the philosophical position that they moved from indifference to belligerence. Initially the Tosafists thought the first Maimonidean controversy was a minor halakhic dispute. In the second controversy, after being exposed to the full implications of Rationalism’s increasing popularity they became the staunchest torch bearers of the conservative anti-Maimonidean camp. Septimus, Hispano-Jewish Culture, p. 49.
classical Jewish worldview was attacked by Christian and Muslim polemicists who pointed out the lack of rational coherence in the Talmud. These lively debates were not strictly a matter of amusement; the stakes were extremely high for the losers, especially when they lacked political power as Jews often did. Losing debates could result in severe punishment to individuals and whole communities, and could even result in exile and death sentences. This can help us understand how urgent it must have been for the rabbinic tradition to defend itself using the efficient argumentative tools of philosophy.

As an example, philosophical interpretations enabled rabbis to claim that the highly unpopular anthropomorphic portions of the Talmud were merely allegories for the more profound meaning of the text. On a more general level, philosophy enabled Jews to present their tradition in a way that was accepted by the progressive intellectual mainstream of the time. But just as philosophy was helpful it also had the power to pierce through the façade on traditional societies and reveal their conventionality and vulnerabilities. It became clear that the Talmud, the heart of Judaism, was in need of protection, and many believed that philosophical argumentation was the only legitimate way to defend it. The paradox was that while Jews were defending their tradition against rational tendencies they were also forced to adopt the tools of the analytic modality that was undermining their tradition.

Philosophers may have been the staunchest critics of the Talmud but it was becoming apparent to conservatives that the Talmud was ill-equipped to deal with the cultural crisis that Judaism was facing. Even in Provençe where Talmudic studies remained strong after the introduction of philosophy, we witness the emergence of
mystics who began to exclusively dedicate their careers to non-Talmudic themes. In other words, in order to protect traditional Judaism even the emerging conservative school of Kabbalah began to marginalize Talmudic studies in favor of a new mystical theology. In what follows, I will provide a short account of the historical context of the rise of Kabbalah. I will attempt to emphasize the frequently neglected social dimensions of this story, and to stress the unique dynamic of how relatively stable cultural entities are destabilized, enter a period of crisis and adaptation (morphogenesis) and finally return to a new updated period of stability (homeostasis).

3.3 THE EMERGENCE OF KABBALAH AND THE RISE OF NEW ELITES

The analytic worldview was destabilizing Judaism in profound ways. It was undermining the legitimacy of its traditional narrative and sacred corpus. As a consequence, Judaism fragmented into contending camps that sought a solution to this crisis. Although many different schools of thought emerged, there was a rough division between progressives, represented by philosophers, and conservatives represented by old authorities and the emerging school of Kabbalah. Appreciating the acute internal and external pressures Judaism was undergoing during this age can help us understand the reasons for the meteoric emergence of the school of Kabbalah, a fact that troubled and intrigued generations of scholars of Judaism. According to Gershom Scholem this question “is indisputably one of the most difficult in the history of the Jewish religion after the destruction of the Second Temple. Just as indisputably, it is one of the most
important.”[^385] In historical terms, it is hard to overemphasis the astonishing speed in which the school of theurgic Kabbalah, represented by the Zohar, managed to consolidate its position in Judaism. As mentioned earlier, this change represents nothing less than a paradigm shift and the restructuring of the traditional canon, in which the Zohar was institutionalized as one of the three pillars of Judaism alongside the Bible and the Talmud. It is no wonder that Scholem presents Kabbalah as the most important phenomenon since the destruction of the Second Temple. Other scholars have reiterated this view, thereby revealing a general consensus regarding the transformation that swept over the Jewish world during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Naturally, the emergence of Kabbalah cannot be detached from the political and sociological realities of the age. History demonstrates time and again that major cultural changes are often accommodated by the weakening of central control, the subsequent rise of new elites, and the growing democratization of knowledge. All these factors were clearly discernible in medieval Judaism between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.

Generally speaking, many prominent philosophers and mystics were towering halakhic authorities and representatives of the rabbinic tradition; in philosophy, the most obvious examples are Saadia and Maimonides, while in Kabbalah we have figures such as the Rabad, Nahmanides, R’ Yonah Gerondi, and the Rashba (R’ Shelomo ben Adret). Common to both rationally inclined and mystically inclined rabbis was their growing interest in cosmological and speculative questions that were non-halakhic in nature. These rabbinic authorities to which Idel refers to as the first elite, were crucial for the

acceptance of philosophy and Kabbalah as legitimate worldviews. But the main carriers and creative power behind the dissemination of Kabbalah and philosophy were what Idel terms secondary elites, namely, “those authors who did not contribute in a significant manner to the communal Jewish life as leading figures, nor did they play a major role in the Halakhic literature, which shaped the religious life of the ordinary Jew.” Free from the time-consuming engagement in halakhic studies and communal affairs, these emerging secondary elites, for reasons I will elaborate shortly, had the unprecedented opportunity to dedicate themselves to a more specialized study of philosophy and mysticism. The fact that these secondary elites became the central representatives of the Kabbalah and Philosophy also led to a substantial rise in their social status and power-base.

For the sake of clarity, it helps to roughly divide the period in question into three general phases. In order to better understand this three-phase periodization it is important to point attention to a few major historical facts that had a lasting impact upon the Jewish world. Of major importance was that as a result of the invasion of southern Spain by the Almohades in the mid-twelfth century the progressive Geonic-Andalusian tradition suffered a critical blow. This event led to the historical relocation of the prosperous Arabic speaking Andalusian community to northern Spain and southern France. It was also the first time that the philosophically inclined Arab-Hispanic community of Andalusia came into intense contact with Jewish communities in northern Spain and southern France. This meeting of substantially different Jewish cultures led to an acute

tension between the philosophically vibrant south and the more conservative Talmudic legacy of the north. The first phase in my periodization will therefore begin with Saadia and the introduction of rational thought into Judaism, and end with the invasion of the Almohads in 1147-8. This phase can be seen as the golden age of the Geonic-Andalusian tradition. The second phase stretches from the Almohads invasion to the end of the second Maimonidean controversy at approximately 1235, a highly polemical stage that symbolizes the apex of a rift between the conservative and progressive camps in the rabbinic tradition. And finally, the third phase will stretch from 1235 to the end of the thirteenth century with the appearance of the Zohar.387 This stage represents the beginning of the consolidation of power by the conservative camp and the gradual decline of philosophy over the next two centuries. For the sake of convenience we can say that the first phase was approximately between 930-1150, the second phase between 1150-1235, and the third between 1235-1300. In what follows I will try to explain why I believe this periodization is helpful in understanding the shift from a state of homeostasis during the classical period, to a stage of morphogenesis, and back to homeostasis. The three phases I am suggesting all took place within the period of morphogenesis and therefore help us understand the peculiar dynamic of the process of adaptation of cultural systems to external environmental pressures.

387 The three phases I am suggesting: a) 930-1150, b) 1150-1235, and c) 1235-1300.
3.3.1 First Phase: 930-1150

The growing rationalistic currents within the rabbinical tradition were a natural, indeed an inevitable, reaction to the challenge of Greek philosophy. When Jews were confronted with the powerful Muslim interpretations of Greek thought, their best and most natural course of action was to introduce the same rational tools into their own religious discourse. The only alternative option was to remain entrenched in Talmudic dogmatism, a choice that was clearly untenable for those who understood the possibly devastating ramifications of ignoring the new intellectual trends of the age. Beyond the necessity to engage with philosophy, the powerful and highly attractive intellectual formats it introduced were bound to resonate with a certain strand of progressive rabbis, as well as an emerging educated middle class. The adoption of various forms of rationalism by rabbinic authorities legitimized philosophy, which was by its very nature a polemical discourse frequently carried by individuals. It is in this stage that we see the emergence of new progressive intellectual elites in Babylonia and southern Spain that enthusiastically embraced the rational worldview. The decline of central authority prompted by periods of crisis, opened a new space for young, sophisticated, and fairly wealthy intellectuals to promote their more universalistic and progressive lifestyles. As carriers of a new and highly attractive ideology these new elites could further climb up the social ladder both within the Jewish tradition and within the advanced Muslim milieu in which they operated.

Philosophy’s escalation from the tempered Geonic model towards the more radical Maimonidean worldview underscored its potential harmful effects and led to
increasing concerns among traditionalists.\textsuperscript{388} Although clear signs of suspicion towards rationalism were already apparent during this first phase, the Geonic-Andalusian tradition generally embraced the rational worldview, which became its hallmark and source of pride.\textsuperscript{389} The social, intellectual, and economic prosperity of the Babylonian, and later the Andalusian Jewish community, must have reassured the rationally inclined elites that their ideological position was advantageous. At a time of cultural affluence there was very little reason for concern, especially since philosophers were ultimately demonstrating that Judaism was in conformity with reason, and therefore a relevant and respectable system of belief. Another reason for the scant opposition towards philosophy among conservatives at this early stage was that Talmudic Judaism lacked the internal resources to adequately confront the questions raised by philosophy. Therefore, even if conservatives felt a discomfort towards philosophy during this early stage, they had no real alternative to offer as a counter argument.

It was only towards the end of this phase that we witness the first systematic critique of rationalism and Andalusian culture in general. Halevi’s influential \textit{Kuzari} was a philosophically informed attack against extreme forms of rationalism and a defense of the traditional Jewish worldview. Halevi claimed that arguments based on reason were inferior to the traditional Jewish reliance on historical transmission, communal

\textsuperscript{388} The motto of Saadia’s conservative rationalism was: “to establish the principle of the Torah in our hearts by way of proofs and refutations of our opponents” (\textit{Book of Beliefs and Opinions}). Septimus, \textit{Hispano-Jewish Culture}, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{389} First attacks go back to the Neoplatonic work of Solomon ibn Gabirol in the early eleventh-century, in which the latter was accused of departing from Saadia’s qualified rationalism towards a more radical form of rationalism. See Septimus, ibid., p. 61.
experience, and revelation. Halevi’s attack came from within the Andalusian milieu; it sought to highlight the possible dangers of leaning too strongly on the spurious intellectual foundations of Greek culture. Halevi was a man of words but also deeds; he ended up abandoning the comfort of the prosperous Al-Andalus for the harsh and remote land of Palestine where he believed Jews would find redemption. The subsequent collapse of Andalusian Jewry can be seen as a confirmation of his critique of rationalism and the dangers of its universalistic ethos.

It is worth noting that the first Geonic-Andalusian phase was one in which philosophical discourse was conducted in Arabic, and therefore inaccessible to large portions of the Jewish world. Outside this Muslim sphere of influence, Jewish communities were generally unaware of the tensions that were beginning to form between progressive and conservative voices in the Geonic-Andalusian tradition. The spread of these tensions to the rest of European Jewry led to an even greater conflict between conservatives and rationalists; this began with the Andalusian Jewry’s relocation to the north.

3.3.2 Second Phase: 1150-1235

In the second phase, Halevi’s almost solitary resistance escalated towards a more concerted attack against philosophy, facilitated by an increase in important translations of philosophical works to Hebrew. Also known as the ‘translation movement,’ the beginning of this process is usually dated at 1150, and coincided with the Almohads.

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390 Ibid., p. 62.
invasion and the relocation to the north. The Almohads’ invasion led to the escape of the great translators, best represented by the famous Tibbon family from the philosophically active Grenada in southern Spain to Lunel, one of greatest Talmudic centers in the Jewish world. The first great translator of the Tibbon family was Yehuda ben Shaul ibn Tibbon. Among his important translations were ibn Paquda’s *Duties of the Hearts* (1161), Halevi’s *Kuzari* (1167), followed by Saadia’s *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, as well as psychological works by the Neoplatonist ibn Gabirol. Yehuda’s son, Samuel ibn Tibbon, most likely born in Lunel, translated the most important works of Maimonides, including the *Mishneh Torah*, the *Guide*, his commentary on the Mishnah, and the *Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead*. As Colette Sirat notes, together with works by Jewish thinkers, the Tibbonite project went on to transmit almost the entire body of Greek science that came from the Arabs.  

Therefore the beginning of the second phase is marked by the dramatic shift of Jewish culture from Muslim to Christian lands in which the Tibbonite translations played a crucial role in the transmission of accurate scientific and philosophical information to Hebrew. From the point of view of Jewish communities that were not in command of Arabic this transmission of ideas was an essential prerequisite for a more thorough understanding of the new Greek formats that were infiltrating Judaism.

While the former part of the second phase was dominated by translation, transmission, and internalization of rational thought, the latter part was defined by an

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escalating antagonism towards philosophy marked by the eruption of the Maimonidean controversies. It is in this period that we witness the growing rift between the rational and anti-rational wings of Judaism. In the eyes of the more conservatively inclined the implications of philosophy’s growing popularity were worrisome for a host of reasons. But I think that the short answer to this complicated question is that rationalism had a conventionalizing impact upon Judaism. The scrutiny of objective reason revealed the precarious grounds on which many central Jewish assumptions were based. In other words, philosophy led to an internal tension between those who sought to preserve the superior and indisputable normative status of Judaism and those who were satisfied with rationally proving its validity and advantages without emphasizing any kind of ontological superiority.

This tension is most discernible in the contrasting approaches promoted by Halevi and Maimonides. In his Kuzari, Halevi presents the Jewish tradition as superior on metaphysical grounds: the Jewish nation, the Hebrew language, and the land of Israel are all ontologically superior to the people, the languages, and the lands of other cultures. The Jewish people are infused with the Inyan Elohi (divine attribute), the Hebrew language is the sacred and eternal code of existence, and the land of Israel is the unique and holy location to which Jews should ideally return in order to resume Temple sacrifice and hasten the advent of the messiah. Maimonidean rationalism completely transforms this picture: Hebrew becomes a better language rather than the ultimate sacred

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language,\(^{393}\) and the Jewish people are sanctified by their deeds rather than their inherent biological or ethnic holiness. According to Maimonides, Jews represent a great community (\textit{Kibbutz Me’ule}) not due to anything inherent but because of their exceptional potential for intellectual contemplation.\(^{394}\) The land of Israel is emotionally and historically important but Judaism can be practiced and implemented in Spain, Egypt or anywhere else in the world. As Menachem Kellner points out, the Maimonidean interpretation of the Bible “scandalized generations of readers.” Purity is no longer a metaphysical state but rather a moral one, food is Kosher mainly because it was healthier, and Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem is the outcome of contingent historical circumstances.\(^{395}\) The rational perspective was dangerously conventionalizing Judaism; traditional legitimacy could no longer rest upon the mere conviction or piety of its adherents. Although Halevi was certainly not a Kabbalist, his discomfort with the conventionalization of Judaism captured the essence of the tensions between rationalists

\(^{393}\) Maimonides audaciously conventionalizes the Hebrew language when he claims that if God were to impose the commandments on different people the language of the bible could have very well been different.

\(^{394}\) Shilat, \textit{Ben ha’Kuzari la Rambam}, p. 45. On the goi see pp. 76-84. For Halevi the \textit{Inyan Sichli} reflects matters of the intellect which are shared by all humans, while the \textit{Inyan elohi} (divine matters or as it is usually translated divine order) is exclusive to Israel, making the Jews an ontologically distinct group. In contrast, Maimonides sees the events at Sinai as an act of conversion. He therefore believed that the gentile could go through a similar conversion that all Jews went through. Maimonides’ perception was far more inclusive than Halevi’s, according to him not only can gentiles join the Jewish nation they can potentially become prophets.

\(^{395}\) Menachem Kellner, \textit{Maimonides’ Confrontation With Mysticism}, pp. 128; 144; 158. The temple sacrifices were instituted against God’s will because of the weakness of the Israelites coming out of Egypt. According to Maimonides without this “compromise” of allowing the Jews to practice what they were accustomed to in Egypt, they would have been unable to accept the Torah.
and conservatives. The former group sees holiness as an intellectual transformative process, while conservatives perceive Judaism as an eternal and superior metaphysical reality. Looking at the tensions in Judaism from this perspective can help us understand the Kabbalistic reaction as a mission to restore Judaism’s ontological, normative status and to anchor its indisputability in a more advanced metaphysics.

It was during this highly contentious second phase that support seemed to gradually shift in favor of the anti-rationalist camp. This trend was reflected by the disproportionate condemnation of philosophy and the widespread acceptance of the equally revolutionary Kabbalah. Philosophers therefore lacked the same type of authoritative support that kabbalists enjoyed. Although Maimonides was admired throughout the Jewish world, philosophy failed to rally the institutional support of large groups of rabbis, as in the case of mysticism. With a growing portion of the rabbinic

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396 For more about the Kuzari’s popularity among Kabbalists see Adam Shear, The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Especially chapter 2 “The Image and Function of the Kuzari in the Late Middle Ages.” pp. 55-94.
397 Idel, “Rabbinism versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem’s Phenomenology of Judaism.” Modern Judaism 11, no. 3 (1991): 289; Joseph Dan and Ronald C. Kiener, The Early Kabbalah (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 9; Scholem: Ha Kabbalah bi Provence, p. 86. Scholem talks about several attacks against Kabbalah in Provence. See Scholem’s Teuda Hadasha le Toldot ha Kabbalah, p. 88. In Milchemet Mitzvah, R’ Meir ben Shimon’s “war” is against Christianity but he takes the opportunity to attack Kabbalah as well. Rabbi Meir ben Shimon of Narbonne famously criticized Kabbalists for their polytheistic forms of prayer in which they “direct the day’s prayer to one God and the night’s to another God.” Joseph Dan notes that “During the next two centuries, when the Kabbalah became better known among Jewish intellectuals, we hardly find a second opposing voice to join that of Rabbi Meir’s.” See “Gershom Scholem’s Reconstruction of Early Kabbalah,” Modern Judaism 5, no. 1, (1985): 58.
398 As Idel notes “…the first elite’s adherence to Kabbalah was crucial for the aura of respectability and credibility this lore enjoyed…” Idel “Window of Opportunities,” p. 19.
institution’s backing, anti-rational voices with a mystical bent were now able to carve a growing space for the promotion of their political, social, and spiritual interests.399

Following the Almohad invasion, Provençe became the nexus of the dramatic shift of Judaism’s vitality from the Muslim world to the Christian world. The relocation of Andalusian Jewry to northern Spain was a traumatic event in Jewish history and represents the beginning of a process of the reconstruction of the Andalusian communities and their damaged halakhic traditions.400 The important point for our story is that as opposed to what many Provençal Jews assumed, the Andalusian community, far from being a unified entity, was now experiencing unprecedented internal tensions. It seems plausible that the growing skepticism within the Andalusian tradition towards its own rationalistic legacy was to a great extent spurred by its dramatic fall from glory. Early warnings against the growing laxity of Geonic-Andalusian Judaism, embodied in the Kuzari, were now supported by concrete proof. The Hispano-Jewish culture failed to persevere; and it was its progressive and increasingly secular lifestyle that was seen as the

399 In many ways Provençe, the cradle of Kabbalah, occupied a crucial position in this story since it was caught in between two central trajectories in the Jewish world: the largely progressive and rationalist Geonic-Andalusian tradition on the one hand, and the more conservative Franco-Germanic tradition on the other. Interestingly the Provençal intellectuals, especially after the generation of the conservative Rabad (approx.1125-1198), became devout rationalists and saw themselves as defenders and continuation of the Geonic-Andalusian tradition. It was this Provençal community that to a great extent instigated the second Maimonidean controversy when they sought to excommunicate Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier and his anti-rationalist circle of followers.

400 Two main forces explain the rapidity of the transition: firstly, the Christian re-conquest of Spain pushing the Muslims to the south. The second is the invasion of Muslim Spain by northern African Berber tribes that led Jews to flee to Christian lands in the north. The Berbers and the Christians come from both sides and even clash until Christianity takes over. The specific Berber tribes that invaded from the south were first the Almoravides a Moroccan and Southern Spanish dynasty and later the more violent Almohads who banned the practice of other religions. Septimus, Hispano-Jewish Culture, pp. 1-3.
main culprit for this failure. The Ramah in Castile, a descendent of the Andalusian aristocracy is only one example of a leading Halakhic authority that turned his back against radical forms of rationalism.\footnote{The Provençal rationalists were astonished when the Ramah refused to support their Campaign against R’ Abraham of Montpellier. They assumed that since the Ramah belonged to the rational legacy of Spain he would automatically support their anti-rationalists efforts.} Therefore, together with the the growing attacks against rationalism from conservatives in northern Spain and France, the trauma suffered by the Hispano-Jewish tradition also led to an internal backlash from Andalusian Jews against their own rational heritage.

The internal tensions within the dislocated Andalusian tradition had social dimensions that should be considered in addition to Idel’s distinction between the first and secondary elite. With the Andalusian relocation to the north, we see a growing rift between the aristocratic Nesi’im (Presidents) who represented a continuation of the “political style of Moslem Spain… literate and rationalistic, worldly and somewhat decadent” and the more conservative but highly influential groups of northern Catalonian rabbis especially in Barcelona. This anti-rationalist and mystically inclined wing was represented by prominent figures such as Nahmanides and R. Yonah Gerondi, who frequently attacked the growing corruption of the nepotistic lineages of the Nesi’im.\footnote{The opponents of the Nesi’im were often characterized as “merchants, perhaps nouveaux riches, Talmudists and mystics, energetic, striving for spirituality.” See Septimus “piety and power in thirteenth-Century Catalonia,” Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 197-230.}

According to Shlomo Pick, this emerging conservative class was eager to climb up the social ladder and gain the kind of political influence that corresponded with their growing economic and political power. The influence of the Nesi’im was slowly deteriorating and...
after the second Maimonidean controversy they were fully eclipsed by their conservative opponents who quickly became a new aristocracy. Pertinent to our discussion is that the decline of the Nesi’im reflects the dwindling power of the rationalist camp and the consolidation of power by a new and more mystically-inclined, albeit somewhat conservative elite led by Nahmanides and later by the Rashba. The rising authority of the rabbis of Barcelona now further supported the emergence of a growing secondary elite of mystics, whereas the already deteriorating power base of rationalists was further weakened by the decline of the Andalusian Nesi’im.

As mentioned, the two Maimonidean controversies between 1200-1235 represented the escalating discomfort with philosophy and a growing effort to articulate an alternative mystical worldview. A certain period of ‘incubation’ was necessary before Judaism could possibly devise an effective native reaction to the philosophical challenge. Once Judaism became more familiar with rationalism, a more efficient and concerted reaction to philosophy could take shape. In other words, once philosophy was systematically articulated and transported into a Jewish medium, it provided anti-rationalists with a new and formerly unavailable course of action. Understood in native terms, the Jewish philosophical tradition could now be more fully understood and therefore countered internally and within a familiar and exclusively Jewish context.

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404 The first controversy is generally dated 1200-1204, the second 1230-1235.
Among various contending factions, theurgic Kabbalah consolidated itself as the most efficient alternative to rationalism and provided conservatives with the speculative tools that the Talmudic tradition lacked.

This can perhaps explain why an anti-rationalist secondary elite took time to emerge. As I have argued, when philosophy was the only intellectual alternative to Talmudic studies, progressive intellectuals were bound to become attracted to it, whereas conservative voices lacked the tools to confront it. But as the mystical reaction gained maturity a growing number of secondary elite intellectuals could now choose to participate in an equally stimulating discourse. Metaphysical speculation and the search for a more personal and introspective form of religiosity were no longer the monopoly of philosophy. As time went on the new accessibility of an increasingly mature mystical theology was also reflected by the way many advocates of philosophy shifted towards Kabbalah and even became its leading proponents. 405 Although Kabbalah, was still practiced by first elite conservatives who were mainly halakhic authorities and community leaders, towards the end of the second phase we begin to see the first signs of thinkers such a Isaac the Blind and his followers who were fully dedicated to mysticism and were beginning to adopt more pro-active forms of transmission. Isaac the Blind, perhaps the first representative of this new elite, died at the end of the second phase in 1235, but the new secondary elites that followed were gaining momentum, a trend that became most apparent during the third phase between 1235 and the appearance of the Zohar.

405 Two notable examples are Joseph Gikatilla and Moshe de Leon.
In conclusion, the second period between 1150-1235, can be characterized by three major factors: a) the introduction of Maimonidean/Aristotelian forms of philosophy to non-Hispanic Judaism which coincided with the shift of Judaism form the Geonic-Andalusian sphere to Christian Europe, b) the internalization of rational thought and the beginning of a more systematic and confident condemnation of philosophy, and c) the growing support for Kabbalah on behalf the conservative rabbinical elites and the initial signs of the emergence of an energetic and creative secondary elite of mystics.

3.3.3 The Third Phase: 1235-1300

Finally, the third and last phase of our story was characterized by the ascendancy of highly creative forms of mysticism and a clear proliferation of Kabbalistic works. This phase, especially towards its end, represents the mature reaction of a systematic mysticism that was tailored to replace philosophy as an alternative theological discourse. During this stage the relatively conservative mysticism of halakhic figures such as Nahmanides and his followers was picked up and intensified by mystics who were no longer attempting to conceal their esoteric impulse. The type of experimental enthusiasm with which these intellectuals promoted the message of Kabbalah led to signs of concern among certain rabbis as well as more conservative mystics. Indeed, even Isaac the Blind, the early prototype of the secondary elite mystic, found it necessary to criticize those who “speak openly in marketplaces and in the streets as agitated and confused people.”

\[406\] Scholem argued that the critique was pointed at his students R. Ezra and R. Azriel and was a response to R. Meir ben Shimon of Narbonne’s attack against Kabbalistic heresy. Scholem, and Dan maintained that the instructions of Isaac the Blind are what engendered the esoteric style of
in spite of his reservations, R’ Isaac represented the beginning of a more relaxed form of transmission. As opposed to his forefathers such as R’ Abraham ben Isaac and the Rabad, who worked in exclusive circles, Isaac the Blind began to disseminate Kabbalah outside his family sphere, and went as far as teaching mystical lore to students who were geographically distant and therefore not completely under his control. It is in this sense that Isaac the Blind can be seen as a middle stage between the first elite’s conservative oral dissemination during the second phase (1150-1235), and the more bold and pro-active attitude of secondary elite Kabbalists during the third phase, beginning in Gerona and later more intensely in Castile.

As in other instances in which written formats replace orality, the new modes of transmission that were adopted by secondary elite mystics must have substantially changed Kabbalistic discourse such that texts could now both be duplicated and transmitted on a larger scale, as well as analyzed publicly and refined under a broader communal examination. Indeed, as scholars have argued, written formats must have have

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407 Idel, “Window of Opportunities,” p. 11. The escalation in the audacity of Kabbalistic dissemination was reflected in the new elites’ departure from traditional forms of oral transmission characteristic of first elite Rabbis towards written forms of transmission. As Isaac the Blind himself testifies in his famous letter to Nahmanides and R. Yona Gerondi: “for my fathers were the nobles of the land and disseminators of the Torah among many, and no such thing [mystical lore] ever departed from their lips.” [my brackets]. See Gershom Scholem in Studies in Kabbalah, pp. 9–10.

408 As R’ Isaac himself claimed in his letter to Nahmanides “what is written abides in no cabinet.”
facilitated a more concerted procedure of experimentation,\textsuperscript{409} which was conducive to the synthesis of different strand of thought that eventually made their way into the Zohar. Finally, the shift towards the much more efficient and transmittable written formats also reflected a more general trend towards the democratization of knowledge that was characteristic of the age. Such modes of transmission enabled people to engage in speculative mysticism without necessarily having a close teacher or being admitted to exclusive circles. In *Sefer ha-Shem (Book of the Divine Name)* the author states that he created this work as a guide for beginners to become familiar with Kabbalistic wisdom, a service “to all of Israel, according to their capacity… to enlighten the eyes of one who is beginning to learn Kabbalah.”\textsuperscript{410} Hundreds of Kabbalistic manuscripts were in circulation during this period, the overwhelming number of which were commentaries on the *sefirot*; these works served as symbolic codes for deciphering the Bible and other mystical texts.\textsuperscript{411} The anonymous author of *Milano Hebrew Manuscript 57* states that he wrote his commentary for:


\textsuperscript{410} Michal Oron, *Sefer ha-Shem Attributed to R. Moses de Leon* [ספר השם המשותף לרב משה די להפוך]. (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010), p. 54.

one who desires [to comprehend] the wisdom of the Kabbalah in its entirety… once one knows this, it will be possible for him when he reads a biblical verse or dictum of the Rabbis of blessed memory, or a matter described in a kabbalistic composition, that he will understand the intention of that verse or dictum, and to what matter it alludes. It is for this purpose that I composed this text.\textsuperscript{412}

As Hartley Lachter notes, such comments could be found in plenty of Kabbalistic texts composed in thirteenth century Castile, suggesting that the common idea that Kabbalah was a carefully guarded occupation of a small elite is in need of revision.\textsuperscript{413} The name of the game during this third phase was not concealment, but rather the dissemination and popularization of allegedly concealed ancient secrets. We see a clear effort to make Kabbalistic lore more accessible and “user friendly” in an attempt to reach the widest audience possible.

The people behind this last phase in Castile were an educated secondary elite with a mystical bent; they were the main creative force behind the systematic articulation and dissemination of Kabbalah in the final stages before the appearance of the Zohar. This elite’s bold experimentation with ideas together with the lack of central authority to restrain their discourse, led to the proliferation of ideas so characteristic of periods of crisis and adaptation.\textsuperscript{414} Secondary elites of both mystics and philosophers were free to

\textsuperscript{412} Milano Hebrew Manuscript 57, 11a.
\textsuperscript{414} Idel argues that the passing away of Nahmanides and Rabbeinu Yonah meant that the secondary elite could promote their mystical ideas more freely: “In the span of one generation there were no great Halachic figures in Spain who were able to inhibit, explicitly or tacitly, the
engage in a more confrontational polemic and mutual attacks that were not as common among first elite rabbis.\textsuperscript{415} Such a dynamic environment of polemics and experimentation is exactly the type of social Darwinian background that facilitates the emergence of new paradigms and the construction of new identities. The Zohar became the encapsulation of this new worldview; far from being a normal book, it functioned as a literary platform and symbolic repository for a new religious discourse, one that reflected a newly constructed Jewish identity.

A few more comments about the social conditions that characterized the age can help us understand the historical dynamic that led to the victory of Kabbalah over philosophy. Beginning with the decline of the Talmudic paradigm during the Geonic period, first elite rabbis seemed to gradually lose the power to restrain the emergence of new intellectual discourses and alternative modes of transmission. As demonstrated above, the rabbinic institution was increasingly united in its anti-rationalistic stance, and although it frowned upon the untamed dissemination of mystical works by secondary elites, conservative rabbis were certainly aware that Kabbalah was preferable to the ascendancy of rationalism. The conspicuous lack of criticism of Kabbalah may very well reflect the sense of urgency that anti-rationalists felt at this time of crisis. As Lachter points out “if a particular kind of discourse emerges abruptly at a specific time and place, freer creativity which produced huge and very imaginative forms of Kabbalistic literature.” See “Kabbalah and Elites,” p. 17. However, it also seems that the first elites lacked the power to restrict the dissemination of mystical lore, since it continued despite clear concerns on behalf of Nahmanides and Gerondi during their lifetime.

\textsuperscript{415} Idel., p. 16. Instead of attacking Maimonides directly Ya’akov Ben-Sheshet in his \textit{Meshiv Devarim Nekohim} attacks Maimonides’ faithful follower, the translator and rationalist Samuel ibn Tibbon. Therefore, attacks against first elite rabbis could now be circumvented and expressed within a more polemical confrontation between second elites of mystics and philosophers.
it is reasonable to regard this as evidence that such discourse is serving an important strategic purpose for those involved in its production and dissemination, and that the cultural context is one in which an opening for such discourse exists."416 In the case of Judaism’s confrontation with Greek thought, both the dire need and the favorable social conditions were in place. Although the conservative wing of the tradition seemed to emerge from the Maimonidean controversies with the upper hand, Jewish philosophy remained a substantial cultural force for at least two more centuries. The lingering danger of philosophy must have contributed to the sense of urgency among conservative rabbis to devise an alternative native response to philosophical discourse, even at the expense of yielding power to an intellectual elite that was diverging from traditional practices. It also stands to reason that institutional support for Kabbalists was strengthened by the fact that mystics were clearly representatives of a conservative sensibility that resonated with first elite rabbis.

Beyond conditions internal to the rabbinic tradition, there were several external reason for the relative freedom that the secondary elite of mystics was enjoying. As I mentioned earlier, the unprecedented influx in interfaith public disputations in thirteenth century Spain was certainly a cause for concern. Jews were in need of systematic tools for defending their tradition against the constant scholastic attacks they were facing.417

417 See more on the growing polemical attacks against Judaism in Theodore Steinberg, Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages (Westport, CT ; London: Praeger Publishers, 2008), pp. 61- 69. The Mendicant order was strongly supported by the papacy in attacking Jews. Lachter contends that if “we take the social and political context of late thirteenth-century Castile into account, the kabbalists’ choice to construct their esotericism in this manner reflects an engagement with the contemporary political and intellectual climate. Among the challenges facing traditional Judaism
Such acute pressures can further explain why the period between 1235-1300 (third phase) in Castile represented one of the greatest outbursts of speculative creativity in Jewish history. The upsurge in the production of Jewish mystical treatises is not surprising if we consider the simultaneous rise in the appearance of revealed Christian esoteric texts. Latcher points out that the escalating interest in esoteric literature in late thirteenth-century Spain can be explained by:

[The] shift in the intellectual and cultural landscape in which revealed secret traditions from antiquity were attributed prestige and regarded as a reliable source of truth. By presenting their conception of Judaism in terms of the esoteric, kabbalists may have been seeking to tap into an existing modality within the broader culture whereby claims for legitimacy could be authorized.418

Certainly, the production of Kabbalistic texts served an internal Jewish goal of confronting rationalism, but it seems that Castilian Jewish mystics took advantage of the favorable cultural conditions of both their Jewish and non-Jewish environment to gain power both within and outside their native communities.

Attacks against the rabbinic tradition were both internal and external, but as opposed to earlier stages, Judaism was now equipped with an increasingly mature mystical theology. This was supported from within by the first rabbinic elite and externally by favorable social and economic conditions. An age of prosperity and cultural advancement in the areas in which Kabbalah and philosophy emerged was a central factor in the profound socio-economic changes Judaism was undergoing. In Provençe, in this period were Aristotelian rationalism and the scholastic anti-Jewish argumentation of the mendicant friars.” see “The Politics of Secrets,” p. 506.

418 Lachter, ibid., p. 508.
Catalonia, and Castile, the material well being of Jews was indispensable for the flourishing of new forms of knowledge. As Sirat notes, the existence of towns, economic ease, and relatively relaxed social relations were all crucial ingredients in this cultural renaissance and the unprecedented expansion of a new middle class that was enthusiastically immersed in the most advanced sciences of the time.\footnote{Colette Sirat, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 212-213.} The Muslim golden age from as early as Saadia’s time was well known for its relative tolerance towards Jews, but even after the transition to the Christian domination of Europe, affluence and relatively positive social relations between Jews and Christians endured. This was especially apparent in Castile where Jewish intellectuals occupied central positions in the court of Alfonso X (r. 1252-1284). The Castilian town of Toledo became a center for the fleeing Andalusian aristocracy in which Jews prospered in diverse fields such as education, medicine, and finance. Alfonso’s renaissance gave rise to the famous ‘Toledo school of translators’ in which Jews, Muslim, and Christian were engaged in a systematic translation of works from Arabic to Latin and later to Castilian.\footnote{In addition to the possible need to stress one’s local identity, Alfonso’s insistence on translations to the vernacular Castilian rather than the scholastic Latin can be seen as an indication of the democratizing effects of the age in which the pressure of new educated elites to participate in a cultural dialogue were evident across traditions.} Thanks to their outstanding command of languages, Jews occupied a central position in the translation project of Castile; Alfonso was so impressed with their accomplishments that he went on to employ them for other services as well. Of relevance to the emergence of Kabbalah is the fact that some of the most important works of the day, both mystical and philosophical, were being systematically translated at Alfonso’s court. This cultural
project led to the emergence of a “pastiche of Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Hermetic, and Pythagorean ideas and formulations” that must have been a critical factor in the cultural creativity that ensued during what Idel terms the “window of opportunities” between 1270 – 1290. The favorable cultural conditions provided the creative minds of the secondary elite with the final momentum they needed to refine and systemize their ideas prior to their final incorporation into the Zohar.

3.3.4 Homeostasis to Morphogenesis and back to Homeostasis

The three-phase progression of the emergence of Kabbalah I have delineated stresses the internal dynamic of a cultural system that found itself in a state of crisis. Before I proceed to look at the changes Judaism underwent in terms of its morphology, I will conclude with a summary of this process, beginning with the late Geonic period and ending with the appearance of the Zohar. The pressures exerted on Judaism by the introduction of analytic thought in the tenth century led to the decline of the Talmudic paradigm and the power of traditional rabbinical authority. This is the beginning of Judaism’s shift from a state of homeostasis to a state of destabilization and crisis. The synthetic mode of operation in its current state was unable to cope with Greek forms of thought and was therefore forced to adjust. Saadia’s adoption of Kalamic theology is an example of how information from a tradition’s external environment was introduced internally. This initial interaction with analytical forms of thought led to a long succession of philosophical works, including ibn Gabirol’s Megor Hayyim (Fons Vitae),

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421 For more on the interaction of Jewish translators with the external philosophical and mystical knowledge see Lachter, op. cit., p. 507.
Bahya ibn Paquda’s *Duties of the Heart*, Abraham ibn Daud’s *Exalted Faith (Emunah Ramah)*, and Maimonides’ *Guide*. These philosophical publications reflect the escalation of analytic tendencies in Judaism and the profound impact Greek philosophical formats had on medieval Jewish thought. The translations of philosophical works from Arabic to Hebrew beginning in the mid twelfth-century and the eruption of the Maimonidean controversies represent a phase in which the introduction of external information into the body of Judaism reached a climax. Once this inflow of analytic tendencies began to raise concerns among conservatives, a counter reaction formed and gained momentum. In other words, the escalation of analytic tendencies led to the real danger of Judaism losing its most fundamental characteristics. Such danger became most obvious in the growing conventionalization Judaism was undergoing and the increase in conversion and assimilation among rationally inclined Jews. Individualism, universalism, allegorical exegesis, and the trivialization of the commandments were all undermining Judaism’s ability to protect its traditional sources of meaning. This led to the Kabbalistic counter-attack. One which assimilated ideas from philosophy but interpreted them in a conservative way that safeguarded the particularistic and ontological distinctiveness of Judaism. Instead of conventionalization we see a process in which traditional Judaism is supported by a highly advanced metaphysics that provides it with a powerful normative foundation.

As a cultural system, the Jewish tradition was profoundly destabilized by the emergence of the analytic worldview during the late middle ages. It reacted to this perturbation by a protracted phase of adaptation and “restructuration,” or what I refer to
as cultural morphogenesis. The consolidation of theurgic Kabbalah as orthodoxy symbolizes the completion of this adaptive stage and the successful incorporation of elements form the analytic worldview together with their subordination to an updated theology that bears all the marks of a highly synthetic tradition.

It has long been observed that Kabbalah was grappling with problems that were almost identical to those raised by rationalists. Echoing the position of early scholars, Eitan Fishbane notes:

For the historian of ideas, it is indeed strangely paradoxical that many of the same kabbalists who so vigorously attacked the philosophical way and who often defined themselves within the bitter antagonism of that polemic were simultaneously shaped by the philosophy they rejected, and that a great many ideas characteristic of medieval philosophical trends were integrated into the theological systems espoused by the mystics… At the same time that they denounced philosophers as ignorant of true metaphysical wisdom, and labeled them the forerunners of antinomianism within Jewish society, the Kabbalists wrote in terms that clearly echoed philosophical theology.⁴²²

Some, following Scholem, have referred to this process as the philosophization of Jewish mysticism. Kabbalah can be seen as a mode of speculation that sought to replace the analytic interpretations of reality with a mode of thought that protected the boundaries of the Jewish tradition. This mystical alternative should be understood in a broad perspective; I suggest that instead of restricting our discussion to theological content, a more comprehensive understanding of the Kabbalistic phenomenon should consider multiple levels of analysis; cognitive, linguistic, social, political, and cultural. In other

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words, Kabbalah is not merely a theology in the narrow sense; beyond its contents, it also reflects a peculiar social structure, and a distinct attitude towards authority, scripture, language, and the human body. The conflict between the synthetic and analytic modes of operation is a conflict between two forms of world-making — two divergent and highly efficient ways for the construction of order.

In the following three sections will explore the cognitive, social, and cultural aspects of the conflict between the analytic and synthetic worldviews within medieval Judaism. I will begin by looking at how changes in these domains initially appeared in the works of Jewish philosophers and then proceed to look at the way Kabbalists reacted to the analytical challenge by incorporating many of its methodologies and themes while simultaneously presenting them in a reinforced and updated synthetic framework.
3.4 THE COGNITIVE LEVEL

As discussed in earlier chapters, the synthetic and analytic modes of operation employ substantially different types of cognitive skills in their interpretation of reality. Beginning in the mid-tenth century, the analytic atomization of data and more linear and logically structured systems were becoming central to the thought processes of the first Jewish philosophers. I would like to stress this dramatic shift in methodology and how new cognitive procedures led to the emergence of the first systematic Jewish theologies, this time presented in formats that disclosed clear marks of the analytic paradigm. These new intellectual tendencies did not appear ex-nihilo; the emergence of analytical approaches in Judaism were directly linked to the new accessibility of Greek philosophy translated by Muslims. As mentioned earlier, in Provençe, one of the most vibrant intellectual centers in Europe, there were no signs of a systematic theology prior to the Tibbonite translations of philosophical works to Hebrew.\(^{423}\) This suggests that only after a contact with Greek philosophical methodologies on a new and unprecedented scale, did Jews begin to articulate their tradition in increasingly analytic terms. Prior to this contact, so it seems, the pressure for change was simply not in place.

\(^{423}\) Scholem, *Ha Kabblaah bi Provence*, p. 4.
3.4.1 Atomization of Data: The Rational Phase

As I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, the classical rabbinic tradition lacked the type of logical organization that characterized analytical modes of discourse. This situation drastically changed with the emergence of Jewish philosophy. The new analytic trends that began to infiltrate Judaism during the tenth century represent the gradual decline of the Talmudic paradigm and the emergence of a radically new intellectual temperament. With Saadia we begin witnessing the characteristic analytic fragmentation of knowledge into clear isolated units that could relate to each other logically. His philosophical works disclosed an “obsessive fondness for numbered lists” which became one of his central trademark. Sarah Stroumsa points out that Saadia’s inclinations towards the presentation of ideas in a systematic and logically ordered format even surpassed the Kalamic tradition that nurtured him. Indeed, Saadia’s methodical and orderly codification of law became a model for future thinkers; he represented the first instance in Judaism since Philo where we witness such an exegetical lucidity and clarity of organization. Unsurprisingly, in both the cases of Philo and Saadia such logical formalism was undeniably instigated by the rise of philosophical rationalism.

The atomization of data in Judaism was reflected by a new attention to the demarcation of speculative categories and specialized terminology. This led to the fine-tuning of the philosophy’s linguistic tools so that specialized concepts began to refer to a more confined and focused meaning. The emergence of specialized fields of linguistics

424 Shatz, “The biblical and rabbinic background to medieval Jewish philosophy,” p. 29.  
425 Stroumsa, “Saadya and Jewish Kalam,” p. 82.  
426 Ibid.  
and philology during this period represented an important shift from the multi-layered semantic range and ambiguous language of Midrashic and Talmudic discourse, towards a philosophically refined terminology. In other words, the atomization of data meant that linguistic terminology was more tightly compartmentalized to designate specific and non-alterable meaning conducive for clarity and inter-religious dialogue. It is for this reason that some of the most influential philosophical works such as Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* begin with a detailed clarification and definition of terms. This period also saw the proliferation of dictionaries and works on Hebrew grammar, a trend that was to a great extent an outcome of the need to hone and refine language to suit philosophical discourse and adjust Jewish discourse to a more precise and scientific mindset.\(^{428}\)

On a more general level, analytic atomization led to a greater division of labor within Judaism and the emergence of new forms of religious discourse. David Blumenthal argues that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Geonic period was that new literary genres appeared and that intellectuals began to deal with religious issues topically. Saadia himself pioneered several areas of specialization such as philosophy, linguistics, poetics, exegesis and law. As opposed to the synthetic and narrative nature of Talmudic discourse, we suddenly witness independent fields of expertise that are thematically differentiated. This was certainly a revolutionary change in the treatment of information among Jewish intellectuals. Blumenthal claims that this new reality “generated new structures of thinking, new questions, and new sets of problems.”\(^{429}\) The

\(^{428}\) Ibid., p. 125.

traditional rabbinic worldview was reformulated according to analytic methodologies which radically changed the face of classical Judaism.

The neat differentiation of information and the more explicit definition of terms made Judaism more decipherable and accessible to those who were not trained in the exclusive procedures of Talmudic discourse. The formal clarity of philosophy was more accessible to the intellectual novice such that young educated Jews could now begin to participate in a new and intellectually stimulating discourse. Another clear advantage of the analytic mindset was that for the first time Judaism could be presented to Muslims and Christians through a universally accessible format.

3.4.2 Systemization: The Rational Phase

Philosophy is relentless in its demand for organization; in the increasingly rational intellectual milieu of the times, failing to communicate beliefs methodically became a sign of inferiority. In addition, the advent of rationalism represented a new age in which apologetics, disputation, and argumentation took a central stage. Believers were expected to defend their worldviews in a coherent and communicable fashion, frequently in the presence of an audience and judges. In order to compete in this harsh and competitive environment, Jewish authorities had to reify their tradition and articulate it as a concrete ‘something.’ The lack of a well-defined Jewish dogma became increasingly alarming as it made Judaism highly vulnerable to external attacks.\(^{430}\) Maimonides rose to this challenge and successfully articulated the main articles of belief in his famous thirteen principles of

\(^{430}\) Wilfred Cantwell Smith shows that it was the typical Greek proclivity towards reification that conceived Judaism as a distinct religion, not something that emerged from within Judaism. See his *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London: S.P.C.K., 1978), p. 72.
faith. In his commentary on the Mishnah, Maimonides refers to his methodical formulation of Judaism as the “fundamental truths of our religion and its very foundations.” Such a statement would have seemed extremely bizarre prior to the tenth century, since from a classical Talmudic point of view the need to condense Judaism into a few central statements would have seemed absurd, if not problematic. Why would one endeavor to conclusively articulate the Jewish faith, if life as we experience it, was ever changing, non-conclusive, and open-ended? According to this traditional view a static and unalterable dogma neglects the nature of reality as a dynamic process in which history plays a crucial position, it also reflects the non-systematic nature of pre-philosophical Judaism. Unfortunately for conservatives, the open-ended and meandering Talmudic style was no longer capable of dealing with the demand for an accessible and ordered exposition of knowledge. This new mindset is beautifully captured in Halevi’s *Kuzari*, which unsurprisingly takes place in a court dispute between representatives of philosophy and different religions. After the Jewish protagonist, the *Haver*, defends his faith in detail, the disappointed king of the Khazars claims that his argument was unsystematic and therefore inferior and simplistic.

The analytic clarity of philosophy gave Judaism the necessary tools to defend itself systematically, and was the first step in moving from a narrative discourse towards a rational/speculative one. In other words, beginning with Saadia, the Talmudic associative, and open-ended model gave way to a new trend of systematic theology.

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Although the increasing systemization of Judaism may seem like a methodological change, it actually went far beyond mere alterations in presentation. In order to articulate their beliefs systematically, Jewish philosophers were forced to respond to a set of questions that came to the fore as a result of a more analytical disposition. Theodore Steinberg reminds us that the Talmud and Mishnah attempt to explain how to implement the law rather than to examine the system of beliefs that forms the basis for these laws.\textsuperscript{433}

As a result of the emergence of a more skeptical frame of mind, Jewish thinkers, following their Muslim counterparts, began to question their traditions by asking a new set of questions framed in a substantially new mode. Rabbis were no longer in their secluded orbit of discourse, they were forced to explain why they believe rather than simply insist that they do. Once the why questions were raised, a reassessment of the entire tradition became inevitable. Apologetics and argumentation began to replace systems that were taken for granted due to the sheer charisma of traditional institutions.\textsuperscript{434}

Some of the new topics that came to the fore were related to creation and cosmology, God’s existence, His attributes, the nature of language, free will, the role of Scripture, the nature of prophecy and revelation, the problem of evil, the problem of divine retribution, God’s unity, eschatology, and the nature and meaning of miracles. Blumenthal notes that all the books of theology that emerge after Saadia dealt with these central dilemmas, exhibiting a new systematic approach to knowledge.\textsuperscript{435} Therefore, the

\textsuperscript{433} Theodore Steinberg, \textit{Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages}, pp. 222-3.

\textsuperscript{434} Although Halevi’s argument is philosophically informed, his prioritization of historical experience over logical proof deviated from the intellectual demands of his age. See Itzhak Shilat, \textit{Ben hakuzari la’rambam}, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{435} Blumenthal, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 121.
increasing dependence on reason led to the conscious articulation of a new set of interrelated questions that begged an organized and methodical response. These new questions were ordered systematically from the most central to the most subtle, offering a comprehensive investigation of a *sui-generis* worldview. Such systematicity entailed a peculiar ordering of topics such that tackling central themes became a prerequisite for dealing with more subtle ones. This rational organization evoked a sense of logical linearity and a hierarchical attitude towards the exposition of data. Jewish philosophers from Saadia to Maimonides began to follow these causative formats in which one question led to the next, aiming towards a set of clear and indisputable conclusions. As an example, in addition to the type of questions Maimonides raised, one of his greatest contributions was the way he managed to present those questions in a well-ordered and interrelated manner. Maimonides Guide “moves from logic and language to physics (and cosmology) to metaphysics and philosophical psychology to, finally, legal, moral, and political philosophy. This progression, which maps on to the ancient ordering of the Aristotelian corpus, is to be seen as culminating in the practical sciences.” These new hierarchically stratified methods were a far cry from the rabbinical tradition in which:

No halakhic dictum, exegesis, or idea (or document, for that matter) dominates all others. None is subordinate, none formally set off as the epitome of all wisdom and truth. Rather, all stand, as it were, next to one another in a relation of mutuality and exquisite tension. For this reason rabbinic documents read as if suspended in space, moving towards no

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literary or cognitive conclusion. Many of them even lack formal beginnings and endings.\footnote{William Scott Green, “Storytelling and Holy Man: The Case of Ancient Israel,” p. 33}

The differences between classical Judaism and the thought processes introduced by philosophers were indeed dramatic. During what I refer to as the period between the emergence of philosophy and the appearance of the Zohar, there was a clear departure from the associative, non-linear and open-ended methods of the Talmud towards a logically organized systematic theology.

3.4.3 \textit{De-Contextualization: The Rational Phase}

In the second chapter I argued that synthetic systems show an interest in contextualized historical analysis and ethics. The new rational discourse that was introduced into Judaism led to a shift from a narrative discourse to an increasingly a-historical articulation of cosmology and dogma. Jewish philosophers were less inclined to incorporate particularistic and narrative-based elements into their polemical arguments. The cross-cultural applicability of philosophical discourse entailed an inevitable de-contextualization of information. As Oliver Leaman argues, “instead of linking information together in terms of weak connectors such as allusion, analogy, and propinquity between passages…” philosophy focused on “the logical relationship between terms. It was this conceptual strength of philosophy that made it so significant in various cultures…”\footnote{Oliver Leaman, “Introduction to the Study of Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” in \textit{Cambridge Companion}, p. 10. Leaman continues: “…Like Pandora’s box, once the ideas are out in the open, it is difficult if not impossible to put them back again, and this happened with philosophy.” Ibid.}
Jewish philosophers initiated a transformation from the Talmudic paradigm founded upon relatively ambiguous terminology, open-endedness, and contextualized historical narratives, towards strategies of interpretation that highlighted conceptual accuracy, linear and logical organization, and an increasingly de-contextualized, objective presentation of information. Methodologically this new type of formalism was apparent in the integration of discrete units of information using content-free relations, which provided philosophical discourse with a convenient linearity that was relatively free of particularistic cultural considerations. In terms of content, the shift from a narrative theology concerned with ethics and historical analysis towards a more objectified form of speculation was reflected by an unprecedented interest in metaphysics. As opposed to the fairly rudimentary creation story in Genesis, medieval Jewish thinkers turned towards a more sophisticated explanation of the structure of the cosmos and its relationship to human activity. By its very nature, the field of metaphysics, inspired by Aristotelianism, sought to present a trans-cultural universe that transcended the particularities of any specific religion or culture. Here again we see an objectified and de-contextualized approach that came to replace the typical archaic and local narratives anchored in a specific cultural ethos.

The emergence of Jewish philosophy profoundly changed that Judaism. The peculiar cognitive strategies of rational thought were dramatically different from anything Jews were accustomed to prior to the tenth century. Gradually, a native and philosophically informed backlash to rationalism emerged among conservatives, best represented by various schools of medieval mysticism. The following section will look at
how the school of theurgic Kabbalah both adopted the new analytic cognitive strategies of Greece, but also managed to incorporate them into an alternative intellectual discourse that was based on the synthetic foundations of traditional Judaism.

3.4.4 Atomization and Conceptualization: The Kabbalistic Reaction

The conservative wing of the rabbinic tradition could not ignore the new powerful methodologies of the analytic paradigm. This led to the emulation of rational strategies and a tendency towards the atomization of data and the construction of clear and distinct metaphysical categories among medieval Jewish mystics. It therefore makes perfect sense that *Sefer Yetzirah (The Book of Creation)* played a central role in this process. For Jewish thinkers, philosophers and mystics alike, this unique text was a testimony to the existence of an original and native Jewish speculative tradition that offered an intricate cosmology and cosmogony of its own. In Halevi’s *Kuzari*, for instance, *Sefer Yetzirah* is often quoted and presented as a work of science superior to the Aristotelian worldview. The first commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah* were philosophical and disclose no knowledge or acquaintance with Kabbalistic ideas. The two most noteworthy philosophical commentaries were written by Saadia and Judah b. Barzillai, both of which had an enduring influence on the development of medieval Jewish mysticism. Barzillai was one of the most prominent figures in Provençal Jewry at the beginning of the twelfth century where theurgic Kabbalah first emerged. It therefore makes sense that the first Kabbalistic commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah* in Provençé was influenced by Barzillai’s philosophical

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439 According to Scholem *Yetzirah* can be seen as the first speculative text in the Jewish tradition. Scholem, *ha Kabbalah Bi Provence*, p. 49.
commentary.\textsuperscript{440} Therefore the first Kabbalists were clearly following philosophers in adopting \textit{Sefer Yetzirah} as a platform for the construction of their alternative cosmology. The fact that both medieval Jewish philosophers and mystics used \textit{Sefer Yetzirah} as an early foundation for their speculative cosmologies turned this slim text into a kind of battleground for articulating different ideologies and opposing perceptions of reality. Both groups were adamant in arguing that \textit{Sefer Yetzirah} was an ancient text that could be traced back to the first patriarchs, thereby presenting their new theologies as ancient wisdom. Modern scholarship, however, is in general agreement that \textit{Sefer Yetzirah} is a fairly late text, which discloses clear Neo-pythagorean and other Greek influences.\textsuperscript{441}

This is a good example of how complex traditions are able to tap into their resources at times of need. Although dating \textit{Sefer Yetzirah} remains an extremely controversial issue, one thing is clear; beginning with Saadia, it became one of the most frequently quoted texts in medieval Judaism between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{442}

This is an example of the sudden focus on a previously peripheral text by practically all contending ideologies in the Jewish milieu. The new attention that formerly marginalized texts enjoy can be seen as one of the most common phenomena in the way traditions adapt to new realities. This will be discussed in the Chinese case as well, where the \textit{Yijing}

\textsuperscript{440} Ibid., Earlier mystical commentaries to \textit{Yetzirah} were composed by the German Pietists prior to Isaac the Blind but these were not Kabbalistic in nature. Barzillai’s commentary on \textit{Yetzirah} is considered to be the most broad and detailed of all philosophical commentaries.

\textsuperscript{441} “We can only be sure that [the sepher Yetzirah] was written by a Jewish Neo-Pythagorean some time between the third and sixth century,” Scholem, \textit{Major Trends}, p. 76 n.4, in Arthur E. Waite and Kunt Stensing, \textit{Book of Formation or Sefer Yetzirah: Attributed to Rabbi Akiha Ben Joseph} (London: W. Rider and Son, 1923). Also see Joseph Dan, \textit{Toldot Torat Ha’sod Ha’ivrit} [Hebrew]. Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2011), pp. 559-561; Liebes and the relationship of \textit{Yetzirah} to Philo and Greek culture, see \textit{Torat Ha-Yetsirah Shel Sefer Yetzirah}. (Yerushalayim; Tel-Aviv: Hotsa’at Shoken, 2000), pp. 264-249.

\textsuperscript{442} Dan, \textit{Toldot}, Vol. 2, pp. 566-568.
(Book of Changes) experienced a similar commentarial revival during the Song Dynasty. Both texts were metaphysical in nature and therefore provided rabbis and literati with material for responding to the analytic challenge.

Of interest to our discussion, is the fact that one of main characteristics of Sefer Yetzirah is its neat categorization of data. Indeed it is the most intricate work of typology and classification in the Jewish tradition prior to the emergence of philosophy and Kabbalah. Ithamar Gruenwald notes that Sefer Yetzirah presents the world through well-defined structural categories and systematic terminology that disclose many of the characteristics of a well-written medieval scientific treatise.443 One of Sefer Yetzirah’s main goals was the creation of a correlative relationship between nature, the human body, different human attributes, the Hebrew alphabet, and the ‘ten numbers’ that were destined to become the ten sefirot or hypostases of the Kabbalah. Indeed, Sefer Yetzirah’s typological complexity is a unique instance in Jewish literature; it offered a conceptual foundation for a more systematic and speculative worldview that was perceived through an objective fragmentation of reality into ontological entities.444

443 Ithamar Gruenwald, “Ha-Mistika Ha-Yehudit Bama’Avar Mi-Sefer Yetzirah Le-Sefer Bahir.” In Divrei Ha-Kenes Ha-Ben Leumiha-Sheni Le Toldot Ha-Mistika Ha-Yehudit be-Eropa, edited by Joseph Dan, (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 15-16. R’ Shabtai Donnolo a famous Italian doctor and scientist of the tenth century wrote a commentary on Yetzirah known as Chakmoni that discloses clear scientific interests. His book shows a clear attempt of supporting his scientific project with Jewish sources.

444 At the beginning we are introduced to the ‘ten numbers’ that are ‘unspoken,’ ‘unknown’ or ‘formed from nothingness’ (בלימה ספירות עשר), together with the Hebrew alphabet we get the ‘thirty-two foundational letters;’ the letters are further divided into the ‘three mothers,’ the ‘seven doubles,’ and ‘twelve elementals.’ Later the texts goes on to classify the relationship between the sexes, bodily organs, the natural elements (which conform to the Greek air, water, and fire), the progression of time and space, the constellations, the twelve directions, human senses and emotions, and so forth.
The atomization of data begins with *Sefer Yetzirah* but is later extended to the whole Kabbalistic project. Medieval Jewish mystics began to define terms with unprecedented precision and attention to the interrelationship between concepts. The sefirotic tree, one of the defining features of Kabbalah, is itself a central example of analytical differentiation, represented by the conceptualizations and hypostatization of the divine attributes. Kabbalists audaciously dissected the godhead into separate entities, expressing a disposition towards the fragmentation of information characteristic of the analytic mind. Moreover, beginning with *Sefer Yetzirah* but clearly present in the *Bahir* and in subsequent Kabbalistic texts, important notions such as *devekut* (clinging), and *kavvanah* (intention), took on new and more explicit meanings that clearly diverged from their more ambiguous use in Midrashic and Talmudic literature. In other words, like philosophers, early Kabbalists began to conceptualize their classical terminology such that it pointed to a more precise and focused meaning. Terms were reified so that their flexible classical undertones were transformed to denote discrete metaphysical substances. For example, reality was divided into four distinct levels of existence, the soul was stratified into five layers, and as mentioned, the godhead was divided into clear entities that could be addressed separately in prayer and manipulated according to one’s intentions. Language is of particular importance here: although both philosophers and mystics clearly sought to systemize their respective worldviews, their diverging approaches towards language led to utterly different intellectual orientations. The different linguistic approaches of medieval philosophers and theurgic kabbalists have

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445 The Kabbalistic understanding of the soul adds two layers, *Hayah* (חי) and *Yechida* (יחידה) which are exclusively Jewish, to philosophy’s *Nefesh* (נפש), *Ruah* (רוח), and *Neshama* (נפש).
been widely commented upon by modern scholarship and could be generally summarized as the distinction between philosophical conceptualism and mystical symbolism. Conceptual language refers to terms that have one restricted and confined significance, while mystical symbolism can possibly denote a wide range of meanings. As I argued, following philosophers, mystics began to conceptualize their speculative terminology but in spite of these clear analytical tendencies, important differences between mystics and philosophers remained substantial. Although both groups constructed a much more specialized terminology, rationalists were much more concerned with the elimination of ambiguity and the establishment of a well-ordered correlation between term and referent. The nature of mystical symbolism, on the other hand, was much more broad and elusive. The ‘diffused’ semantic range of Kabbalistic symbols meant they overlapped and therefore interacted in a more dynamic and nonlinear fashion. The boundaries of the mystical symbol were less discrete thereby endowing the Kabbalistic system with a more synthetic and integrative nature that resonated with conservative Rabbinical models of


447 The Kabbalistic sefirot, including Hokhmah (Intelllect), Binah (Wisdom), Hesed (Compassion), Gevura (Judgement) and Malchut (Kingliness), were hypostasized and presented as meta-categories. These terms were no longer understood in their Biblical and Talmudic sense as various dispositions of God. In Kabbalah they were reified and cosmologized and presented as distinct metaphysical qualities. In conformance to the medieval search for unity, Kabbalists insisted that such differentiation was only secondary to divine unity that transcended distinctions.
discourse. According to Scholem and Tishby, the mystical symbol is paradoxical in that it uses language to point to that which language cannot communicate. In other words, instead of explicitly pointing towards a narrow and confined meaning, the mystical symbol is pregnant with significance, one that attempts to lead the mystic as close as possible to that which cannot be expressed discursively. The atomization of data in Kabbalah was therefore different than that of philosophy, it left space, so to speak, for exegetical diversity that avoided the rigidity of philosophical conceptualism.

I will return to these important distinctions in the section on language, here I want to stress the contrary ways philosophers and mystics approached the task of atomizing information. As opposed to the economical approach of philosophy, Kabbalistic symbolism was multi-layered and opaque, but its lack of referential exactitude was compensated for by its ability to point the mystic towards profound intuitive and experiential insights. Although Jewish theurgists followed Greek philosophical formats in

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448 Moshe Idel offers three scholarly approaches to the rise of Kabbalistic symbolism. He terms the approach espoused by Scholem and Tishby “Neotic Insufficiency.” According to him although this approach is partially correct, its exclusive focus on the referential features of symbolism leads to the unfortunate marginalization of its performative aspects: “While the referential approaches can in some cases define the initial phase of the theosophical-theurgical path, they cannot exhaust a fundamental aspect of some Kabbalistic theories of language: their performative, or manipulative, or effective understandings… the symbol as the divine presence within the lower world is not only the feeble reflection of the supernal into the mundane but also the beginning of an ontological chain that facilitates the transmission of the human influence on high.” See idel, Absorbing Perfection, pp. 276. The other two approaches see Kabbalistic symbolism as, a) a reaction to a crisis of meaning in the biblical text and, b) Scholem’s idea of Kabbalistic symbolism as a reflection of the historical experience of the Jewish people: “Here we have an interesting attempt to propose a correlation between the Kabbalistic symbol and the cumulative historical experiences of the people of Israel… a fusion between the personal and the collective experience.” More on this approach towards symbolism see Tishby, Paths of Faith and Heresy, p. 13; idem., The Wisdom of the Zohar, 1:284; Scholem, On the Kabbalah, p. 36; p. 22: “Symbols, by their very nature, are a means of expressing an experience that is in itself expressionless”; idem., On Jews and Judaism, p. 48; idem, Major Trends, pp. 27-28. Joseph Dan, The Early Kabbalah, pp. 9–13.
their establishment of specialized terminology, the fact that their basic unit of meaning was the symbol rather than the philosophical concept endowed Kabbalah with a much more flexible and dynamic interpretive nature. That Kabbalists resorted to an emanationist theology is yet another factor that reflects their unique approach towards the atomization of data. Idel calls this a “conjunctive theology” which he contrasts with the Maimonidean dualist distinction between the divine and the material world.\textsuperscript{449} The emanative progression from the highly abstract and hidden domain of \textit{Ein-Sof} towards the increasingly concrete lower worlds of \textit{Azilut} (emanation - intellect), \textit{Briyah} (sphere of angels), \textit{Yetzirah} (creation), and \textit{Asiyah} (action) is such that these different spheres of existence interact and relate to each other through a fluid process of emanation in which the shift from one sphere to another avoids the typical abrupt differentiation between categories in analytic systems. Of relevance is that although kabbalists display a clear tendency towards an analytic construction of categories and specialized terminology, they chose a distinctly anti-Aristotelian, emanationist approach that downplayed conceptual rigidity in favor of a more dynamic, process-based, and fluid progression between metaphysical categories.

In conclusion, like philosophers, Kabbalists, too, moved towards a more analytic approach towards data, one that sought to distinguish between units of information and metaphysical entities. What made Kabbalah distinct was its use of symbolism and emanationist strategies, which lent its theology a peculiar synthetic flavor. The dynamic I want to stress in all the subsequent sections on Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism is that

\textsuperscript{449} Idel, “Kabbalah and Elites,” p. 9.
both these defense-theologies appropriate analytic features and subordinate them to native synthetic sensibilities. In this specific case we see the Kabbalistic emulation of the analytic atomization of data, which was executed in a quintessentially synthetic manner such that there was a fluid movement between concepts and the use of a more multi-layered and flexible symbolic theology.

3.4.5 Systemization: The Kabbalistic Reaction

Following philosophical models, medieval Jewish mysticism represents an escalation in systematic thought. Both mystics and philosophers came to believe that the cosmos as a whole worked according to a hierarchy of laws and “a law-like necessity.” Contradictions that were never problematic during the classical Talmudic age made way for a more unified worldview typical of medieval thought. Just like philosophers, mystical schools such as the German pietists, the Iyyun Circle, theurgists, and the school of ecstatic Kabbalah all adopted analytical strategies of presenting knowledge systematically. In the case of theurgic Kabbalah, the sefirotic tree

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451 Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture*, pp. 110-111. In this example the Kabbalist Ibn Gabbai sees the Kabbalistic necessity as superior and more tightly knit than that of philosophy.
452 Examples of the way the Zohar systemized “discrepancies” in the Talmud are numerous. Moshe Idel points our attention to one such instance in which the Zohar synthesizes two perceptions of the notion of the ‘pillar’ in Rabbinic literature, one which believes the world is sustained by seven pillars, the other that the world stands on a single pillar. According to the theosophical code the single pillar is that of sefirat yesod while the six others are related to the six lower sefirot, which are grounded in yesod. Idel refers to this as the ‘luminous pillar’ of the Zohar. *Ascension on High*, pp. 88-90.
453 The first indications of this Greek trend can possibly be traced back the book Sha’arei Hokhmah (*Gates of wisdom*) of the Kalonimus family in Germany but the increase in systematization is apparent in all schools of medieval mysticism and most clearly in the Kabbalistic schools. See Dan, *Toldot Torat ha Sod*, vol.5. p. 190.
functioned as an infrastructure for the construction of a systematic theology concerned
with reality as whole. This organized structure provided kabbalists with a conceptual
foundation to probe into the nature of existence, the inner qualities of the godhead,
human psychology, and the performance and meaning of the commandments in a
coherent and unified fashion. The shift towards systematic thought among mystics can be
seen in the way Kabbalistic manuals and commentaries disclosed an unprecedented order
and progression of ideas. Almost all of these kabbalistic texts introduce a neat and
methodical explication of the sefirot beginning with the lowest Malchut or the highest
Ein-Sof and proceeding through the whole Kabbalistic structure.

In her analysis of the early Zoharic ‘Midrash of Rabbi Isaac,’ Ronit Meroz
highlights the clear escalation of systematic thought from early Jewish Heikhalot
mysticism to that of the middle ages:

Comparing to the angelology with its conceptions and characteristics of the first
millennium C.E., the salient innovation in this passage is its systematization. Unlike the
texts of the first millennium in which we find an enormous and chaotic list of angelic
names, here we are presented with a systematic discussion of angels based on abstract
categories – upper and lower, Din and Rahamim (Judgment and Compassion), male and
female, etc. Furthermore, fixing the number 10 of the inner angels as a typological
number also shows an effort at systematization. Based on the evidence thus far, it would
seem that our unit represents a transitional stage between the angelology of the first
millennium and the Kabbalah of the 2nd millennium.454

and Mizrahi Jewry, 1 (2007): 44. Also see Jonathan Dauber, Knowledge of God and the
Kabbalists were clearly following philosophers in presenting information and thinking more systematically, but they did this is a way that retained many of the intellectual dispositions of the synthetic modality. One obvious characteristic of Kabbalistic systematization was the insistence on preserving old layers of the tradition. Aggadah, Midrash, and ancient Heikhalot and Merkavah mysticism were all synthesized into a coherent whole with an internal logic. Indeed, every device available in Jewish discourse was tapped into, intensified or re-articulated in an attempt to give Kabbalistic theology an internal coherence that integrated themes with a new systematic cosmology. Kabbalists, as opposed to philosophers, refused to delegitimize old layers of the tradition; as opposed to philosophers who abandoned layers of the tradition that they saw as illegitimate and outdated, kabbalists skillfully tapped into these earlier strata and reinterpreted them in a new and systematic fashion.

This unique approach can be seen in Kabbalah’s adoption of the aggadic portions of the tradition - the same parts that were seen as outdated and problematic in the eyes of Jewish rationalists. While Aggadah was an embarrassment for many rationalists it

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455 Idel makes this point clear in his review of Scholem’s understanding of the emergence of Kabbalah: “Rabbinism was not an homogeneous religiosity; it incorporates diverging views on many issues, including the preference, or the rejection of mythical types of expression. It is therefore quite strange that Scholem implicitly identified Rabbinism exclusively with Halakhah, whereas the Aggadah was not included as part of the discussion of the dichotomy Rabbinism-Kabbalism. As he himself has several times remarked, the continuity between the Kabbalistic and the Aggadic literature seems to be obvious…” see “Rabbanism vs. Kabbalism,” p. 289. Scholem even explicitly acknowledges that “the whole of Aggadah can in a way be regarded as a popular mythology of the Jewish universe. Now, this mythical element which is deeply rooted in the creative forms of Aggadic production, operates on different planes in the old Aggadah and in Kabbalism." Scholem, Major Trends, pp. 30-32.

456 Beginning with the Geonim, two general attitudes towards Aggadah became prevalent: rejection or reinterpretation. The philosophers generally gravitated towards different degrees of the former, and Kabbalists to different degrees of the latter. See David Shatz, “The biblical and
became a central tool for conservatives in restructuring their tradition. Not only was the speculative nature of aggadah a natural candidate to confront philosophical speculation, but it also helped thinkers such as R. Ezra and R. Azriel create a seamless continuity with the rabbinic tradition. Both these important Gerona kabbalists claimed that the aggadot of the Talmud were actually a code that can be deciphered in mystical terms. Rabbi Azriel’s commentary on the aggadot represents a milestone in the institutionalization and legitimation of aggadic literature within mysticism. This important treatise became a manifesto of Kabbalah and the earliest and most explicit declaration of Kabbalah’s inherent relationship with the tradition that preceded it. Relevant to our story is the fact that R’ Azriel’s commentary represented a transformation of Aggadah from a narrative discourse towards a conceptual tool for systematic speculation in which different symbols take on a more reified and stable meaning. This is a classical example of how Kabbalah managed to strike a balance between conservatism and change. Kabbalists preserved the portions of aggadic Judaism that philosophers denied, but they nevertheless reorganized and utilized Aggadah in a completely non-literal and systematic manner. This balancing

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act can help us understand their historical success. The theurgic School positioned itself between radical rationalists who marginalized the role and truth-value of Aggadah on the one hand, and ultra-conservative talmudists such as the French Tosafists who remained rigidly entrenched in its literal interpretation. Countering rationalists, Kabbalists managed to protect this central feature of Jewish discourse, which contained a wealth of native symbols that were emotionally dear to the hearts of many Jews. One the other hand, they also differed from extreme traditionalists by tapping into aggadah’s non-literal meaning and speculative symbolic potential.

The Kabbalistic sefirotic structure functioned as a foundation for a systematic philosophy that deciphered existence according to a coherent psycho-cosmological framework. Mystics constructed a clear and methodic worldview in which everything in life could be expressed and understood according to the sefirot. The creation of the world from the Ein-Sof, the structure of the universe, the inner workings of the godhead, the different layers of existence, the evolution of the human soul and its relation to the body, the goal Israel in the world, the object of prayer, the process of hastening the advent of the messiah, the relationship between good and evil, male and female, and matter and spirit could all be understood according to a systematic framework. Due to this consistency and coherence, Kabbalah, just like philosophy, became much more accessible than rabbinic thought. Once the Kabbalistic “code” was understood it gave believers a common key for understanding scripture and deciphering the world.

Here again I want to stress the dynamic of ‘appropriation and subordination.’ Although mystics show a clear tendency towards systematization in the early period of
Kabbalah, the final expression of the theurgic worldview in the Zohar returned to a traditional Midrashic discourse that avoided the strict linear approach of analytical systems. The narrative features of the Zohar have long been commented upon by scholars of Kabbalah; Scholem’s characterization of this work as a mystical novel is one notable example.\(^{459}\) More recently, influenced by the romantic interpretation of the Zohar paved by Yehuda Liebes and his students, Eitan Fishbane has noted that:

…the Zohar is distinguished by its use of fictionality and storytelling—features that are highly unusual in the broader context of kabbalistic theology and systematic metaphysics. Indeed, it is precisely in the adaptation of midrashic modalities (of narrative and exegesis) that the authors of the Zohar sought to achieve their pseudepigraphical goal; the deliberate avoidance of medieval conventions is central to the aesthetic texture of the work.\(^{460}\)

There are two points that merit our attentions in this short passage. The first is that the Zohar’s adoption of a literary format represents a clear departure from Greek formats of speculation to a mode of presentation that is familiar to the traditional Jewish emphasis

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on narratives. The second point is that the narrative fiction of the Zohar is “unusual in the broader context of Kabbalistic theology.” In other words, the early mystics of Gerona articulate their worldviews in close conformity to philosophical models but once Kabbalistic theology reaches greater maturity it slowly shifted towards an increasingly synthetic presentation of information. This dynamic is reflected in the turn from the highly conceptual language mystics employed at the beginning of the twelfth century towards the increasingly “diffused” symbolism of the Zohar, as well as in the more systematic nature of Kabbalah in Gerona as opposed to its more organic and narrative structure in the Zohar. The return to Midrashic and aggadic formats of presentation in the Zohar did not, however, mean that the systematic nature of Kabbalah was abandoned. A new and indeed revolutionary systematic theology lurks behind the zoharic narrative. The narrative and Midrashic characteristics of zoharic theology gave it a sense of continuity with the past, thereby cloaking its systematic and innovative character. This double-sided nature of the Zohar equipped Judaism with the analytic resources to answer the same questions raised by philosophy, while at the same time it preserved indigenous rabbinic modes of presenting information. The fact that the Zohar returned to a discourse that was irrefutable by the restricted mechanisms of the intellect, enabled mystics to present the Kabbalistic worldview as metaphysically superior to philosophy.  

461 To a certain extent, medieval mystics were following the course paved by Halevi who marginalized proof by reason in favor of revelation and experience. According to Halevi the philosophical method is incapable of dealing with the sheer facts of history and the undeniable testimony of collective experience. Halevi’s defense of Judaism in face of philosophical thought was therefore a precursor to many of the anti-rational sensibilities harbored by Kabbalists and conservative rabbis. See more on the acceptance of the Kuzari in Adam Shear, The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
3.4.6 De-Contextualization: The Kabbalistic Reaction

Finally, the decontextualization of information is another feature that Kabbalists clearly adopted from analytic formats. This can be seen in the way Kabbalah constructed a relatively objective and trans-cultural cosmology. I will look at this phenomenon in greater detail in section 3.7.2 (Universalism vs. Particularism), here I will only note that such decontextualization meant that more than ever before, Kabbalah proposed a Jewish cosmology that could be transported to foreign cultural environments. As I will show later, Kabbalah exercised a substantial influence on non-Jewish European culture, where Christian thinkers integrated its sefirotic architectonic with their own symbolic world. In other words, Kabbalah’s attempt to construct a speculative theology to counter philosophy, led it to shift from the rabbinic concern with Israel’s historical relationship with God and the analysis of specific ethical situations to a more objectified metaphysical discourse. This tendency towards the objectification of information can be traced back to mystical interest in Sefer Yetzirah, which states matters in complete detachment from any specific cultural experience. As Gruenwald notes this work “doesn’t divulge, not even with the slightest hint, what we are supposed to make of the information it presents us with…. The knowledge the book supplies is predominantly static.”462 Sefer Yetzirah does not mention Israel, the commandments, or Jerusalem; the objective metaphysical picture it presented helped Kabbalists lay the foundations for their theology, but unlike philosophers who went on to adopt increasingly radical forms of analytical objectivity,

462 Gruenwald. op. cit., pp. 29-30 (my translation): “Jewish mysticism in its Transition from the Book of creation to the Bahir” [Hebrew].
kabbalists reacted by contextualizing their worldview with particularistic and anthropomorphic features that were anti-rational par-excellence.⁴⁶³

A good example of this recurrent process of appropriation of analytic elements and their subordination to synthetic sensibilities can be seen in the sefirotic structure. It is in Sefer Yetzirah that we first come across the notion of the sefirot which eventually came to function as the conceptual framework for Kabbalistic theology. The difference is that in Sefer Yetzirah, the sefirot represent the primordial numbers that constitute the world (together with the twenty four letters of the Hebrew alphabet). Therefore the sefirot of Sefer Yetzirah are objective substances with no additional symbolic significance. Slowly the sefirot begin to accumulate symbolic layers that cloak their initial objectivity with an increasingly particularistic symbolism. By the time of the Zohar, each sefirah had come to represent a dense cluster of symbols and meanings. Of interest is the fact that the gradual masking of the conceptual objectivity of Yetzirah’s sefirot meant that the sefirot of Kabbalah were far more mythic and symbolic while simultaneously retaining some of the objective qualities of the analytical modality. In other words, behind the mythic character of the Kabbalistic sefirot, we see metaphysical entities that relate to each other according to constant rules that are relatively transparent and predictable. The sefirotic

⁴⁶³ Dan. Toldot, vol. 2, p. 557. Although both philosophers and mystics alike could use this text to promote opposing ideologies, around the middle of the twelfth century we witness a decrease in philosophical commentaries on Yetzirah and a clear escalation in mystical commentaries. This is a period in which most rationalists who were increasingly sympathetic to Aristotelianism in its Maimonidean version began to find the creation narrative of Yetzirah distasteful. In contrast, the mystics between the mid-twelfth and early thirteenth century, embraced Yetzirah and turned it into one of the foundational texts of medieval mysticism. Dan, ibid., pp. 568-9. Dan notes that Yetzirah “was appropriated by the mystics from the hands of philosophers.” This is an adequate example of how information that was initially tapped into by rationalists was co-opted by Kabbalists.
tree, in spite of its fluctuating nature, is nevertheless stable and un-changing; it is constructed of ten hypostases that relate to each other in a hierarchical manner that represents the eternal and objective physiognomy of the divine realm.

Other indications of the decontextualization of information can be seen in the notion of Ein-Sof in which God is stripped from His biblical qualities and presented as a boundless source of energy that emanates through the sefirot to the created world. As opposed to the worldview of the anthropomorphic Biblical picture, the Kabbalistic God is represented by an eternal structure. The Ein-Sof is to a great extent an intersection of an Aristotelean and Neoplatonic God, both of which were never associated with a specific nation or historical experience, and certainly not characterized by human attributes. The Ein-Sof is eternal and static like Aristotle’s unmoved mover but it also operated according to a typically Neoplatonic emanative process. In spite of these clear efforts to towards objectification, kabbalists skillfully qualify their analytic borrowings with a theology that returned to a conservative and historically-informed mindset. Here, too, initially mystics remained close to philosophy but once they managed to formulate the basic foundations of their system they began to return to a more exclusive form of speculation that barred accessibility to foreign participation. As an example, while philosophical works such as Ibn Gabirol’s Fons Vitae could be used by Christian scholastics and even misunderstood as a Christian work, the Kabbalah, in spite of its trans-cultural transportability was clearly a Jewish theology that had to go through substantial alterations in order to suit itself to a non-Jewish environment.464 Put

464 Scholem, Ha Kabbalah Bi Provence, pp. 20-1.
differently, it can be said that both Kabbalah and philosophy adopted the analytic tendency to decontextualize information, but philosophers never felt compelled to mask this tendency with a mythic or symbolic language; Jewish philosophy borrowed but never seemed to qualify those borrowings with a conservative mindset.

A look at Abulafia’s ecstatic Kabbalah can help us understand why the theurgic school managed to consolidate its positions in the Jewish tradition and outstrip other mystical approaches. Ecstatic Kabbalah, with its analytical qualities was far more conducive to a cross-cultural reception. Its highly decontextualized method stripped the biblical text and the Hebrew language from their intrinsic meaning and their relationship with the specific experience of the Jews. Symbolism, and any form of culturally-specific information, was seen as an obstacle to one’s unification with ultimate reality. Abulafia believed that the path towards a unity with the divine must be direct and unmediated by symbols.\footnote{Idel, \textit{New Perspectives}, pp. 201-205.} It is no wonder that he didn’t only accept non-Jewish students, who were among his favorites, but also became the most influential Jewish mystic in the non-Jewish world. His mysticism was applicable to mystics of other traditions since it focused on an individual contemplative experience rather than on the unique function of a nation. The effective transportability of Abulafia’s mystical system was actually a disadvantage within Judaism. Its analytic tendency towards radical objectification gave it a universal character that many saw as a real threat to Jewish exclusivism. It is exactly here that the theurgic school’s conservative use of native symbols and a more historically oriented narrative managed to win the hearts of conservatives. Although some of the objective
features of theurgic Kabbalah lent it an unprecedented ability to cross cultural boarders, it was not as transportable as the rational mysticism of the ecstatic school. Theurgic Kabbalah’s ability to appropriate analytic tools and at the same time subordinate them to native Jewish sensibilities meant that Jewish practitioners were not exposed to the dangers of a universalistic ethos - a cultural position that could easily lead to conversion and mass assimilation. Indeed, theurgic Kabbalah, especially in its zoharic manifestation, embellished its objective metaphysics with a narrative that was exclusive and extremely difficult to penetrate without a deep familiarity with Jewish symbolism. Another important feature of theurgic Kabbalah was that there existed a continuous dialectical interaction between the divine sphere and human action in the form of ritual. This theurgic-ritualistic feature meant that Kabbalistic theology was practiced within the particular context of Jewish law, in which both communal and individual behavior directly impinged upon the Godhead. This was another way of departing from the objectivity and universalistic metaphysical structures of the Greeks towards a dynamic theology in which context, historical events, and the specific behavior of the Jewish people were of crucial importance. The ontological exclusivism of Kabbalah endowed it with a temporal, diachronic aspect in which both humans and the divine were deeply embedded in particularistic historical narrative that was somewhat irrelevant to non-Jews.

Although the Kabbalistic structure discloses an unprecedented objectivity it was nevertheless manipulatable by a specific people rather than equally relevant to all people by virtue of their shared humanity. The delicate balancing of a de-contextualized metaphysics with Jewish narratives endowed the theurgic school with the necessary qualities to outstrip mystical systems that gravitated too heavily towards the analytic worldview.

3.4.7 Conclusion

In this section I have examined tensions between the analytical and synthetic mindsets in respect to cognition. Theurgic Kabbalists succeeded where other schools failed; they successfully embedded the cognitive strategies of the analytic mode of operation in a restrictive and exclusive symbolic world that was more semantically diffused, historically informed, and open-ended. They follow philosophers in differentiating data into distinct categories but they also returned to a more symbolic and ambiguous mysticism; like philosophers they systemized Jewish theology but formulated the Zohar according to a Midrashic format with strong narrative features; and in common with philosophers they constructed an objectified cosmology but nevertheless returned to a contextualized theology that unfolds in respect to the exclusive behavior and context of the Jewish people. In addition to the Kabbalistic prioritization of synthetic features over analytic borrowings, its adoption of symbolism taken from the heart of the world of aggadah lent Kabbalah its apparently seamless continuity with the legacy of rabbinic Judaism. Theurgic Kabbalists equipped Judaism with the powerful speculative tools of
the analytic modality, while reinforcing the synthetic, conservative foundations of their classical tradition.
3.5 THE SOCIAL LEVEL

3.5.1 Individualism: Specialization and Signed Works

The shift towards increasingly analytic patterns of thought in Judaism was contemporaneous with dramatic social changes. I am not arguing for a causative description in which the adoption of analytic strategies of meaning led to greater individualism nor am I arguing for a Durkheimian stance that reduces culture and psychology to social realities. Instead I will merely note that these changes occur in relative synchrony and that there exists a constant symbiotic relationship between personality, society, culture, and the environment. The period under examination saw a growing tendency towards individualism in the Jewish tradition. This can be discerned in the emergence of alternative literary formats to the communally oriented Talmudic and Midrashic literature. As mentioned earlier, it was Saadia who initiated this new trend of specialized works in diverse fields of knowledge such as theology, science, grammar, literature, law, and poetry. Saadia was “the first author in the Rabbinic tradition; his works are not mere compilations, arrangements, or rearrangements of older sources; they are products of original reflection and expression.” Blumenthal notes that the common trait of the host of specialized books that ensued was that they were all authored and signed by individuals. For the first time, the private person was appreciated as a legitimate purveyor of knowledge; for the first time, one was relatively free to choose

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469 Blumenthal, *op. cit.*
what to discuss and whom to quote. The proliferation of such books stood in stark contrast to the traditional Talmudic communal format that was written, and most probably edited, over a long period of time.\footnote{As discussed earlier, the traditional Talmudic model does not disclose a specific author or a single authority responsible for shaping the tradition according to his own understanding; even the most honored sage was forever dependent upon, and supported by his contemporaries and past generations. In Christianity for instance, we witness the authorship of private works from the very inception of the traditions: Tertullian’s prolific work, Origen’s \textit{On First Principles}, Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} and \textit{City of God}, are only a few examples of a tradition that was immersed in Hellenism and comfortable with the intellectual autonomy of individual thinkers.} During the Geonic period, Judaism began to move towards a more polemical and individualistic form of discourse that reflected an undeniably Greek temperament. The new freedom from the classical Talmudic model beginning in the tenth century was an indication of the decline of central control and the opening of a growing space for individuals to interpret religion in a more creative and independent manner.

As discussed earlier, the rational mind dissects and differentiates; it breaks the fluid and analogue formats of traditional thought and creates distinct boundaries that clearly delineate territories of specialization. The traditional pretense of religious leaders to be authorities in all aspects of life was now shifting towards a more specialized focus on restricted and well-defined areas of expertise. In other words, the traditional well-rounded sage was challenged by the growing importance of the liberal intellectual or technocratic expert. Until the tenth century, Talmudic and Midrashic literature represented an all-inclusive body of knowledge dealing with life in its entirety. The appearance of signed books can be seen as a new indication of the empowerment of the individual vis-à-vis traditional forms of social embeddedness. Saadia’s \textit{Beliefs and}
Opinions, Bahya ibn Paquda’s Duties of the Hearts, Solomon ibn Gabirol’s Fons Vitae, Halevi’s Kuzari, Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed, and later Joseph Albo’s Ikkarim are some of the better-known examples, but there existed hundreds of others signed books that emerged as part of this new influx of individual creativity.

The medium of discourse in the Middle Ages was therefore characterized by a proliferation of books dealing with various topics. Blumenthal is aware of the sociological implications of these changes when he notes that “these genres became the marketplace for ideas. They were the sociological reality of medieval Jewish intellectuality. And, interestingly, almost all these books are signed, a procedure not common in late antiquity.” It is apparent that Jewish thinkers, beginning in the Geonic period, found themselves in a new reality where modes of communication and knowledge were rapidly changing. On the social level we witness a structural shift towards the growing autonomy of the individual. Rather than a univocal and communal rabbinical voice, the main representatives of this new cultural ambience were individual intellectuals who promoted diverging and contending philosophical and theological perspectives. A characteristic of these intellectuals was that they were “isolated individuals” most of them were autodidacts operating independently from rabbinic institutions or communal restrictions. They could have been rabbis but also doctors or merchants who were immersed in secular non-religious knowledge such as logic, science, poetry, polemics, grammar, as well as theology.

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472 Ibid.
3.5.2 Allegorical and Mystical Hermeneutics

I have already mentioned the differing hermeneutical inclinations, allegorical and symbolic, of rationalists and mystics respectively. Here I will briefly mention the social implications of these exegetical approaches. The Talmudic dictum “the Torah speaks in the language of humans,” which was originally meant to restrict the role of interpretation, was appropriated by philosophers as a tool for legitimizing an allegorical elucidation of scripture. Saadia represents an initial phase in which figurative interpretations were applied to “problematic” parts of Jewish scripture. But as Judaism began to endorse increasingly rationalist approaches to religious exegesis, more radical non-literal approaches came to the fore. These new hermeneutical methods became most apparent in the allegorical interpretations of medieval philosophers, most importantly Maimonides. The allegorical approach functioned as a potent strategy for eliminating literalism; crude anthropomorphic features in the bible could now be explained as having an alternative meaning - only one alternative meaning. It is important to stress the hermeneutic rigidity of the allegorical method, which offers very little place for disagreement. Although the allegorical perspective advocated by philosophers did not prevent a communal dialogue, it certainly turned intellectual discourse into a more confrontational and polemical

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David Shatz, “The biblical and rabbinic background to medieval Jewish philosophy,” p. 21; pp. 25-26. The Philosophers begin to construct methodologies for how and when figurative interpretations are legitimate. Saadia offered four parameters: a) contradiction with reason, b) opposition to experience, c) contravenes with accepted tradition, and d) contradiction with other verses. In all these cases a non-literal interpretation was legitimate. Maimonides constructs more lenient parameters. The figurative interpretation of Jewish scripture can be traced back to Philo of Alexandria.
domain in which each philosopher offers a ‘monosemic’ interpretation. Idel claims that “What is quintessential for Maimonides’ allegorical mode is the belief that it is possible to find out the one ‘correct’ allegorical meaning, a presupposition anchored in Aristotelian noetics.” Such a hermeneutic undermined the typically communal discourse of the Talmudic paradigm since it made it almost impossible to harmonize diverging opinions and reach wide consensus. In other words, the traditional flexibility and suggestiveness of classical Judaism was replaced by an uncompromising search for conclusive truths.

The conservative Jewish authorities who were nurtured by the multi-vocal and inclusive methodologies of the Talmud, soon became aware of the inherent dangers that allegory presented. The analytic stress on individual opinion was potentially detrimental to communal cohesion. Disagreements among members of the same community exposed the contingent and arbitrary nature of truth and encouraged individuals to explore scripture on the basis of intellectual integrity and rational suspicion. This led to the worrisome marginalization of traditional values in favor of objectivity and reason. This is where Kabbalists managed to offer a creative solution. The symbolic hermeneutic they introduced was efficient for two reasons; it both managed to offer a more suggestive and less rigid interpretation of scripture, while simultaneously providing Judaism with an effective exegetical tool for the reinterpretation of the outdated rabbinic paradigm.

Medieval mystics were very much part of the new individualistic trends of the age; they authored books, treatises, and argued with their opponents about the true meaning of

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475 Ibid.
scripture. They also broke into contending factions and offered solutions that clearly diverged from the traditional Jewish worldview. But as Kabbalah developed and matured mystics managed to reach a growing consensus regarding the general meaning of the sefirot. They offered a communally accepted symbolic hermeneutic that invited participation and mitigated the probability of irresolvable disputes. Therefore, we witness an initial and inevitable phase of creative individualism that was followed by the emergence of the zoharic paradigm, which returned to a more traditional and inclusive ethos. Here again, we see dynamic of appropriation and subordination; kabbalists followed the analytic inclination towards individual creativity and polemics on the one hand, and the subordination of those borrowings to a communal discourse that resonated with traditional norms on the other.

3.5.3 Methodological Changes and the Democratization of Knowledge

The dangers of rationalism became apparent when many philosophical works of the Geonic period were written with almost no allusions to traditional Jewish sources. These were the first indications of the disturbing independence of philosophy from the communally oriented body of tradition. The ability to do philosophy without taking past authority into account pointed to the unique and threatening features of the Greek tradition. The first signs of disregarding traditional methodologies in Geonic writings reached an ever-disturbing level in Maimonides’ work. One of the harshest critiques ever leveled at Maimonides was directly targeting his disregard for traditional authority and

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476 Dan, Toldot Torat Ha’sod, vol. 4, p. 23.
the neglect of precedent in advancing new arguments. The Rabad, one of the greatest talmudists of the age, the head of the first circle of Provençal Kabbalist, and the most important critic of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, was appalled by the latter’s scholarly conceit. Important Talmudists such as Rabbi Moses ha-Kohen, Rabbi Moses of Coucy, Rabbi Asher b. Yehiel, and Hasdai Crescas all supported the Rabad in this condemnation and leveled their own dissatisfaction with the way philosophers failed to reference their sources. Maimonides’ divergence from traditional models of citation was both an attempt to present knowledge as a clean slate and a way to simplify theology and make it more accessible to readers. The Rabad’s famous response to Maimonides’ rational methodology was vehement:

He intended to improve but did not improve, for he forsook the way of all authors who preceded him. They always adduced proof for their statements and cited the proper authority for each statement…. Now, therefore, I do not know why I should reverse my tradition or my corroborative views because of the compendium of this author…. Moreover, there are matters concerning which the Geonim disagree and this author has selected the opinion of one and incorporated it in his compendium. Why should I rely upon his choice when it is not acceptable to me and I do not know whether the contending authority is competent to differ or not. It can only be that overbearing spirit of his.

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477 In spite of his extensive scholarship the Rabad is best known as *Ba’al ha’Hassagot*, ‘the author of the critiques to Maimonides *Mishneh Torah*. The Rabad’s critique became an indispensable part of the *Mishneh Torah* and since the 1509 edition the two have been printed together. See Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres*, p. 126.

478 Last *hassagah* by the Rabad in the introduction to Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*. See Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres*, p. 131. It is significant that in a historical perspective, the Rabad’s critique proved successful; he managed to initiate a commentarial tradition that supplemented the *Mishneh Torah*, beginning with his own *hassagot* (critiques), thereby functioning as a corrective to its anti-communal tendencies. In other words, while Maimonides’ codification sought to downplay the necessity of tedious Talmudic dialectics, ironically, the *Mishneh Torah* itself “became the focus of endless dialectics and debates over halakhic problems
Maimonides’ radical deviation from conventional formats of scholarship was offensive to a tradition that prided itself on uninterrupted historical continuity. Reading the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, however, it seems that Maimonides, at least initially, was doing exactly the contrary; the first pages of the work are dedicated to an almost obsessive recording of traditional Jewish genealogies of transmission. What soon becomes apparent, however, is that this genealogical section is somewhat of a lip service since it was immediately succeeded by an audacious step in a radically anti-traditionalist direction. Maimonides state:

> Therefore, I have called this text, *Mishneh Torah* ["the second to the Torah," with the intent that] a person should first study the Written Law, and then study this text and comprehend the entire Oral Law from it, without having to study any other text between the two.  

Not only did he refrain from alluding to past authorities Maimonides went as far as claiming that the whole tradition between the Mishnah and his own *Mishneh Torah* was no longer essential. It is not surprising that Jewish authorities of the time found this extremely disturbing. They were further angered by the presumptuousness of the title *Mishneh Torah*, literally the ‘second Torah.’ Even today the names *Yad Ha Chazaka* (*The Strong Hand*), or Simply *Ha Rambam* (Maimonides’ Hebrew acronym) are preferred.  

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480 The ‘Yad’ in *Yad Ha Chazaka* stands for the numerical value of fourteen, the number of chapters in the *Mishneh Torah*.  

- on what sources Maimonides based his decision, on how he interpreted a sugiya, whether he interpreted it correctly, and so on.” Instead of diminishing the attention given to pilpul and long halakhic debates, the *Mishneh Torah* only intensified the convoluted scholasticism that Maimonides sought to eliminate. Halbertal, *People of the Book*, p. 108.
Maimonides followed a typically rationalist approach; he decontextualized Jewish law from the inaccessible, obscure, and highly specialized format of Talmudic pilpul. His detachment of conclusions from their long argumentative processes and his presentation of conclusions in a clear, decisive language signified a far-reaching democratization of Jewish law, considered by many as the most revolutionary feature of the Mishneh Torah. The democratization of Talmudic rulings can be seen as a groundbreaking shift from a communal format of scholarship, deeply embedded in the minutiae of past knowledge and almost always mediated by rabbinical authorities, towards a model that was available to the common individual. Thanks to the Mishneh Torah ordinary Jews no longer needed religious specialists to guide them in every action; Maimonides empowered the individual and simultaneously challenged the power base of traditional authority. As Halbertal notes “paradoxically, anchoring the Talmud with an orderly and decisive code like the Mishneh Torah opens the way for its [Talmud] decline as a text to be studied.” Maimonides did not merely make Judaism more accessible by presenting it in the form of clear, concise, and readable conclusions, but he was also adamant in writing the Mishneh Torah in Hebrew, a decision that seemed strange to

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481 The Mishneh Torah became a model for Joseph Karo’s classic Shulchan Aruch; in both cases the authors offer common people a text that is clear, concise, and systematic. The tradition of simplifying the Talmud can be traced back to R’ Isaac Alfasi’s (1013-1103) Sefer Ha’Halakhot, also known as Talmud Katan (Small Talmud). As in the Guide, R’ Alfasi focused on Halakhic conclusions without the surrounding pilpul, he also got rid of all the Aggadic portions and non-legal elements.

482 Halbertal, People of the Book, p. 104. See pp. 104-106 for more on Maimonides’ radical view regarding the future abandonment of the Talmud and the adoption of his Mishneh Torah.
many of his contemporaries. This act of translation from the original mix of Aramaic and Hebrew was yet another devise that helped Maimonides reinterpret the Talmud on his own terms. The Rabad, was unhappy with this divergence from the traditional model; he claimed that Maimonides “speaks to the people in a different tongue and he changes the language of our sages.” The Rabad, advocated a return to the original combination of Hebrew and Aramaic, and warned that Maimonides, in translating the Aramaic to Hebrew, distorted the original meaning of the sages.

There is yet an even more important aspect to the elimination of Aramaic from the Mishneh Torah. The Hebrew text made Jewish law more accessible to readers who were not versed in Aramaic, a language that was by then exclusively literary and no longer in oral use. Getting rid of exclusive scholarly features reflects another example of the tension between those who offered to open the traditional body of knowledge to a wider audience, and conservative talmudists who sought to deny its accessibility to the rank and file. I think it would be wrong to assume that conservatives such as the Rabad represented nothing but the selfish interests of a jealous elite. Instead, I would argue that the antagonistic orthodox reaction reflected a genuine concern for Judaism’s ability to protect itself in the highly progressive, cosmopolitan, and heretical atmosphere of twelfth and thirteenth-century Europe.

And finally beyond the Mishneh Torah per-se Maimonides invested the individual with an intellectual autonomy, and freedom of judgment that was unprecedented in

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484 From the Rabad’s Hassagot, Twersky, *Rabad*, p. 171.
Jewish history. His radical demand that the individual use his own intellect to scrutinize the sacred texts and reach conclusions based on reason is astonishing, even form a modern perspective:

At each point the student must ask whether a sacred text is to be taken literally or figuratively, whether it complies with reason or whether it does not. If it does not, he must revise his interpretation to bring the text back into line with what is known to be true.485

Such intellectual autonomy did not stop in matters pertaining to interpretation and exegesis; it became especially obvious in the domain of contemplation and spiritual perfection.

3.5.4 Cognitive Individualism

The shift towards greater individualism became apparent in several ways. The disregard for past scholarship represented a break with communal modes of discourse; the simplification and democratization of knowledge reflected the empowerment of the individual; and the emergence of signed and specialized books represented the development of new forms of intellectual authority. These methodological transformations were indeed groundbreaking, but the shift towards a new form of individualism was equally apparent in the contents of rational philosophy. In the Guide of the Perplexed Maimonides promoted a form of individualism that was supported by an elaborate and highly advanced Neo-Aristotelian cosmology. Although Maimonides’ prioritization of the secluded individual over the social sphere troubled Jews long before

485 Kenneth Seeskin, Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy, pp. 96-97.
the publication of the Guide in 1191, this work represented the culmination of the
tensions between rabbinic orthodoxy and the Greek analytic paradigm.

How exactly Maimonides diverged from traditional norms can be understood by
contrasting him with the conservative voice of Judah Halevi. In stark opposition to the
rationalistic stance, Halevi located the resilience of the Judaism in its prioritization of the
group over the individual. Yitzhak Shilat notes that Halevi’s ‘organism metaphor,’
continually reminds us that the individual, like an organ of a body, has no movement or
freedom that is detached from the body which guides and controls it. Halevi’s Inyan
Elohi or ‘divine order’ is seen as the fundamental characteristic of the divine body of
Israel, a robust and eternal entity composed of replaceable and ephemeral individual
components. This ‘organism’ maintains and preserves its sanctity in spite of sporadic
misdeeds on behalf of individual members.

Halevi’s communally oriented theology is reversed in the Guide to a substantially
different paradigm that sees the social entity as a platform for the perfection of the

\footnote{Shilat, Ben ha’Kuzari la Rambam, p. 211.}
\footnote{Halevi actually believed that prior to Sinai the inyan elohi was an attribute of individuals
beginning with Adam, through exceptional figures such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
Starting with the sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes, this formerly individualistic ‘divine spark’
turned into a social attribute of the Jews as a whole. See Kuzari, ch. 1, p. 47. Halevi attacked the
unreliable transmission of information form individual to individual, claiming that the Talmud
provides a more robust mechanism of communal transmission where information is safely
communicated from ‘many to many.’ This is an important distinction between the Greek and the
Hebraic worlds. The former sees the evolution of knowledge in individualistic terms: Homer,
Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are put on the pedestal rather than a certain group of people let
alone a generation. The Jewish paradigm, on the other hand, sees this evolution as preceding
through a communal lineage: from the elders to the prophets and from the prophets on to the
Great Assembly, the Tannaim, the Amoraim, the Geonim, the Rishonim, and all the way to the
present.}
individual. In Maimonides’ eyes society serves one’s basic needs and therefore facilitates a life that is not preoccupied with survival, but oriented towards spiritual fulfillment and individual self-cultivation. In spite of the fact that the community remained central, Maimonidean thought was undermining a highly communal worldview that orthodox Jewish authorities saw as the foundation for national and ethnic self-preservation. The individualistic theology of Maimonides led to what is known as the first Maimonidean controversy, a dispute that was focused on the nature of resurrection. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides advanced a quintessentially Greek perspective in which the soul, rather than the body, is the human aspect that survives death. The Maimonidean soul was a rational soul that was nourished and enriched by the perfection of the intellect. The soteriological ramifications of such a theory were devastating; the traditional Jewish perspective perceived resurrection in physical terms, thereby avoiding the rationalistic aversion towards the body and matter. Maimonides challenged this deeply ingrained sensitivity by detaching the Jew from her familiar genetic heritage. This severing of our mental faculties from our biological origins and the prioritization of the former over the latter was a cause for concern. Before Maimonides, Jewish believers could rest assured that they would be resurrected by virtue of being members of a holy group, regardless of their intellectual competence. Maimonides’ theory of resurrection, as well as his theory of prophecy, diverts one’s attention towards the thinking subject, and

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489 Ibid., pp. 211-212.
the perfection of one’s rational faculties.490 As Halbertal notes “What remains in the afterlife is the impersonal body of knowledge a person gained in his life on earth; In Aristotelian terminology, what remains is the person’s active Intellect.”491 Attacking Maimonides’ mentalistic-intellectualist stance of resurrection the famous Rashba asked “are the pious men of Israel without philosophy not worthy of an afterlife?”492

The almost solipsistic privacy involved in human self-realization becomes clear in Maimonides’ description of man’s four perfections. After explaining the perfection of wealth (property, shelter, clothing etc.), bodily perfection (health, strength etc.), and moral perfection, Maimonides goes on to describe the final and highest level of accomplishment:

The fourth kind is the true human perfection; that is the attainment of rational virtues. By this I mean, of course, the conception of ideas which lead to correct opinions on metaphysical matters. This is the ultimate purpose, and this is the one which bestows upon man true perfection, being peculiar to him alone. It brings him eternal life, and by it man is man… this last perfection, however, belongs to yourself exclusively, and no one else has any share in it.493

Maimonides’ individualism is therefore rooted in a larger metaphysical picture that perceives the cosmos as an intelligible domain accessible to individuals by virtue of their

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490 In the Essay (Epistle) on Resurrection (Igeret tehi’yat ha’metim, 1173) Maimonides changes his view but he nevertheless insists that after a period in which the body and soul unite there will be an additional separation of the two in which the soul will remain alone.

491 Halbertal, op. cit., 109. [my italics].

492 In Minhat Kenaot (Jealous Offerings), which includes a compilation of a series of epistles attributed to the Rashba. The Rashba’s attack was directed at Samuel the Sulami the author of Livnat Chen. For more see Halbertal People of the Book, pp. 109-124 and p. 176 n. 77.

intellectual capacities. This is a classical example of cognitive-individualism in which self-realization involves the harmonization of the epistemic microcosm with a metaphysical macrocosm. This quote from the Guide highlights the fact that it is only through the perfection of rational virtue that the human being can win eternal life and truly realize her or his humanity. Indeed, the ability to enter the next world was predominantly an individual endeavor rather than a consequence of ethnic or national affiliation. The construction of private channels for self-realization in Judaism, so characteristic of analytic paradigms, represented the emergence of a new potential for religious expression in relative isolation from the community. As Kenneth Seeskin notes, “the reason rational virtue is the highest perfection is that it pertains to us not as animals or as social beings but as individuals.”

In many fundamental issues, the Kuzari and the Guide have come to represent two opposing sensibilities in the medieval Jewish world. Their contrasting standpoints regarding the individual and society is a clear representation of the internal tensions Judaism was experiencing during this age of crisis. As Shilat puts it:

in the Kuzari the main weight is invested in the community, the whole of Israel, in which the ‘divine order’ (inyan eloḥi), after a long hereditary process, was made manifest and never ceased ever since. This is the topic that occupied the Kuzari. The importance of the individuals, even “the virtuous of the virtuous”, is secondary. In Maimonides this picture is reversed: the main point of interest is the perfection of the individual. The stress on the “Nation that knows G-d and worships him” is secondary. The Kuzari deals with history and this world. Maimonides deals with the individual’s connection to a spiritual world, the next world.

494 Seeskin, Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy, p. 95 [my italics].
495 Shilat, op. cit., p. 219.
Therefore, while Halevi would contend that the only way to reach perfection is to operate within the organism of a holy nation, Maimonides provides us with a worldview that located perfection and self-fulfillment in the intellect of the individual agent. For the first time in Jewish history a form of cognitive individualism emerged in which the perfection of the intellect is perceived as the highest human virtue; according to Maimonides this is a human potential that “reaches its climax in the knowledge of God, and this knowledge is private, not social.”

3.6 THE KABBALISTIC REACTION

One of the most unique features of medieval Jewish mysticism was its ability to construct mentalistic and meditational techniques for individual exploration while simultaneously integrating these private procedures into a form of communal mysticism. Since I will dedicate a separate section to the introspective features of Kabbalah, here I will simply give a few examples of the type of cognitive-individualism that emerged in Kabbalah. I will then move to examine the unique communal features of this mysticism and the ways in which it managed to curtail the individualistic tendencies of philosophy.

3.6.1 Cognitive Individualism in Kabbalah

Growing individualistic trends in Judaism between the tenth and thirteenth-centuries meant that any successful theology had to provide its members with advanced channels for individual exploration. The ability of new elites to distance themselves from

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496 Ibid., p. 212 [my translation and italics.]
centers of power entailed the emergence of a greater demand to satisfy one’s private
spiritual needs. Since Muslims and Christians had already successfully introduced many
Neoplatonic and Aristotelian features to the monotheistic worldview, Jewish philosophers
had a fairly clear model for operation; rationalists therefore led the way in constructing
individual modes of contemplation. Kabbalists built their own models upon “the
insights, categories, and structures” of rational philosophy, in which features such as
prophecy were internalized and conceived in mentalistic and introspective terms.

Philosophical techniques of deep concentration later developed into the Kabbalistic
notion of kavannah (intention). The practice of Kavannah infused Jewish traditional
liturgy with a contemplative dimension that allowed a person to explore both the recesses
of his own soul, and the inner structure of the divine realm. Such practices would

497 Judaism entered the High Middle Ages in Europe in a disadvantage compared to Christianity
and Islam, which preceded it in adopting and accommodating their spiritual world to the
ideally lead to a state of *devekuth* (cleaving, clinging) in which the mystic would reach a highly intimate relationship with God.

The concepts of the soul that emerged among theurgic Kabbalists provides another example of new analytic dispositions that entered the Zohar and were devised in response to Maimonidean philosophy. While the body as a vehicle for the performance of the commandments remained central for medieval mystics, the Zohar adopted new Platonic and Gnostic analytic tendencies that glorified the mental aspects of existence. Kabbalists believed the soul was superior to the polluted body; they saw the soul as an “eternal substance that preexists the body… capable of surviving the death of the body, provided the embodied person manages his or her affairs correctly throughout life.” The soul’s function is to control the body’s inherent proclivity towards sin; but humans can purify their souls through the bodily performance of the commandments. This process of purification is reminiscent of Maimonides’ theory, with the important difference that it was not achieved through intellectual cognition but rather through the physical performance of the commandments. These new approaches among Kabbalists gave growing attention to the mental aspects of the individual represented by a typically analytic distinction between the body and the soul, but they did this by anchoring the perfection of the abstract soul in an embodied behavioral procedure that safeguarded the role of the body and ritual in religious life.


Kabbalah therefore provided Jews with an unprecedented opportunity to engage in a highly complex form of spirituality with private dimensions, which included meditational techniques and the use of one’s cognitive resources. As opposed to the highly somatic and scholastic practices of traditional rabbinism, a more intimate and mentalistic relationship between man and God emerged in Kabbalah.\(^{501}\) Perhaps the most important point for our topic is that instead of the philosophical trivialization of the commandments, Kabbalists reinforced traditional rabbinic practices such that the central position of liturgy and the following of the commandments remained unchanged.\(^{502}\)

Pertinent to the morphological divide between social autonomy and social embeddedness is that the new introspective practices introduced by Kabbalists did not encourage detaching oneself from the communal body; on the contrary, theurgy, \textit{kavannah}, and \textit{devekuth} were all embedded in a highly restrictive and communal mystical practice. Although phenomenologically a new introspective horizon opened before the mystic,

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\(^{501}\) The Notion of \textit{kavannah} features in Rabbinic literature but it seems to lack the contemplative aspects of the Kabbalistic \textit{kavannah}. The Talmud’s \textit{Masechet Berachot} discusses \textit{kavannah} where it is perceived as a state of sincerity in following the commandments. Scholem \textit{Ha Kabbalah bi Provence}, p. 78. Scholem argues that in the classical Rabbinical tradition and the great works of Talmud and midrash there are no contemplative elements. Midrash and Talmud, he argues, are sources anchored in an “active life” (vita activa) and not a contemplative life which seek to understand higher concepts and ideals. ibid., pp. 75. As opposed to the ascent of the Heikhalot mystic who physically found himself in the celestial realm, in Kabbalah we see a psychological ascent. Scholem, ibid., pp. 14-5. Although rabbinical forms of theurgy were not related to introspective techniques there did seem to exist a form of physical theurgy based on the performance of the commandments. This was transported in Kabbalah to the mental sphere. See Idel, \textit{New Perspectives}, pp. 156-199; Idem, \textit{Enchanted Chains}, pp. 165-168; Jonathan Garb, \textit{Hofaatav Shel Ha-Koah Ba-Mistikah Ha-Yehudit: Mi-Sifrut Hazal Ad Kabalat Tsefat} (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), pp. 28-46; Idem, ‘Kinds of Power: Rabbinic texts and the Kabbalah’, Kabbalah 6 (2001), pp. 45-71, (29); Yair Lorberbaum, \textit{Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah [Hebrew]} (Tel Aviv: Schoken Publishing House, 2004).

\(^{502}\) Scholem was struck by the fact that Kabbalists did not devise prayers of their own. This is another indication of the deep conservative streak of Kabbalah.
behaviorally the communal features of Judaism endured and were even intensified. The
new spiritual practices mystics devised did not create a gap between the kabbalista and
common Jews in respect to the actual implementation of the commandments and the
participation in communal activity. From this perspective, although mystics were doing
much more than mechanically performing the commandments, there was nothing about
their behavior that made them seem distinct from the community. Yosef ben Shlomo adds
that unlike the elitist perspectives harbored by philosophers, Kabbalistic theology could
be interpreted on many different levels of sophistication, which enabled Kabbalah to be
disseminated among intellectual elites as well as on a very popular level.  

Similarly, according to Idel, Kabbalah’s “conjunctive” theology in which Ein-Sof is linked to the
realm of matter through a process of emanation was reflected socially in the way mystics
seemed to forge a more intimate and unmediated relationship with commoners.

While mysticism is usually associated with the secluded individual such as the
Christian and Buddhist monk, or the Hindu ascetic, here we see a very uncommon
perspective in which practices such a kavannah were exercised in the name of the
community as a whole. Although individual intentions were important, the restoration of
the divine realm was first and foremost a communal effort of groups of Kabbalists who
prayed in concert. Not only did Kabbalistic circles ideally operated in groups but they
saw themselves as representing the yearnings and metaphysical role of a whole nation.
This communal perspective meant that the position of the Shaliach Tzibur, the person

leading the prayer and the *kavannot* (intentions) of other members, became of central importance. Similarly establishing a quorum for prayer became all the more important for kabbalists since the concerted exercise of communal intentions was seen as far superior to the practice of *kavannah* in solitude. It is this peculiar communal dimension that gave Kabbalah its unique character among the mystical traditions of other world religions.

### 3.6.2 Literary Formats

I argued above that the in spite of its incorporation of many analytical features, the *Zohar* returned to a narrative and Midrashic formulation characteristic of traditional rabbinic discourse. Here I would like to highlight how the communal ethos promoted by kabbalists is reflected in the *Zohar*’s returned to a form of discourse open to various interpretations rather than one uncompromising truth. Scholem’s original reconstruction of the *Zohar* as a “book” authored by a single person (Moshe de Leon) has been challenged by his student Yehuda Liebes and more recently by scholars such as Ronit Meroz, Daniel Abrams, and Boaz Huss. Abrams, for instance, contends that far from

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505 Scholem, *Ha Kabbalah bi Provence*, pp. 76-79.
being a book, the Zohar should be seen as a *literary phenomenon* or even a series of literary phenomena.\(^{507}\) Instead of looking at the Zohar as a distinct and well-defined work, we should treat it as a general discourse or worldview that was gradually institutionalized beginning at the end of the thirteenth century. Indeed, Lurianic Kabbalah, Sabbateanism, the Hasidic movement, and more recently the influential Kabbalah of R’ Yehuda Ashlag are only some examples of how the Zohar as a ‘literary phenomenon’ continues to operate as a general discourse that allowed divergent interpretations. Even the first 1558 Mantua publication did not lead to its finality; zoharic discourse with its symbolic ambiguity persevered as a platform for varying ideas and approaches; a pluralism that enabled Jewish thinkers to update their ideas in respect to changing circumstance. While the Zohar represents a fairly distinct vision of the universe and man’s relation to God, it also invites participation and re-interpretation. Elliot Wolfson notes that “recognition of plurivocality does not undermine the soundness of

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\(^{507}\) Abrams notes that the Zohar is a literary phenomenon “which, depending on the definition, could include numerous authors or contributors to its literary creation… The Zohar could also just as easily be considered a literary phenomenon whose chronological boundaries cannot be limited to the Castilian kabbalists…” Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, p. 424.
positing a uniform world-view; on the contrary, heterogeneity may itself be
demonstrative of a shared perspective...one can posit several authors of a treatise—even
straddling centuries—and continue to speak of a unifying factor; indeed, one might make
the case on hermeneutical grounds that it is precisely the unifying factor that allows for
diversity.”

The prevalence of alternative hermeneutic techniques that emerged between the
tenth and thirteenth-centuries reflect the Jewish tradition’s urgent need to furnish
scripture with new interpretations. As opposed to the allegoric stance of the philosophers,
kabbalists chose a symbolic discourse that provided “loose” parameters of meaning and
interpretation. Idel contends that “by the intermediacy of its symbolism theosophical
[theurgic] Kabbalah operates as a unifying ideology,” he opposes this to ecstatic
Kabbalah, which was oriented towards the isolated individual and neglected the social
structure. Again, as mentioned earlier, Idel argues that the key to the Zohar’s ability to
revitalize Judaism was that as opposed to the elitist perspective of philosophers and the
school of ecstatic Kabbalah, the Zohar “was intended from the outset for a double
audience” the ordinary Jew as well as confined circles of mystics. Here again, as in the
case of prayer and the commandments, the zoharic text permits a more broad
participation, one that invites both mystics and commoners to engage the text.

508 Elliot Wolfson, “Zoharic Literature and Midrashic Temporality,” in Michael Fishbane and
Joanna Weinberg ed. Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations, pp. 324-5; idem.,
‘Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and
Discontinuity in Kabbalistic Tradition,’ Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies, 6
509 Idel, New Perspectives, p. 206 [my brackets]. Theosophical Kabbalah is another name for the
school of the theurgical Kabbalah.
510 Ibid., p. 209.
The groundbreaking changes introduced by Kabbalists represent the emergence of a radically innovative discourse, indeed a new worldview, but in no way did these changes encourage members to depart from the communal body or from the traditional family structure. On the contrary, ritual within the family, marital relations, and procreation were reinforced with a new theological foundation. Beginning with the *Bahir*, Kabbalistic theology introduced to Judaism the notion of transmigration, in which “a man or a woman who voluntarily decides to be childless may suffer transmigration for not having fulfilled the biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply.”\(^{511}\) The Kabbalah became replete with family-related symbolism in which “the organic structure of the *sefirot* is often described symbolically as a family composed of Father, a Mother, a Son, and a Daughter, Bride, and Bridegroom, Husband and Wife.\(^{512}\) In *Tiqqunei Zohar*, creation is supported by the union of the *sefirot*, which are symbolized by family members.\(^{513}\) The goal of unity in the *sefirotic* realm symbolized by family members suggests that the unity and integrity of the traditional Jewish family remains central and is even intensified in Kabbalistic theology. Cosmic harmony is directly associated with the family unit, sexual activity, and procreation. Kabbalah, through its successful synthesis of personal and communal features, managed to absorb both analytic and synthetic elements. Kabbalists adopted Greek forms of introspection while simultaneously

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\(^{513}\) The son is an outcome of the union of father and mother, while the union of mother and daughter represented by the *sefirot* Binah and Malchut represent the coming together of two letters (H -heh) in the Tetragrammaton (YHWH). The union of these two letters is facilitated by the letter ‘vav’ (W) which represents the son. *Tiqqunei Zohar, Tiqqun* 69, 99a. See Idel, *Ascensions on High*, p. 89.
constructing a social mysticism that highlighted the centrality of the community and family life. They thereby carved a new space for spiritual autonomy while safeguarding and reinforcing their traditional forms of social embeddedness.

The unique balancing of radicalism and conservatism was what enabled Kabbalists to outstrip both philosophical and mystical strands with a rationalist bent such as ecstatic Kabbalah. They revolutionized prayer by infusing it with a new mental procedure, while they simultaneously preserved prayer's communal orientation. The ability of theurgists to devise new forms of “cognitive individualism” while at the same time insisting that prayer and the commandments remain ‘externally’ unchanged was a typical example of the appropriation of tools from analytic modes of operation and their subordination to those of the synthetic modality. While philosophical allegory was undermining the physical commandments and their function as a unifying mode of action, theurgists presented the commandments as having an unprecedentedly central cosmological function thereby preserving ritual as an inalienable factor of Jewish communal life. Kabbalists believed that the common Jew could continue following the commandments without any change in behavior or old habits; mere performance, although somewhat inferior, was sufficient and entailed cosmic ramifications of which the simple-minded person was not even aware. And finally, the Zohar, due to its unique literary characteristics and symbolic approach avoided a finalized dogmatic theology and invited communal participation.

514 Ibn Bahya Paquda’s Duties of the Hearts was the main influence on Maimonides’ stress on belief in the following of the commandments. See Seeskin, Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy, p. 90.
3.7 THE CULTURAL LEVEL

3.7.1 Contemplation vs. Praxis

In the last section I looked at the relationship between sociality and the new contemplative features promoted by medieval Jewish philosophers and mystics. I argued that the emergence of new forms of cognitive-individualism equipped Jews with unprecedented channels for personal fulfillment. Such changes were a reflection of a move from the typical communalism of classical Judaism to a more individualistic approach. Here I will look at the conflict between these growing spiritualistic trends and the synthetic modality’s emphasis on ritual performance or orthopraxy.

As argued in the second chapter, classical Judaism was mainly a tradition of deeds and action; the main religious activity was not oriented towards introspection or the construction of abstract cosmological notions, but rather biologically expressed through concrete behavioral patterns and the meticulous following of the commandments. In the rabbinic view the mitzvot were seen as a reflection of God’s will such that they were a goal in and of themselves, rather than a means to an end, as medieval philosophers argued. The commandments were taken for granted such that rabbis never felt compelled to provide a systematic explanation for why Jews had to follow them. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, this old paradigm changed and led to the emergence of an influential literature known as Ta’améi ha Mitzvot (reasons for the commandments). The fact that this new body of literature dedicated to exploring the

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underlying meaning of the commandments came to the fore reflects the historical changes that Judaism was undergoing during this period. Bahya ibn Paquda’s highly influential *Duties of the Heart* (1080) began to shift the tradition towards a stronger emphasis on the mental facets of ritual in which the ‘intentions of the heart’ were seen as superior to external physical deeds.\(^{516}\)

Bahya’s Neoplatonic stance reflected an escalating conflict between body and spirit in medieval Judaism. Greek philosophy, especially in its Platonic versions, promoted a worldview in which there was a progression from the lower and problematic world of material towards the sublime spiritual sphere of the divine. This fundamental logic reflects the typical Greek prioritization of the mental over the material aspects of existence.\(^{517}\) One of the central dilemmas medieval Jews faced was the following question: if religious perfection was measured according to one’s distance from the world of material, how can one remain committed to the performance of physical deeds? Early Neoplatonic philosophers dealt with this dilemma by claiming that deeds were secondary to sincerity, a perspective that challenged the rote performance of prescribed physical acts. The stance of Aristotelian philosophers was similar in that, they too, saw the physical act as a means to an end rather than a goal. Maimonides, for instance, was a strict opponent of the traditional view that saw divine will (the will that we follow the

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\(^{516}\) Some interpreters claim that Paquda went as far as suggesting that the physical act can be discarded. The common interpretation, however, is that his main goal was to bring together the inner and outer “duties;” the external duties of the body and the inner duties of the heart. The fact that Paquda’s spiritualistic approach was hardly criticized is a testimony of the strong anti-materialistic currents of the age.

\(^{517}\) Dan argues that “the concept of God as infinite and purely spiritual demanded that religious life emphasize the spiritual aspects rather than the practical and material ones.” *A very Short Introduction*, p. 53.
commandments) as superior to the commandments as vehicles of meaning. Since God operates according to order and reason, Maimonides argued, the commandments were certain to contain an intelligible meaning. In the rationalistic view the mitzvot were channels for improving welfare by promoting health, morality, and positive social habits, as well as a platform for intellectual self-realization. This compelled Jewish philosophers to attribute a specific meaning to each commandment, thereby leading Judaism down a slippery slope. As an example, if the commandments associated with keeping the Sabbath were merely a way to strengthen one’s belief in the biblical creation story, what would happen once one’s belief in creation became firm and unshakable? Would this not entail the redundancy of the physical act? As discussed earlier, the conventionalizing effects of philosophy were worrisome; conservatives were particularly concerned with the possible trivialization of the commandment. As Moshe Halbertal notes, “The line between allegorizing the biblical narrative and allegorizing the commandments is a fine one, and the allegorizers were accused of harboring a secret intention to cross that line.” The spiritualistic tendencies that entered Judaism were therefore presenting a real challenge to its deed-based theology. This conflict meant that

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519 Examples of philosophical allegory: philosophers believed that the Song of Songs was an allegory of the contact between the human rational soul and the active intellect and that Abraham and Sarah represented the Greek distinction between Form and Matter. They also argued that the Talmudic ma’aseh bereshit (work of creation) and ma’aseh merkabah (work of the chariot) really pointed to the study of physics and metaphysics.

520 Halbertal, *People of the Book*, p. 112.
the commandments occupied a central point of contention between competing schools of thought in medieval Judaism.

Following philosophers, once mystics constructed a more mature response to rationalism, they also began proposing their own unique interpretations to the mitzvot. As in the case of philosophers, a new suspicion towards carnality became very apparent in Kabbalah. Clear Gnostic influences as seen in the work of the Kohen brothers in Castile made it into the Zohar, which related the human body to the demonic other-side (sitra achra). Elliot Wolfson notes that under the influence of philosophy Kabbalists began to adopt “a negative view towards the corporeal body;” such inclinations meant that Jewish mystics “considered the contemplative life as a way to escape the bonds of carnality. This explains the adoption of ascetic forms of piety on the part of Kabbalists with special emphasis placed on sexual abstinence.”

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson notes that according to many Kabbalists the soul was in charge of controlling the corporeal body’s proclivity towards sin, a perspective that saw the body as inferior to the divine origin of the soul.

Therefore, just like philosophers, mystic had to provide solutions for why physical deeds still mattered. In order to understand these contrasting solutions, we must examine the new contemplative techniques philosophers and mystics devised.

Medieval thinkers, strongly influenced by the Greek paradigm, sought to construct a more sophisticated form of religiosity that gave the individual a more central position in religious life. Many of them wanted to shift the tradition from tedious

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orthopraxy towards a more spiritualized theology. In their search to embed contemplative
techniques in a monotheistic vision, philosophers began to redefine the phenomenon of
prophecy, which was interpreted in terms of one’s intellectual capacities. Like his
Muslim predecessors, Maimonides regarded the prophetic experience as a potential
equivalent to Greek forms of spiritual realization. For the first time a systematic method
based on the individual was formulated in which prophecy was stripped from its
supernatural implications and presented as an event governed by a logical procedure.
Although divine providence (hashgaha) remained important, prophecy was nevertheless
seen as an outcome of a concordance between the human intellect and the the part of the
divine that was accessible to humans – the active intellect. To a great extent, the very
fact that the attainment of prophecy involved a decipherable process rather than a sudden
miraculous event was in itself a striking innovation. The individual could now engage in
a spiritual exploration of the inner self, based on the refinement of one’s intellect. The
problem with the philosophical stance was that it trivialized the uniqueness of the Jewish
people by claiming that prophecy was a phenomenon accessible to all humans by virtue
of their common cognitive apparatus. This rational approach diminished the role of
divine will in the prophetic process. Even worse, although the commandments could
certainly contribute to the process of intellectual refinement, they did not seem to occupy

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523 Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *A Comparative History of World Philosophy: From the Upanishads to Kant* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). What the different philosophers, namely, Maimonides, Aquinas, Al-Farabi, Avicenna “conceive of prophecy is critical to their synthesis of reason and faith. It represents a strategy for distinguishing between the prophet and the philosopher.” pp. 327.

an indispensable role in reaching a prophetic level. It is this sense that philosophers saw
the commandments means rather than a goal.

In their reaction to philosophical theories of prophecy, Kabbalists sought to devise
their own contemplative techniques. As mentioned earlier, their solution was a unique
type of mystical intentions (*kavannah*). This new approach meant that through the
practice of intense mental concentration, the Jewish mystic could facilitate a more fluid
flow of divine energy (*shefa*) from the *Ein-Sof*, through the ten *sefirot*, and towards the
human sphere. Meditative prayer could therefore lead to the rectification of reality by
harmonizing the inner recesses of the Godhead. This brings us back to ritual; the genius
of the introspective approach advanced by kabbalists was that it was anchored in the
performance of the commandments and therefore represented a shift from dry orthopraxy
towards a more sophisticated meditative enactment of the *mitzvot*. The individual was no
longer performing the commandments because he was told to, but rather because their
performance was crucial for the preservation of the world. Just as philosophers
empowered the private person by offering introspective channels towards the attainment
of prophecy, so did Kabbalists empower believers by making them sustainers of cosmic
harmony. In both cases we see the emergence of contemplative techniques that were
centered upon the private person; the central difference being that the Kabbalistic stance
did not have a conventionalizing effect upon the commandments.

Owing to the ontological importance of the commandments, the Jewish body
remained indispensable in Kabbalistic theology. Although we saw that both philosophers
and mystics downgraded the position of physicality vis-à-vis the soul, unlike
philosophers, kabbalists proposed a process-oriented theology in which the body was implicated in a metaphysics of mutual resonance with the divine realm. Wolfson notes that for kabbalists “the separation from sensual matters is not seen as a way to obliterate the body—commitment to rabbinic ritual precluded such an unmitigated renunciation of the natural world…” Therefore together with the escalation of mentalism among kabbalists, we see an adamant protection of the classical rabbinic commitment to the body and ritual performance.

The Kabbalistic approach represented an extremely conservative understanding of the commandments. The starting point of mystics was that Jewish ritual must remain behaviorally unchanged. Kabbalists managed to strike a balance between adding a contemplative dimension to Jewish praxis while at the same time preserving the indisputable importance of rigorously following the commandments. In fact, the meticulous implementation of the commandments became more important than ever; the body of the Jew became an earthly channel to the attainment of divine harmony in the upper worlds. The resonance between the material body and the world of the sefirot gave the commandments an ontological significance and a resilience against the allegorizing tendencies of rationalists. The fact that the mitzvot were beyond human comprehension meant that they could not be changed in the slightest degree. This interpretation was so powerful and impervious to historical change that it still dominates the understanding of

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525 Wolfson, “The Body in the Text,” p. 493; The philosophical spiritualized interpretation of the afterlife finds a counterpart in the Kabbalah of R. Azriel where the body is perceived in terms of a punishment which leads to Gilgul. See more in Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, p. 112.
the commandments by many orthodox communities today. Instead of the philosophical belief that an act points to a specific meaning, the genius of theurgic Kabbalah was that the commandments could not be interpreted according to human reason. While nothing changed on the mundane, behavioral level, the same commandments that were traditionally followed by Jews had far reaching cosmological implications. This meant that common Jews did not have to worry about the elitist preoccupation with moral perfection or the refinement of the intellect; following the commandments in a literal way was sufficient as a religious duty.

Other indications of a favorable approach towards the body among kabbalists can be seen in the importance of the image of the divine anthropos, or *Adam Kadmon* (primordial man). As opposed to philosophers who launched a war against any sign of carnality and anthropomorphism in Jewish scripture, Kabbalists re-engaged the early mystical text of *Shiur Koma* (the divine dimensions), the same tradition that Maimonides so opposed. Although kabbalists abandoned the interest of early Jewish mystics in the awesome physical dimensions of God or in the possibility of visualizing God on his divine throne, they nevertheless integrated the image of the divine anthropos into their theology by interpreting it in a more symbolic and spiritualistic way. The centrality of God’s anthropomorphic features invested the human body with an ontological significance. Mystics understood this image as containing some of the most profound

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527 A critique of traditional anthropomorphism was one of the main goals of philosophers, especially Maimonides who dedicated large parts of his work, notably the beginning of the Guide to the allegorical reinterpretation of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic biblical passages. Kabbalists, on the other hand, interpreted anthropomorphism symbolically. In his introduction to
metaphysical insights regarding the nature of the divine, predicated upon a mysterious homology between the human body and the heavenly non-carnal “body” of God. David Ariel notes that “when the mystics speak of man as being created in the image of God, they literally mean that man is created as a microcosm and embodiment of the sefirot.\(^{528}\) The correlation between the divine structure and the human body resonated with the biblical idea that man (\textit{adam}) was created in the image (\textit{tzelem}) of God. This informed the basic Kabbalistic belief that the primordial anthropos created a link between the mundane and the divine realms. Far from being conventionalized, the body of the Jew suddenly takes on a metaphysical/ontological role that had a direct impact on the divine “limbs.” The well-known Kabbalistic dictum ‘\textit{evar machzik evar}’ (limb supports limb) represents a theurgic notion that stipulated a direct correlation between the human and divine limbs in which the former, through ritual action, supports the latter.\(^{529}\) Gershom Scholem noted that “Kabbalists were not embarrassed by their discourse on \textit{Shiur Koma}, on the contrary, they were honored by it, they frequently declare the relationship between their mystical theology and the \textit{Shiur Koma} tradition, and they did so with an air of pride

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\textit{Sha’arei Orah} Joseph Gikatilla state:”… all those instances in the Torah where we come across words such as hand and foot, ear and eye and so forth, what do they mean? Know and believe that all those matters although indicating His greatness and reality, there is no living thing that can comprehend or see such a hand and foot and ear and so on… do not assume, that an eye is in the shape of a real eye, or hand in the shape of a hand, these are internal matters, and the profoundest of the profound in discovering the reality of God’s existence blessed be He. Know that there is no relationship between our and His substance and image, but that the meaning of the shape of the limbs is that they are symbols, sublime matters, incomprehensible to human knowledge except through the imagination.” \textit{Sha’arei Orah}, p. 49 [my translation].
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\(^{528}\) Ariel, \textit{The Mystic Quest}, p. 140.

that mocked [philosophical] apologetics.” The point I would like to stress is that in spite of the clear contemplative techniques Kabbalists devised, features such as carnality, the body, and literal ritual performance were preserved and even intensified.

Kabbalah’s positive attitudes towards the body may also be discerned in the famous Iggeret ha Kodesh (The Holy Epistle) which criticized the negative Maimonidean stance towards corporeality and man’s sexual nature. In conformity with Judaism’s positive view towards procreation and the body, the author of the Iggeret presents sexual relations as a sacred, even mystical activity that has implications for the nature of one’s offsprings. The Greek discomfort with carnality, reflected in the Maimonidean position (following Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics), in which our tactile senses associated with drinking, eating, and sexual intercourse were seen as disgraceful, was harshly attacked by conservative rabbis. This short text treats the sexual act by using a typical Kabbalistic

530 Scholem, Pirkei Yesod behavanat hakabbalah ve simlei’ha (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1980), p. 174 [my translation].
532 Guide of the Perplexed part 2 Ch. 36. see Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics book 3 ch. 10.
symbolic dynamism between the male (hokmah - intellect) and the female (tvunah - wisdom) whose dialectical interaction is resolved in the unity of knowledge (da’at).

Instead of the common analytical distinction between the sublime soul and inferior body, the Iggeret’s author contends that everything about the human body was created in God’s exquisite wisdom “but being ignorant man attaches repulsiveness to that which is not repulsive.”

Finally, the Ramah, in the resurrection debate, was angered by Maimonides’ sharp distinction between body and soul, and the interpretation of the former as an impure impediment to perfection. In a response to Sheshet ben Isaac he states “in what way is the soul of righteous man superior to his body?… both have an equal share in his righteousness.”

As conservative defenders of the synthetic mindset, Kabbalists were determined to both spiritualize Judaism and to simultaneously safeguard the behavioral and ritualistic features of the rabbinic worldview. Indeed, one of the greatest tools Judaism ever had against assimilation was its peculiar way of action. As Roy Rappaport has taught us, the physical participation in ritual is one of the most unambiguous ways to affirm one’s commitment to a group. The Kabbalistic protection of physical deeds together with its new mentalistic approaches towards following the commandments is a fascinating

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533 Iggeret ha-Kodesh
534 Septimus, Hispano-Jewish Culture, pp. 58-59. Sheshet ben Isaac was a radical rationalist who defended the Maimonidean view of the afterlife in the first controversy of 1202. See the analysis of this phenomenon in Daniel Matt, "The Mystic and the Mizvot," in Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages, Arthur Green ed., pp. 372-382. Matt gathers together the polemical remarks of Joseph ben Todros Abulafia, Jacob ben Sheshet, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi and Moses de Leon, all of whom denounced the philosophical-rationalist approach to the commandments, and who feared the negative implications of this approach for normative Jewish practices.
example of the delicate balance of conservative synthetic and revolutionary analytic tendencies.

3.7.2 Particularism vs. Universalism

In earlier chapters I have discussed the way analytic traditions are more prone towards a universalistic worldview. Following Jewish philosophers, Kabbalists began adopting many analytic features that gave their theology a more universal characteristic. From a structural point of view, due to its Neoplatonic and Gnostic undertones, medieval Jewish mysticism constructed a relatively objectified metaphysics, reflected by a systematic and hierarchical progression from the mundane world towards the divine. Such structural qualities were more conducive to the transportability of the sefirotic architectonic to other cultures. The fact that Christians could borrow Kabbalistic theology and metaphysics is a testimony of this cross-cultural applicability. Clearly, such transportability would be impossible with Talmudic material, which was embedded in a dense particularistic history and operated according to inaccessible methodologies. As an example, the sefirotic structure could be used by philosopher Raymond Lull (1232-1316) as a tool for the conversion of Jews and Muslims to Christianity.\textsuperscript{535} The fact that Kabbalah caught Lull’s attention is significant since his intellectual project sought to

introduce more universalizable and logical models for the exposition of knowledge.

Slightly later, during the Renaissance, Christian Kabbalah enjoyed considerable popularity using the same *sefirotic* structure devised by Jews while replacing Jewish symbols with Christian ones, notably those of the trinity. In other words, although the symbolic world of Kabbalah was highly particularistic, the objective structure of Kabbalistic theology and the kind of logical dynamic that governed its operation was easily transported to foreign cultural settings.

Beyond these structural considerations, there are also matters of content that gave medieval Jewish mysticism its universalistic undertones. The Kabbalistic notion of an impersonal emanating divine source, the *Ein-Sof* (lit. without end) stripped the God of Israel of his traditional historical underpinnings; mythological features were now replaced by a pure divine entity that was understood through a characteristic philosophical ‘negative theology.’\(^{536}\) Similarly, the Aristotelian hierarchy of Separate Intellects was replaced by the nine higher *sefirot*, with the tenth hypostasis of *Malchut* (Kingliness) serving as a substitute for the Active Intellect. Again, such an impersonal interpretation of the divine gave Kabbalah its indisputable universalistic thrust. It is also worth noting that the very shift from the Talmudic domains of law, ethics, and historical analysis to the domain of metaphysics had universalizing influence upon Jewish

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536 Scholem, *Ha’Kabala Bi Provence*, pp. 169-170. The philosophical source for ‘*via negativa*’ was Job 38:12. Saadya was the first to see this passage as hinting at the foundations of the world in his first ma’amar in *Emunot ve De’ot*, p. 171: For Saadya the Yesodot (foundations) are indivisible elements of creation (Schoelm hints at atomistic influences that were popular among the arabs). Risan was the first to comment on this passage, which led to *Ein* and then *Hochmah* and then *Binah*. The whole chapter is seen as symbolizing a cosmogony. Idel contends that Kabbalists were actually much less concerned with negative theology than the school of Scholem assumed. *Ascensions on High*, p. 15.
theology. This was especially clear in the early phase of Kabbalah in which very little is said about “every-day life, ethical behavior and reasons for the ritualistic commandments.” Only in the following generation (in the second half of the thirteenth century), after mystics constructed a general consensus regarding the structural characteristics of their theology did they return to traditional areas of interest: ethics, the commandments, and Israel’s historical experience. The mystics of Gerona, especially R. Azriel, interpreted the sefirot in highly conceptual, philosophical language. The objective introduction of information meant that mystical manuals became more accessible to Jewish readers as well as to Christians. Therefore, as opposed to the inaccessible Talmud, Kabbalah, both in terms of structure and in certain feature related to content, represented a revolutionary theology that disclosed a more objectified picture of reality that could be applied universally.

But in spite of these universal aspects, Jewish mystics made certain to return to a highly particularistic worldview that countered the conventionalizing effects of philosophical decontextualization. As in the case of all the morphological distinctions made in this study, Kabbalists took followed the pattern of appropriation and subordination. In this specific case, they showed a tendency towards the universal metaphysics of the analytic modality, but they presented it in a highly exclusive narrative that was quintessentially particularistic; indeed, Kabbalistic theology represents an

538 As an example one of the most influential treatises on the Kabbalah of Johann Reuchlin was Joseph Gikatila’s Sha’arei Orah. See Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, “Christian Kabbala: Joseph Gikatilla (1247-1305), Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), Paulus Ricius (D. 1541), and Jacob Böhme (1575-1624),” In Allison E. Coudert ed. The Language of Adam/Die Sparche Adams (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), pp. 81–121.
unprecedented climax in the reinstitution of Judaism’s exclusivity and sacred ontological status. One example of this radical particularism is reflected in the zoharic idea of the “Ministers of the Nations” (*Sarei Umot ha-Olam*) who represented celestial ambassadors of the earthly nations. According to this thesis, interactions among nation in the worldly sphere are a reflection of a higher cosmological drama between the angelic ministers above. As opposed to other nations that are wholly dependent on the energy emanated from God, Jews are directly connected to the divine source, especially to the sefirah of *Tiferet*, their personal God. That Israel is constantly provoked and castigated by other nations is an outcome of its sinful behavior, but this misery will come to an end with the advent of the Messiah, a time in which God and Israel (*Knesset Israel*) will finally reunite (the unification of *Malchut* and *Tiferet*) and Israel will rise to glory. While in many pre-zoharic works the nations are clearly antagonistic to Israel, this is taken to new extremes in the Zohar in which the nations are associated with the dark ’other side’ (*Sitra Achra*) that will eventually be annihilated. The particularistic stance of the Zohar is further reflected in endless metaphors that created a sharp ontological divide between Jews and non-Jews. One such recurring metaphor is the portrayal of the “nations” as bodily organs that are sustained and nourished by Israel, symbolized by the heart. Joseph Hamadan in his commentary on the commandments states: “The people of Israel are the

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539 For example, *Zohar* 1 p. 287.
essence of the universe, for they allude to the pure and the holy supernal form.” In agreement, David Ariel contends that:

Kabbalah reflects the nativistic stream in Judaism which subscribes to an essentialist view of Jewishness. The Kabbalistic view that the neshamah [the highest part of the soul] is an emanation of God’s essence and comes to reside in us because of our connection with torah leads to the restrictive idea that only Jews can acquire neshamah. Judaism, in this view, is the only path of ascent to God.

Here to we see the Kabbalistic insistence on the exclusive superiority of being Jewish. The choice of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai as the central protagonist of the Zohar is of relevance as well. Bar Yohai was a well-known figure in the conservative, nationalistic camp of R. Aqiva during the rebellion against Rome in the first century CE. This certainly provided the Zohar with a strong particularistic atmosphere in the eyes of Jews who were well aware of Bar Yohai’s anti-foreign inclinations.

As opposed to the unprecedented universalism of works such as Maimonides Mishneh Torah and Guide, the institutionalization of Kabbalah in the zoharic text returned to a highly inaccessible mode of discourse, replete with symbols and a difficult Hebrew/Aramaic hybrid. The exclusive history of Israel returns to the main stage with a dense mythological language that embellishes and conceals the objective sefirotic structure with a particularistic garment. As an example, while philosophical allegory transformed Abraham into the Greek notion of Form, the Abraham of the Kabbalah

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541 Ariel, The Mystic Quest, p. 139-140. [my italics].
542 Liebes, Studies in the Zohar, p. 4.
remains both the historical first patriarch while simultaneously representing more profound cosmic powers such as the attribute of Mercy. This theology preserved the literal meaning of the text and therefore functioned as a type of protection against the excessive universalism and text-destroying hermeneutic of philosophy. In regards to the danger of philosophical universalism, Halbertal notes:

the irony was that by elevating the concrete particular to the universal and the conceptual through allegory, the philosophers undermined not only the importance of the particulars in the biblical narrative but also the very idea of the particularity of the People of Israel. Sarah and Abraham, their flesh-and-blood forefathers, received the status of mere allegories. At this point the interpretative assimilation of the Torah to the Aristotelian realm becomes an act of assimilating the concrete people of Israel into the universal realm.\(^{543}\)

Unlike the untamed universalism of the philosophers, the universal characteristics of Kabbalistic metaphysics were masked in a particularistic narrative as well as by a hermeneutic that preserved the literal, historical meaning of the biblical text as understood by common people. Most importantly, as we have seen, Jewish ritual played a central role in the maintenance of cosmic harmony. Only Jews could theurgically manipulate the divine realm through the meditative process of \textit{kavannah} and the performance of the \textit{mitzvot}. Such particularism was substantially different from the philosophical idea that religious activity depends on one’s intellectual potential. While philosophical universalism was predicated upon a pan-human intellectual apparatus

\(^{543}\) Halbertal, \textit{People of the Book}, p. 112.
shared by people from different traditions, the Kabbalistic notion of theurgy was based on the exclusive role of Jewish prayer and the following of the commandment.

All of the above examples disclose a Judeo-centric vision of reality in which the Hebrew language and liturgy, Jewish ritual, the Jewish soul, the nation of Israel, and its unique history were ontologically irreplaceable. Kabbalists offered a systematic and theologically coherent metaphysical vision in which Judaism represents the very foundations of cosmic order. The dynamic of appropriating universalistic tendencies while subordinating them to a particularistic worldview remained a fascinating characteristic of medieval Jewish mysticism. This inner paradox is beautifully reflected in the way Kabbalah managed to both counter philosophical universalism by constructing its own universal metaphysics, while simultaneously attacking the philosophical conventionalization of their tradition by presenting Judaism through a highly particularistic and ontologically superior perspective. In present times, Kabbalah’s combination of universal and particularistic features is reflected in its ability to serve as a tool for both Ultra-Orthodox xenophobia, and universalistic new-age trends in Hollywood.\textsuperscript{544} Here again forms of analytical mysticism such as Abulafia’s ecstatic Kabbalah were too similar to the philosophical position. The fact that ecstatic Kabbalah failed to supplement its universalism with the ontological particularism such as one we

see in the Zohar, can be seen as a major reason for its failure to consolidate its position in the Jewish tradition.

3.7.3 This-Worldliness vs. Other-Worldliness

Thus far, our discussion of the cultural level has focused on the two morphological distinctions: contemplation vs. orthopraxy and universalism vs. particularism. In both cases, I have argued that Kabbalists managed to equip Jewish theology with analytic features such as contemplative techniques and a more universalistic cosmology, while simultaneously prioritizing opposing synthetic sensibilities, such as the stress on ritual performance and a highly particularistic, exclusionist worldview. In both these examples the distinctions between the analytic and synthetic modes of operation are directly or indirectly related to approaches towards the body and soul. The example of the analytic prioritization of spirit entailed the marginalization of ritual in favor of introspective techniques (cognitive individualism), while the tendency towards mentalistic procedures based on a universal cognitive apparatus naturally downplayed particularistic tendencies. With respect to the distinction between world-affirming and world-negating traditions, attitudes towards matter and spirit were similarly central.

As I argued in the second chapter, the analytic prioritization of soul over matter meant that the material world was treated with suspicion, an attitude that led to a growing interest in other-worldly spheres of existence. Menachem Kellner notes that Maimonides promoted Judaism’s shift from a tradition that was preoccupied with Halakhic matters
and specific deeds to the realm of thought.\textsuperscript{545} This typical philosophical move is one that subordinated the world of matter and action to a spiritualized existence in the afterworld. Indeed, the famous resurrection debate in Judaism touched at the heart of these opposing attitudes. Maimonides’ docetic approach towards resurrection was predicated upon the immortality of the rational soul, which outlives the body. This perspective pointed towards a realm of existence that was free from the encumbering effects of matter; a place in which the rational soul reaches immortality.\textsuperscript{546} This typically Greek understanding of immortality angered conservatives, not only due to its elitist intellectualism but also because it undermined the traditional Jewish view of physical resurrection as an event that reflects a change \textit{in this world}. Oliver Leaman argues that as opposed to Christianity in which the temporal state is “a prelude to the next life, and so the arrangements in this world are of no great salvific significance,” Judaism “never made a sharp demarcation between the theological and the political…”\textsuperscript{547} Kabbalists generally followed this traditional political perspective, in which the messianic age was seen as the reinstitution of the Davidic monarchy and the restoration of the nation of Israel to its homeland. This meant that redemption did not involve transcending the world but rather its rectification on the mundane sphere.

\textsuperscript{545} Kellner, \textit{Maimonides’ Confrontation With Mysticism}, pp. viii-ix.
\textsuperscript{546} Louis Jacobs, \textit{A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 421. Jacobs points out that even after Maimonides defended himself in his \textit{Essay on the Resurrection of the Dead}, he refused to believe that the body could live forever - only the soul.
In spite of this more affirmative attitude towards the world Kabbalah became distinctly more other-worldly. Yehuda Liebes argues that although national-historical redemption is not excluded from the zoharic perspective it is nevertheless relegated “to an instrumental level, where it is seen as a means for achieving the mystical-cognitive objective” very similar to the Maimonidean position. Therefore, together with misgivings towards the world-negating stance of philosophers, Kabbalists began to introduce an increasingly other-worldly theology as well. In Provenç during the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries we begin to come across religious figures with ascetic titles such as Perushim (recluses) and Nezirim (nazarites). These new trends which disclosed Greco-Christian influences, suggest that other-worldly approached began to be viewed favorably. This is attested by the fact that many pseudepigraphic texts were attributed to religious figures with titles such as nazir and parush as a sign of prestige. Jacob the Nazarite, a figure that was related to the first mystical circle of Provenç, is one of several representatives of these new ascetic inclinations. In another instance we have the famous testimony of Benjamin of Tudel

548 Liebes, Studies in the Zohar, p. 3.
549 Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah, pp. 48; 227-248. According to Scholem the Gnostic Cathars in southern France and the influx of Neoplatonic translations to Hebrew in Provenç were the main influences on these new ascetic trends in Judaism. Also see Haviva Pedaya on indications that Ya’akov ha Nazir, R’ Asher be-Shaul of Lunel were sympathetic to the emerging Kabbalah of the Risan. Hashem ve ha-Mikdash be-Mishnat Rabbi Itzhak Sagi Nahor (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), pp. 16-17 [Hebrew]; and Isodore Twersky. Rabad of Posquiere, pp. 26-27.
about one “Asher the recluse (ha-parush), who dwells apart from the world; he pores over his books day and night, fasts periodically and abstains from all meat.”  

Theologically, world-negating inclinations are already apparent in the views of the early Kabbalah; the concept of transmigration appeared in the first known Kabbalistic work the Bahir, and later features in several early Kabbalistic works in Gerona. R. Azriel went as far as to hold the uncharacteristically Jewish view in which the body is perceived in terms of punishment, which leads to one’s transmigration. Similarly, eschatological themes occupy a central place in the thought of Nahmanides, especially in his Sha’ar ha-Gemul (The Gate of Reward), where he sets to harmonize traditional rabbinical approaches to the afterlife with the more sophisticated ones of his time, especially those held by philosophers. Nahmanides’ new notion of Olam ha-Neshamot (the world of souls) reflects a clear spiritualization of the Talmudic perception of the soul, with a special emphasis on the distinctiveness of the soul and its non-material existence after death. But Nahmanides also firmly challenged the radical Maimonidean

550 The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation, and Commentary by Marcus Nathan Adler (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), p. 3; Also Scholem, Origin of the Kabbalah, p. 231.
551 Different terms have been used for the concept of transmigration, most commonly gilgul, which first appears in Sefer Ha-Temunah (1270). Among early Kabbalists, especially the circle of Isaac the Blind in Provence and Gerona, the earlier term Ibbur (sod ha-Ibbur) was used. Ibbur and gilgul became differentiated in the 13th and 14th centuries. See Encyclopedia Judaica, Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik eds., Vol. 7. 2nd ed., (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), pp. 602-604. [Gershom Scholem]. The Bahir does not use the term Gilgul but rather explains the phenomenon relying on the verse in Ecclesiastes (1:4): “one generation passeth away and another generation cometh; and the world abideth for ever” Ecclesiastes:

552 Septimus, Hispano-Jewish Culture, p. 112.
view of resurrection and the afterlife, siding with the more traditional views of the Talmudic tradition in which the stark divide between body and soul is avoided.\textsuperscript{553}

In the final stages of the institutionalization of Kabbalah, we see a continuation of these spiritualistic trends. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to claim that one of the most central concerns of the Zohar, under clear Gnostic influences, was the nature of the soul, its origin, and final destiny. Among other things, the Zohar is concerned with the ascents of righteous souls from a terrestrial to a heavenly paradise.\textsuperscript{554} The tripartite division of the soul into \textit{nefesh}, \textit{ruah}, and \textit{nesham}, and the stratification of reality into four increasingly transcendent levels of existence: \textit{assiyah} (action), \textit{yetzirah} (formation), \textit{briyoh} (creation), and \textit{atzilut} (emanation) all point to the increasingly other-worldly views of medieval mystics.\textsuperscript{555} In his study of Halakah and Kabbalah, Jacob Katz demonstrates that while traditionally, rabbis took the position that “the Torah speaks in the language of humans” and that it “was not in the heaven,” Kabbalah represented a dramatic turn towards the supernal implications of the Torah that go beyond the mundane world.\textsuperscript{556} Gershom

\textsuperscript{553} Dan, \textit{Toldot Torat ha’sod}, vol. 8, pp. 371-412. Another relevant book by Nahmanides is \textit{Sefer ha-Ge’ula} (The Book of Redemption).

\textsuperscript{554} Idel, \textit{Ascensions on High}, pp. 101-142. In other Kabbalistic works the olam-haba is sometimes associated with the hypostasis of Binah.

\textsuperscript{555} The Kabbalistic classification of the soul followed the philosophical theory of the vegetative soul (\textit{nefesh}), the animal soul (\textit{ruah}), and the Intellectual soul (\textit{neshama}). This classification was followed by philosophers such as Saadia Gaon, Abraham ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Abraham bar Hiyya. Kabbalists later added the higher levels of hayya and yechida which corresponded to the five worlds \textit{assiyah}, \textit{yetzirah}, \textit{beriyah}, \textit{atzilut}, and Adam Kadmon. See Simcha Paull Raphael and Zalman Schachter Shlomi, \textit{Jewish Views of the Afterlife} (Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1994), p. 278.

\textsuperscript{556} Ya’akov Katz, \textit{Halacha ve Kabbalah}, p. 13. “The Torah speaks in the language of man” (Sifre, Numbers 112; Bavli, Yevamot 71a) While this verse from the Talmud was interpreted by R’ Ishmael in a conservative manner that constrained the exegete’s legitimacy to depart from the original text, the philosophers used the same dictum in a progressive way that sees
Scholem stressed the more other-worldly vision of Kabbalists, claiming they were not concerned with grand messianic narratives as much as they endeavored to “overcome the world through the ascent of the ladder towards the sublime chambers located in the divine bosom.”  

In spite of these clear other-worldly themes, Kabbalah never discloses a radically world negating perspective. The mystical correspondence between the divine and the human spheres was drastically different from that of the philosophers. While in philosophy the correspondence between the individual person and God takes place through one’s mental faculties, in Kabbalah the world of matter is infused with the divine. As Eitan Fishbane points out:

> the mystic friends [in the Zohar] are portrayed as they are on a perennial journey and quest for kabbalistic wisdom. The inner life of divinity may be probed and penetrated through the restless search for lower refractions in the earthly realm…the journey through the mundane zone is hardly irrelevant to the search for kabbalistic knowledge; the encounters with the sounds and sights of nature are nothing short of openings into metaphysical discovery.

In other words, as opposed to more radical forms of transcendence and other-worldliness in analytic paradigms, the Zohar offers a qualified picture in which the lower and upper realms interact according to a dynamic reciprocity, without marginalizing either end of anthropomorphic language as a biblical device to communicate profound philosophical truths using visual imagery that is accessible to simple people.

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557 Scholem, “The Idea of Redemption in the Kabbalah,” in Devarim be-Go: Explications and Implications, Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance [Hebrew], (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved. 1975), pp. 191-216: [My translation]. On pp.195 Scholem argues that medieval Kabbalah, as opposed to sixteenth century Lurianic Kabbalah, promoted a vision of “a personal, mystical redemption, which signified the individual’s escape from history to a time before history.

the equation. In his discussion of the notions of the pillar in Zoharic literature, Idel argues:

The paradisiacal role of the pillar is in line with the Zoharic absorption of the lower world into the supernal one. This means that even a concept like the mundane world has meaning as a divine power, which while on high is designated as such. Being paradigmatic, the supernal world includes the lower world, and the Platonic opposition between them is less stringent in Zoharic Kabbalah. In lieu of a worldview based on strict parallelism, the main trends of Kabbalistic approaches assume the active interaction between these two worlds—what I propose calling a correlative approach.559

In contrast to allegory in which one level of meaning is substituted with a higher one, the correlative approach is characterized by the preservation of both levels - mundane and sacred.

The centrality of the commandments in the Kabbalistic perspective and the political undertones of the traditional rabbinic vision of redemption meant that Jewish theology remained strongly anchored in the material world and human activity. In the distinction between the analytic world-negating perspective and the synthetic world-affirming view it can be argued that both philosophers and mystics adopted increasingly mentalistic and other-worldly positions but they differed in the way they approached the relationship between the transcendent sphere and the sphere of action and matter. While in philosophy we see a more radical disjunction between this world and the divine sphere, mystics managed to construct a theology in which the two were inextricable interrelated. This unique relationship is also reflected within the Kabbalistic Godhead where we

witness a constant tension of attraction and repulsion between the sefirah of Malchut with its mundane connotations, and the higher sefirot of Tiferet (the god of Israel) and Binah (frequently associated with the next world). Kabbalists insisted on maintaining this dialectic interaction between the earthly Israel, its historical experience, its stress on earthly sanctity, and its political messianic vision on the one hand, and the sublime realm of the sefirot which offered a new and more updated vision of the function of the soul and its relation to redemption and the afterlife. Again, the emanationist perspective of Kabbalah, or what Idel refers to as a conjunctive theology reflects a structural characteristic that was conducive to this more fluid relationship between the worldly and other-worldly spheres.

Moreover, the this-worldliness of Kabbalah is certainly related to the mystic’s insistence on preserving, indeed intensifying the following of the commandments in their traditional form. The theurgic features of the Kabbalah meant that the main sphere of action and religious activity remained this world. The fusion of this world and the world above is beautifully captured in the way that “religious actions produce the ascent of the soul. When the soul acts according to the requirements of Jewish religious law, it triggers forces in the world that influence the various sefirot.\(^{560}\) The deeds of the body and the deeds of the heart were fused such that activity in this world was crucial for the process of tikkun, or the ‘repairing of the world.’ The Kabbalah provided its followers with a cosmic vision of unprecedented complexity and depth. Together with a new other-worldly vision, the physical world of the mystics both in the form of trees and land, as

\(^{560}\) David Ariel, op. cit., p. 139.
well as the human body, remained relevant, indeed crucial for the realization of cosmic harmony.

3.7.4 Communication: Restricted and Elaborate Codes

In the second chapter I looked at forms of communication and their relationship to the synthetic and analytic modes of operation. I used Basil Bernstein’s code theory to argue that whereas traditions that adhere to the synthetic modality rely on condensed or ‘restricted’ forms of communication, analytical traditions follow a more explicit elaborate code. I also associated analytical, elaborate code traditions with the Indo-European language family, arguing that there is considerable evidence that the structural qualities of Indo-European languages made it more likely for universalistic theologies to emerge. Due to these characteristics, Indo-European cultures were less inclined towards discourses based on opaque symbolism; in their development over the centuries they gradually moved from highly mythological systems to more conceptualized, philosophical discourses that were suitable for the cross-cultural dissemination of ideas.

The above linguistic distinctions do not mean that the Semitic cultures from which Judaism and Islam emerged were unable to construct their own elaborate and analytically inclined discourses. In fact, as I have claimed earlier, the adoption of the elaborate code, in the form of Kalam theology and later Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy, was highly conducive to the expansion of Islam and the transportation of its
culture to new geographical domains. In the Jewish orbit such inclinations found fertile ground among progressive circles that were immersed in the cosmopolitan world of Muslim Spain. My goal here is to show that Bernstein’s code theory can be applied to the cultural tensions that emerged within Judaism between rationalists and Kabbalists in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. My main premise is that while philosophers clearly adopted elaborate forms of communication, Kabbalists consciously turned to a highly restricted symbolic theology, but that their reaction entailed a period of experimentation in which they initially operated according to an analytic, elaborate discourse. I will first look at the way Jewish philosophers ‘opened’ the traditional Talmudic code, and then proceed to discuss the Kabbalistic reaction and its shift from a fairly elaborate code towards the restricted code of the Zohar.

As a short reminder, the elaborate code is one in which information is communicated under the assumption that conversants do not share a common cultural or symbolic background. For this reason, explicit communication with a decreased reliance on local symbols has a leveling effect such that people from different cultural backgrounds can participate in a relatively transparent dialogue. Medieval philosophy represents a striking example of how the elaborate code operates on a cross-cultural level. With the introduction of Aristotelian formats to monotheism we witness the emergence of a pan-monotheistic dialogue that levels the ground between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and enables these three religions to enter a dialogue that was predicated on

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561 There are several examples of universalistic traditions functioning as a unifying factor in the hands of empires. Christianity in the Roman Empire is a well known example. King Asoka used Buddhism as a unifying universal ideology, Alexander the Great used Hellenism, and the Universalism of Islam certainly assisted it in advancing beyond local tribal conflicts.
the basic characteristics of the analytic mindset: the atomization of terminology to explicit and monosemic meaning, the advancement of arguments according to logical models based on formal relation, and the exposition of a systematic and coherent theology that provides well articulated answers to a set of interrelated questions. It is not surprising that philosophers were intensely engaged in the refinement of their linguistic tools, such that fairly ambiguous native symbols as well as problematic anthropomorphic elements in scripture were re-defined to suit the new cross-cultural dialogue that emerged. It also makes sense that the first systematic theories of language in Judaism, emerged with Al-Muqammas and Saadia Gaon who were the first Jewish figures to engage their Muslim kalamic milieu.\footnote{562} Saadia’s theory of language already discloses a movement towards an elaborate discourse in which we see signs of the Aristotelian idea that human languages are conventional. Scores of other works in linguistics, including dictionaries, books on grammar, and philology emerged in the following centuries, mainly written by philosophically inclined Jew: “Saadia’s \textit{Ergon}, Menahem Saruq’s \textit{Mahberet}, Ibn Janah’s \textit{Book of Roots}, and Abraham Ibn Ezra’s \textit{Yesod Dibuq, Sefer Sahot}, and \textit{Safah Berura} are among the best known.”\footnote{563} I already mentioned that philosophical works frequently began with long explications of terms and their proper types of predication. Words were now given a new stable or non-fluctuating meaning that departed from the semantic ambiguity of the Talmud and Midrash. The escalating use of allegory which reached its climax in Maimonidean philosophy and was taken even further by his followers is an example of the hermeneutical devices used by rationalists to

\footnote{562} Sarah Stoumsa, “Saadia and Jewish \textit{Kalam},” p. 84.
shift from a native symbolic particularism to a more universal, elaborate form of communication. Indeed, as Liebes notes, such universalism was intimately related to philosophy’s opposition to the mythic language of the Talmud and Midrash. The sudden interest in grammar, word usage, and the appearance of a genre of books on philology reflects the typical analytic curiosity towards the intricacies of language, so characteristic in the Greco-European and Indian traditions.

One of the interesting aspects of Bernstein’s code theory is its sociological implications, in which there is an attempt to link forms of communication to social realities. I would like to argue that this connection is clearly manifest in the period under examination, where a more progressive, dynamic, and younger generation of Jews attracted to their pluralistic cultural surroundings, were simultaneously becoming more detached from the coercive social structure of traditional Judaism. In other words, an increasingly complex division of labor and relative prosperity inevitably provided individuals from formerly closed communities access to a wider and more diverse social environment. Greater social mobility was most likely accommodated by the adoption of new forms of communication that were conducive to the universal ethos of the Muslim golden age. The prosperity and social benefits that such assimilative tendencies entailed most likely further reinforced these progressive currents. Referring to the relationship between language and sociality in Judaism, Liebes notes that “the abstract, non-mythic culture suited [Jewish] circles that were close to royal courts and engaged in the general culture of the age, first among Muslims and later in Christian Spain….” After noting the

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564 Liebes, “Judaism and Myth” [Hebrew], pp. 22-23.
advantages of these new progressive tendencies, Liebes also points to what began to agonize conservative authorities: “the abstract and rational foundations are universal by nature and therefore suitable for those who were inclined towards assimilation. Indeed, [during the Spanish inquisition] rationalists represented a major portion of those who converted their religion.”565 These quotations supports Bernstein’s idea that the loosening of social restrictions entails a change in forms of communication, which in turn further promoted the crossing of social and cultural boundaries.566

The Jewish philosopher’s ‘opening’ of the previously restricted code of classical Judaism was contemporaneous with an escalation in individualistic tendencies. As both Bernstein and Mary Douglas argue, the elaborate code’s unique ability to bring disparate individuals into a common dialogue was based on the idea that jettisoning one’s cultural background is not only possible but desirable. These tendencies led to a more confrontational and competitive intellectual environment; the highly polemical atmosphere between the tenth and thirteenth centuries was apparent both within Judaism and between the Abrahamic religions. Unsurprisingly, “it is primarily with the development of the independent essay, the book, that polemics became a genre unto

565 Ibid., pp. 13-14.
566 Perhaps the most obvious example of this change is the fact that Jews living in Muslim territories didn’t only speak Arabic, but they saw it as their preferable language for composing theological and philosophical works. On the most basic level, the adoption of Arabic as a language for intellectual discourse as well as everyday affairs can be seen as an important step towards the disintegration of traditional social restrictions. That the Muslims didn’t have a literary language such as Latin, meant that the same ‘linguistic assimilation’ was absent among Jews living in Christian Europe. This made it easier to more efficiently protect social boundaries and remain entrenched in a highly particularistic mode of communication.
Here again we see a clear indication that the analytical worldview entails a range of interconnected phenomena: the rise of individualism, together with the rise of private literary formats such as the authored book and the essay, which were conducive to a polemical and confrontational theology, and that this new discourse was based on new linguistic dispositions oriented towards objectivity, conceptualism, and logical coherence. Therefore, the rise of new elites, the rise of individualism, shifts in a linguistic orientations, new polemical and specialized literary formats, and an unprecedented exegetical freedom, were all inextricably related such that each supported and validated the other.

Looking at the Kabbalistic reaction in terms of the emergence of a conscious and newly informed restricted code can help us pay closer attention to the relationship between language, sociality and the rising tensions between rationalists and conservatives in the Jewish world of Provençe, Catalonia, and Castile. The view that a symbolic theology was constructed to counter the assimilative and universalistic currents of philosophy is not new in Kabbalah scholarship. But while scholars focus on the contrast between symbolic and allegorical hermeneutics, I have highlighted the internal dynamic between these strategies of exegesis in terms of Bernstein’s code theory. I argued above that Jewish philosophers moved from the traditional Midrashic and Talmudic linguistic world towards a more elaborate and open discourse. Kabbalists, in their attempt to synthesize philosophical ideas went through a process in which they too, perhaps inevitably, moved towards a relatively elaborate language before they could return to the

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restricted language of the mature Kabbalah. The shift towards a more elaborate code in the early Kabbalah can therefore be seen as an inevitable initial stage in which mystics were exploring possible strategies for making connections between philosophical theology and native Jewish symbols. Before I look at how mystics oscillated between elaborate and restricted approaches towards language a few comments regarding the social and historical background of these changes are in place.

The intense period of experimentation, which began with the first Kabbalistic circle of Provenç, reached its culmination in the publication of the Zohar, took place in a highly polemical and pluralistic atmosphere. Such unprecedented diversity could only take place in concordance with a social transformation in which traditional centers of authority were incapable of restricting the proliferation of new ideologies within Judaism. This dynamic and polemical stage eventually led to the publication of the Zohar as a ‘consensus literature’ that synthesized the various mystical and philosophical strands of thought that preceded it. Although the Zohar is predominantly associated with the theurgic school of Kabbalah, it clearly incorporated themes and influences from early Heikhalot mysticism, the Iyyun Circle, and ecstatic Kabbalah. As trivial as it may sound, the most efficient way to propagate ideas on a broad popular level is by communicating information clearly and efficiently. By creating an accessible framework for transmitting their groundbreaking theology to potential enthusiasts, Kabbalists of the theurgic school were exceptionally successful in exposing their ideas to a wide audience. In spite of efforts on behalf of first elite rabbis to curtail open dissemination of mystical ideas, these more exoteric currents persisted and even intensified towards the end of the thirteenth-
century. This accessibility was certainly one of the factors behind the theurgic school’s success; as a counter example, more esoteric schools such as the Iyyun Circle lacked the ability or desire to disseminate their ideas effectively. The point I want to stress is that within this highly competitive environment, the move towards an elaborate code among mystics can be seen both as an inevitable initial stage of assimilating philosophical ideas into Kabbalah, as well as an effective method of dissemination. Indeed, one of the most apparent characteristics of early theurgic Kabbalists was their adoption of philosophical conceptualism as well as their pro-active attitudes towards dissemination.

One of the first instances in which we witness the use of a more elaborate code among kabbalists can be seen in R. Azriel’s philosophical Explanation of the Ten Sefirot. R. Azriel’s work was a kind of prototype for hundreds of similar manuals that ensued, all of which were effectively disseminated in writing and sought to provide a general foundation for understanding the basic building blocks of Kabbalistic theology - the ten sefirot. Of special interest was the conceptual and direct language that R. Azriel employed in his clarification of the sefirotic structure, a terminology that was to a great extent adopted from philosophical works that were translated by the Tibbon family for the Provençal community. As opposed to his teacher Isaac the Blind’s extremely inaccessible commentary to Sefer Yetzirah, R. Azriel’s explication of the sefirot is characterized by unprecedented clarity without any signs of supporting his revolutionary position with biblical passages, save a few scant notes at the end of the treatise. His description of the sefirot is concise and unambiguous, such that each hypostasis points to

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a focused meaning free of the dense metaphorical terminology of later Kabbalah.\(^{569}\) Even more astonishing is R. Azriel’s bold thesis that the layered *sefirotic* nature of the godhead should be accepted on logical grounds rather than on account of mystical revelation or reference to sacred scripture.\(^{570}\) As in the case with philosophy at an earlier stage, many saw the new independence of mystical works from traditional sources of authority as a breaching of accepted restrictions of secrecy.\(^{571}\)

Reminiscent of Bernstein’s description of the elaborate code, Halbertal notes that R. Azriel explication of the sefirot represents “a translation of a system of symbols into conceptual language,” which created a “clear transparency. The act of disclosure is thus linked to the transition from a symbolic language to a conceptual one.”\(^{572}\) Such changes are apparent in the way R. Azriel associates each *sefirah* with a limited number of referents, mainly name, color, and general position within the *sefirotic* structure. This concise and accessible treatise can be contrasted with R. Joseph Gikatilla relatively late

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\(^{569}\) The first part of the treatise is composed of twelve questions raised by a student to which R. Azriel provides short answers. It is only after the initial explication of the *sefirot* that R. Azriel proceeds to support his interpretations with verses from scripture in the second half of the treatise. Other works by R. Azriel, such as his *Epistle to Burgos*, are even more direct, disclosing a confident and concise presentation of the Kabbalistic worldview as one that does not necessitate a justification. Here too R. Azriel’s language is relatively free of mystical undertones. For more of R. Azriel’s exoteric dissemination of Kabbalah see Halbertal, ibid., pp. 77-82.

\(^{570}\) Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, p. 78

\(^{571}\) Ibid., R. Azriel’s work was published as part of *Derekh Emunah*, by Rabbi Meir ben Gabbai (Berlin, 1850). The justification for this breach by Azriel and later Kabbalists was that the Talmudic demand for secrecy was in regards to the hidden dimension of the godhead, namely, that which according to Kabbalists is impossible to reveal in the first place.\(^{572}\) Also see Dan, “Scholem’s reconstruction,” p. 43: “It is not only the external appearance of Kabbalistic language and terminology which reveals the influence of Jewish philosophy. The mystical symbols themselves reflect this impact, though it is important to note the differences as well as the similarities. In contrast to the Book Bahir, the works' of the Kabbalists of Gerona may seem like a rejection of, or withdrawal from, mythological and gnostic formulations and the construction of a "philosophical" mysticism.”
and long \textit{Sha’arei Orah} in which each sefirah is associated with a striking number of symbols and meanings.\footnote{As an illustration some of the symbols and terms \textit{sefirat Malchut} is associated with are: The lower intellect (חכמה תחתונה), Adonai, night, sea, holy temple, Shekhina (שכינה), beloved land (ארץ חמדה), moon (לבנה), crown (עטרה), Soul (נפש), all (כל), sapphire (אבן ספיר), Rachel, Great Assembly (כנסת ישראל), me (אני), holy well (באר קדושה), garden (גן), the letter ‘yod’ in the name Adonai, and many more.} This general trend reflects the way in which early-phase Kabbalists sought to establish the ground rules on which the more mature Kabbalah based itself. Whereas the Kabbalists of Gerona were behind the initial institutionalization and legitimization of the symbolic world that nourished future Kabbalists, the later Castilian circles disclosed a more opaque and symbolic mysticism that foreshadowed the dense mythic world of the Zohar.\footnote{Dan, \textit{Toldot Torat ha’sod}, Vol.8, p. 10.} The twofold process of the appropriation of analytic qualities and their subordination to a synthetic ethos is suggested in Idel’s discussion of the progression of Kabbalistic symbolism:

> the relationship between a given word and its supernal counterpart is relatively stable in earlier Kabbalah. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, however, greater fluctuation in this relationship is perceptible. In the very same treatise a word may symbolize more than one sefirah. The theoretical possibility thus emerges of decoding the same verse in several symbolic directions. Indeed, this possibility is fully exploited in the central mystical work of Kabbalah, the Zohar.\footnote{Moshe Idel. \textit{Absorbing Perfections}, p. 92.}

Idel’s description seems to support the idea that a) early Kabbalah adopted analytical strategies of thought towards the atomization and conceptualization of data where we see a relatively stable relationship between word and referent, and b) that this initial analytical disposition gradually shifts towards a greater fluctuation, or greater ambiguity,
in the mature and more confident stage of the Zohar. This second stage is an indication of a return to a more synthetic, fluid, and communal discourse that was familiar to the traditional Jewish worldview.

Once the basic symbols of the sefirot were determined using a conceptual elaborate approach, later Kabbalists could shift to a bolder interpretation in which a wider semantic range is afforded to each sefirah, thereby offering more prolific and flexible hermeneutical tools for the interpretation of scripture. The general dynamic is therefore one that moves from the ‘opening of the code’ in order to establish the basic Kabbalistic lexicon, towards the ‘closing of the code’ in later Kabbalah where terms are intentionally cloaked with a wide cluster of symbols. It is interesting that the move from an initial elaborate code to the later restricted code reflects a shift from a highly polemical phase towards the increasingly communal and inclusive discourse of the Zohar. In other words, a philosophically oriented work such as R. Azriel’s Explanation of the Ten Sefirot, by virtue of its semantic stability, presumes to present an indisputable truth that provides very little space for further interpretation. This represents a continuation of the

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576 Such a process did not take place in Jewish rational theology, on the contrary, Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed, remained in conformity with Greek formats, showing no “return” to the flexibility of traditional Jewish discourse.

577 In his famous article on the concretization and abstraction of Kabbalistic lore, Isaiah Tishby gave an example of the constant historical oscillation between Kabbalists who employ a dense, mythic, and personalistic interpretation of the creation narrative, and the more philosophically inclined mystics who conceptualized the creation story as an objectified and rational cosmogony. In this section I tried to show a similar dialectic within the confines of “early Kabbalah,” while stressing the relationship between these fluctuations and sociological changes. Tishby, “Berur netivei ha-hagshama ve ha-hafshta ba-Kabbalah,” in Netivei ha-emuna u-minut: masot u-mehkarim be-sifrat ha-Kabalah ve-haShabta‘ut (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), pp. 23-29.

578 The form of Kabbalah that Nahmanides promoted is actually a move in the opposite direction towards conservative modes of dissemination and concealment of mystical lore. Therefore, even within the confines of the period known as “early Kabbalah” we see an oscillation between modes of concealing and revealing information.
philosophically oriented culture of polemics and ideological confrontations. The gradual move towards a more fluctuating and symbolically rich interpretation entails the opening of a discourse to divergent interpretations. Such flexibility was most probably facilitated by the fact that a communally accepted interpretation of the sefirot was gradually institutionalized, which, in turn, allowed a more relaxed communal discourse to take place. Said differently, although the linguistic code becomes more restricted in later Kabbalah, such restriction is first and foremost an obstacle to outsiders, while within Judaism it enabled a more communal discourse and the easing of exegetical conflicts.

Channels of dissemination and attitudes towards innovation are another factor in the move towards a more elaborate code among mystics. The Kabbalists of Gerona found different ways to justify their bold dissemination of mystical lore; R. Azriel interprets the Talmudic dictum “Do not expound what is concealed from you and do not investigate what is hidden from you,” creatively as a legitimization of Kabbalah as an open discourse. According to Azriel this sentence, far from being a restriction against discussing mysticism, was merely an acknowledgement that some things are beyond articulation, while what can be said should be said. In his Sha’ar ha-Shama’im (Gate of Heaven) another important Gerona mystic, Ya’akov ben Sheshet, states:

I shall not let the words of holiness be cut off from their hearers, so that the last generation of children that be born may know and tell it to their children…and I shall render accessible some of the sweet matters of truth, and rebuild its ruins, so that there my words may enlighten those to whom I leave it. I shall open doors and break the locks and the gates shall no (longer) be closed.
Such metaphors of breaking the doors and opening locks are reflective of a dramatic shift in language and modes of dissemination. Ben Sheshet explicitly states that the aim of his work is to disseminate Kabbalah beyond confined circles of esotericists. He also paved the way for later Kabbalists in defining the medieval mystic’s approach towards innovation when he claimed that together with what he received (Kabala) he also adds and expounds creatively through his “effort of reasoning.” In all these instances, we see major shifts among early Kabbalists towards a more explicit, exoteric, and individually creative elaborate code. Clearly, the kind of conceptual clarity and accessibility that such Kabbalistic works disclosed, stands in stark contrast to the dense and opaque nature of the Zohar where we see a highly mythological language together with a return to the inaccessible Aramaic.

In discussing the social environment of the thirteenth century I have followed Idel and Lachter in showing that the first elites gave way to a more bold and creative middle class of secondary elite. In the following generations these new elites soon replaced the old elites as the new representatives of the conservative wing of Judaism. This dynamic to a great extent reflects a congruous dynamic in attitudes towards language. During the early phase of the first elites, we have a restricted code and conservative forms of oral transmission; in the second phase with the emergence of secondary elites, we witness a move towards linguistic transparency, philosophical conceptualism, and more bold forms

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580 Old elites, namely those rabbis that were exclusively halakhic figures and community leaders, persevered, but mystics gradually became a legitimate part of the tradition. It also became more common for important halakhic figures to be versed in mystical lore.
of written dissemination; and finally, during the third phase in which the second elites consolidate their positions as orthodoxy we see a simultaneous return to a restricted code represented by the dense symbolism and mythic language of the Zohar.

### 3.7.5 Ritual and Restricted Code

As I argued earlier, following Bernstein and Douglas, ritual can be seen as the most extreme manifestation of the restricted code. Philosophy’s shift towards analytic forms of discourse predicated upon an elaborate code offered new horizons for communication and sociality, but it simultaneously incapacitated the role of ritual in Judaism. The move toward escalating explicitness and individualism is frequently accommodated by the decline of more condensed, communally oriented, and embodied forms of communication. Douglas is aware of this relationship when she argues that the move towards the private internalizing of religious experience simultaneously entails the decline of ritualism and symbolism. The role ritual was given by philosophers was no longer a mechanism for establishing differences but rather an educational tool. The

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581 Daniel Boyarin explores the relationship between forms of hermeneutics and perceptions of the body in relation to the Greek and Jewish clash in the early centuries of the Common Era. He argues that the rising instrumentality of allegorical interpretations to scripture represents one of the dividing features that set early Christians apart from the nascent Rabbinic paradigm. Allegory as a hermeneutical device postulated an oppositional dichotomy between language and text. In opposition to such Greek approaches so characteristic of Hellenized Jews such as Philo and to a great extent Paul as well, the Rabbinic tradition adopted the Midrashic device which completely denied this dualism “eschewing the inner-outer, visible-invisible, body-soul dichotomies of allegorical reading.” He claims that “Midrash and Platonic allegory are alternate techniques of the body” in which the former affirms the physical self while Platonism negates it. See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 14. See also his *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

582 Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, pp. 7-9
Kabbalistic reaction can be seen as a process in which ritual is supported by a new and more sophisticated philosophical and cosmological underpinning; an attempt to anchor ritual is a metaphysical necessity. As an efficient medium for the establishment of distinctions, ritual, as it was understood by medieval mystics, represented a clear departure from the conceptual clarity of early Kabbalah and philosophy, towards a highly condensed and local form of communication.

This brings me back to the axis of communication I introduced in the second chapter in which I argued that conceptual, abstract forms of communication reflect the ‘elaborate’ extreme of the axis, while embodied, physical communication represent its oppositional ‘restricted’ pole. From this point of view, Kabbalah and philosophy can be seen as different strategies of communication in which Kabbalah initially adopts an elaborate language but then moves towards restricted channels of communication represented by a native symbolism, mythical language, and further supported by an ontological theory of ritual. In other words, ritual “says” things and therefore needs to be understood as a form of communication; it is the most basic way to communicate one’s belonging to a certain system of symbols. By supporting ritual with a new theology, Kabbalists managed to consolidate Judaism’s most efficient form of communication; a communication that had proved to be crucial for traditions that operate in an antagonistic environment. Although ritual does not say a lot, what it says is extremely meaningful. In the case of Judaism it signaled one’s belonging to the community. Therefore the ongoing following of Jewish ritual reflects a firm confirmation of one’s acceptance of a tradition. Signaling one’s belonging to a tradition through ritual performance implicates the
believer in a complex system of actions, norms, values, and habits such that assimilation becomes highly improbable. Just as importantly refusing to adhere to a set of communally accepted rituals immediately sends a message that one is no longer committed to a group’s shared values.

In conclusion, prior to the emergence of Kabbalah, philosophical works were successful in engaging a wider audience that was not necessarily trained, nor particularly interested, in Talmudic lore. The new language of philosophy was suitable for consumption by a new social strata that was more intellectually independent and theologically skeptical. As a reaction, a mystically inclined secondary elite with conservative and anti-rationalist tendencies began to use pro-active modes of dissemination and a more conceptual language to promote a counter theology that was accessible to a wider and more popular audience. The secondary elite of mystics, like their philosopher counterparts, were younger, energetic, creative, and immersed in the non-Jewish culture of Catalonia and Castile. Free from demanding commitment towards Talmudic studies and communal leadership, and relatively distant from traditional centers of authority, these mystics sought to construct a theology that re-affirmed the boundaries between Judaism and its non-Jewish environment. The Zohar represents the culmination of these tendencies: symbolism, myth, narrative, ritualism, and the return to a discourse that synthesizes divergent approaches into a communally accepted framework, all representing the prioritization of synthetic sensibilities over analytic features.

In this section I have highlighted two central points: a) that linguistically, philosophers represent a historical shift from the traditional restricted code of the Talmud
towards an elaborate code typical of analytic traditions, and that b) although Kabbalistic theology represents a highly restricted linguistic code, we can detect an internal dynamic in the evolution of Kabbalah in which, for practical reasons, there is an initial conceptual transparency which is later replaced by the linguistic opacity of the Zohar. Finally, the relationship between these linguistic tendencies is related to social changes in which a more cosmopolitan and educated elite was ripe for a new form of discourse. As we have seen, all the topics I have explored on the cultural level exhibit a dynamic of appropriation of analytic tendencies and their subsequent subordination to native synthetic sensibilities; appropriation of introspective mentalistic techniques and their subordination to ritual praxis; appropriation of universalistic tendencies and their subordination to a particularistic worldview; appropriation of other-worldly perspectives, while simultaneously preserving the centrality of action and ethical behavior on the terrestrial sphere, and finally, the appropriation of an elaborate code and its eventual subordination to a restricted code. It is worth reminding ourselves that such a process did not take place in Jewish rational theology; on the contrary, Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, and the philosophical tradition it spawned remained in conformity with Greek formats of discourse, showing no “return” to the flexibility of traditional Jewish discourse or the mythic and restricted language of theurgic Kabbalah.

Judaism between the tenth and thirteenth centuries disclosed the dynamic of a cultural system that entered a phase of morphogenesis and responded to this crisis with conservative measures that sought to preserve its traditional way of life. The upheaval we witness during this turbulent period represent a restructuring of traditional features
according to new needs and realities. Cognitively, we see a shift to a more analytical, objectified, and systematic theology; socially, we see the rise of individualism, greater division of labor, and the emergence of a new energetic middle class; and culturally we see a shift towards a greater stress on contemplative techniques, universalism, and other-worldliness together with the adoption of a discourse that was increasingly conceptual. Ironically, in order to assimilate these analytical features into its midst, Judaism was forced to construct a theology that was unprecedentedly conservative. Such conservatism was reflected by theurgic Kabbalah’s construction of an ontological particularism. I think that this last point is of particular importance, since it suggests that ‘compromises’ made by Judaism as it was forced to concede to an increasingly analytic worldview, were compensated, so to speak, by the reinforcement of its native sensibilities using an ontology typical of analytic systems. The truth-value of Judaism was no longer presented as a fact to be taken for granted; instead, conservatives provided a systematic exposition that anchored their tradition in a cosmological framework. The adoption of the analytic stress on metaphysics together with the refusal to turn to analytic forms of universalism led to an extremely powerful ideology that can explain the historical significance of Kabbalah in the Jewish tradition. The Kabbalistic integration of Jewish particularism with an analytic normative metaphysics resulted in an ultra-conservative ideology that is still the dominant narrative of orthodox communities today.
CHAPTER 4

TRADITIONS IN MORPHOGENESIS – NEO-CONFUCIANISM
4. CHINA: THE DECLINE OF THE CLASSICAL PARADIGM

In the following chapter I will look at the rise of Neo-Confucianism. Since my interpretation of the rise of medieval Jewish mysticism has been clarified, I will explore Neo-Confucianism with continuous comparative allusions to the Kabbalistic case. As in the former chapter I will begin my analysis with a historical overview of the social and political background that led to the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and then proceed to discuss the three morphological levels and the various morphological features that constitute them.

Although this dissertation chose to highlight the structural similarities of the Chinese and Jewish traditions, it is important that we point out differences as well. One such example pertains to the drastically dissimilar environments in which Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists operated. As opposed to the vulnerable and scattered Jewish communities of the Near East and Europe, China represents one of the world’s largest and relatively stable political and cultural entities. In contrast to Jews, the Chinese were never worried about their possible demise as a people; this meant that these two groups were characterized by very different mentalities regarding their status vis-à-vis out-group members. Due to these substantially different environments, the synthetic physiognomies of the Jewish and Chinese traditions were expressed differently. The way I am using the term “expression” here is borrowed from biology, especially from the field of epigenetics, where it is argued that a similar DNA structure (in our case analogous to a culture’s morphological physiognomy) can become phenotypically expressed in
divergent ways. An example can help clarify how the notion of expression can be applied to the field of culture.

Since Judaism was in a continuous state of vulnerability it was led to relay more strongly on certain (synthetic) morphological features rather than others. As a result of its hostile environment, particularism (on the cultural level) occupied an extremely important position. The opposing analytic tendency towards universalism, increasingly discernible in Jewish medieval philosophy, was justifiably perceived as a real threat to Jewish continuity. As I have noted earlier, it became apparent that areas in which philosophy was a dominant ideology disclosed exceptionally high levels of conversion and cultural assimilation. It is no wonder that ritual, the hallmark of particularism, became one of the fundamental concerns of conservative Jews in their battle against philosophy. In the eyes of traditionalists, the philosophical conventionalization of the commandments was a “red line,” so to speak, that was not allowed to be crossed. Jewish conservatives were consciously that stressing differences through ritual was a crucial defense mechanism for internal cohesion and long-term survival. In light of these unique environmental circumstances, other morphological aspects of the synthetic modality, although certainly important, were not as crucial for the Kabbalistic project. Consider the distinction between this-worldliness and other-worldliness; although it was important for conservative Jews to make sure that the physical world remained important as a sphere for the enactment of ritual, it seemed less urgent to dwell on this specific feature as a strategy to secure the perseverance and survivability of the tradition. As a result we see a substantial escalation in other-worldly themes in Kabbalistic theology. Therefore, within
the symbiotic relationship between the various morphological features of the synthetic mode, particularism and the stress on orthopraxy became a more dominant concern for medieval Judaism. This reflects the unique way its synthetic physiognomy was “expressed” in the specific environment in which it operated. As in the domain of living organisms and biology, environmental conditions have a powerful impact on the way inherent genetic proclivities will manifest themselves. Although I am tempted to argue that this relationship is more than metaphoric, for now I will simply note that it can help us understand the intimate relationship between environment and culture, and how the former can impact the unfolding of the latter.

As we shall see shortly, the historical conditions that informed the Chinese experience were such that although particularism was important, it was much less crucial than in the Jewish case. Instead, Neo-Confucians were more intensely concerned with highlighting the importance of engaging the mundane world in contradistinction to the other-worldliness of Buddhism. From a native Chinese perspective, the disengagement from ordinary social commitments represented a burden on society, a very bad model for behavior, and a real threat to social stability. Since the Chinese dilemma was very different from the type of existential threats Jews were facing, the two groups stressed and downplayed different features within their similar synthetic morphologies. Again, it is important for me to stress that due to the symbiotic and interlocking dynamic among the different morphological components in both the synthetic and analytic modalities, all the constituent features of each mode of operation remain important to different degrees.
My goal here is to point attention to a certain asymmetry that can exist within these interlocking relationships due to different environmental circumstances.

4.1 THE TANG-SONG TRANSITION

4.1.1 The Rise of New Elites

The changes that overtook China during what has come to be known as the Tang-Song transition can be traced back to the aftermath of the An Lushan rebellion (安史之亂) of 755 CE, a protracted period of social and political instability that spanned the reign of three emperors and signified the gradual decline of the golden age of the great Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). As in the case of Judaism, here too, we are dealing with a transition that represents a milestone in the history of China. Mark Halperin claims that “During the two millennia from the empire’s unification in 221 BCE to its nineteenth-century collision with the industrial West, no period saw more drastic change than the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, from the late T’ang through the mid-Sung dynasties.” This is precisely the period we will be concerned with, a period that represents the historical transition from China’s early medieval to late medieval or early modern period.583

Generally speaking the Tang model was based on the power of the great aristocratic clans (shizu - 士族); extended families that boasted impressive genealogies

583 Mark Halperin, Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960-1279 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), pp. 5-6. The historian Qian Mu sees the Song as a transition from traditional china (古代中國) to post-traditional China (後代中國). T.C. Liu sees it as the transition to the “early modern period” see James T. C. Liu, China Turning Inward: Intellectual-Political Changes in the Early Twelfth Century, p. 9; 164 n. 9.
reflecting their outstanding pedigree. The great Tang clans almost completely monopolized the ranks of government and they did this by virtue of their ancestry. The Tang rulers, who themselves were the leading aristocratic clan, believed that official positions should be occupied by a cultivated social strata that could continuously produce educated and cultured sons to run the empire. At this stage in history, the imperial examination system (科舉考試) was predominantly based on a recommendation system and networks of connections in which successful candidates were allowed to secure positions for a handful of relatives. Once Tang began to show signs of weakness, more people started questioning the legitimacy and necessity of the existing model. In 907 CE the Tang era came to an end and with it came the end of the great aristocratic clans.

After the Tang period, which I will return to shortly, China went into a phase of instability before it could get back on its feet. The short-lived Five Dynasty Period (五代时期, 907-960) was a preview to the more stable Song dynasty that rose to power in 960 CE. Scholars have referred to the Song era as the Chinese renaissance, a period of unprecedented cultural sophistication and economic prosperity but also of relative military weakness. The question I would like to ask is, how were the dramatic changes of the Tang-Song transition related to the rise of Neo-Confucianism? One way to begin such an analysis is by looking at what came to replace the aristocratic families of the Tang. Generally speaking, both the Tang and Song were dominated by an elite of shi

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584 Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, pp. 31-33.
585 Ibid., p. 30. This was known as the “Protection Privilege System,” more on pp. 34-5.
586 This period is also referred to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (五代十国).
), but while the Tang elites were known as *shizu*, or aristocratic elites, the Song *shi* were what is generally referred to as the literati class, or *shidafu* (scholar officials, 士大夫). 588 These new elites were moving away from affiliation related to pedigree and bloodlines towards emphasizing their intellectual distinction. The new assumption of the Song period was that civilization was not something exclusive or hereditary, but rather a sphere to which everyone had potential access. This democratic spirit was extremely attractive to a huge emerging middle class that immediately detected the political and social opportunities involved in this new model. This growing and relatively prosperous class was quick to seize the opportunity by investing resources “in local schools and academies, providing intellectuals with careers and students with places to gather…” 589 Meanwhile early political reformers were increasingly in favor of recruiting officials that went through the examination system rather than those who entered government through family privilege. 590 With the decline of the Tang we see a general phenomenon in which central authority could no longer fully control the growing power of provincial leaders and the private accumulation of wealth. It became increasingly evident that the old structural features of Tang political power no longer corresponded to the new decentralization of power that China was undergoing. 591 The growing democratization of

588 The character zu (族), meaning ancestors, highlights the nepotistic connotations of the Tang aristocracy.

589 Bol, *op. cit.*, p. 2; also Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, ch. 2 *passim*.

590 These early reforms were undertaken by Fan Zhongyan (989-1052) and his allies who implemented their controversial policies at 1044. See Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, p. 31; Idem., *Neo-Confucianism in History*, p. 54; Kuhn *The Age of Neo-Confucian Rule*, p. 39.

591 Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, pp. 45-6.
the examination systems, and by extension of the political sphere, represents a general restructuring of the Song system in light of new social realities.

The new phenomena of local initiatives was related to the disproportionate increase in a wealthy and educated social strata and the subsequent inability of the central government to employ this influx of talented personnel.\textsuperscript{592} The excess of educated and wealthy people led to an unprecedented diversification in the division of labor, which was further supported and promoted by the impressive technological advancements of the time. New fields of interest and expertise emerged that were beyond the repertoire of the traditional government official. This led influential figures such as Cai Xiang (蔡襄, 1012–1067) to air their dissatisfaction with traditional synthetic approaches to education, which emphasized the well-rounded generalist.\textsuperscript{593} Like Hu Yuan (胡瑗, 993–1059), Wang Anshi (王安石, 1021-1086) and other reformers after him, Cai Xiang advocated a more technocratic training of civil servants oriented towards more focused and practical fields of knowledge.\textsuperscript{594}

\textsuperscript{592} Ibid., pp. 31-35. See more on the changes in the examination system. John Chafee, \textit{The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China} (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 214 n. 66. Chafee claims that the fairness of the Song examination system is doubtable but scholars tend to agree that it was substantially more egalitarian and democratic than the Tang model. Also see Denis Twitchett, “The Fan Clan’s Charitable Estate, 1050-1760,” in \textit{Confucianism in Action} Nivison and Wright eds., pp. 97-133.

\textsuperscript{593} A well-rounded and synthetic education was taken so seriously that some Tang scholars such as Yan zhitui warned against becoming too proficient in one of the traditional six arts (六藝) ritual (禮), music (樂), charioteering (駕), mathematics (數), calligraphy (書), and archery (射). see Bol, \textit{This Culture of Ours}, p.9.

\textsuperscript{594} In addition to the \textit{jingyi} (meaning of the Classics, 經義) section of the examinations, Hu Yuan advocated the introduction of a knowledge (知識) section dedicated to the more practical questions of how to rule the empire, see Hou Wailu, Qiu Hansheng, and Zhang Kaizhi, \textit{Song Ming Lixue Shi}. Vol.1 (Beijing: Renmin Press, 2005), p. 27; Kuhn \textit{The Age of Neo-Confucian Rule}, p. 53. Carsun Chang discusses how the official categories of the division of labor during the
organized in their ability to establish institutions for preparing young men for governmental exams, but they were also establishing themselves as an alternative channel to governmental careers independent from state financial support. As a result of ‘unemployed’ literati, private local academies began to emerge all over China, a phenomenon that provided young men with new prospects for employment on a local level. It also led intellectual communities to broaden their pedagogical programs beyond the confined repertoire of examination material.

Local academies were less concerned with preparing students for state exams than they were with cultivating the individual’s moral integrity. Education, in other words, was no longer exclusively oriented towards officialdom, but was now seen as a way to improve the human condition on a much broader level, beginning with the individual person. This included the training of local educators, the establishment of charitable granaries, publications, shrines, lineage buildings, and other private enterprises. Perhaps most importantly, Carsun Chang notes that the Confucian academies were modeled after the Buddhist ashram that was introduced to China from India. Indeed, much like Buddhist monasteries, the Confucian academies departed from the elitism of state indoctrination and were now open to the general population providing opportunities for Song were diversified from four types of occupations to six. these are very broad categories that included a large amount of professions. *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, p.93; Peter Bol demonstrates how during the 12th century we begin to witness a greater division of labor which led to the blurring of boundaries between shi and non shi. He also shows how the Tang scholars still recommended the ancient arts as a way to remain in power while the Song scholar begin to search for greater expertise. See Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, pp. 9-11.

595 Neo-Confucians were especially notable in this respect; Zhu Xi’s prototypical White Deer Grotto Academy (Bailudong Shuyuan - 白鹿洞書院) served as a model for a pedagogy focused on the individual’s moral betterment.
literacy and basic education, even for those who could not afford it. This highlights a clear shift from strictly political indoctrination to the Neo-Confucian (or should I say Buddhist) emphasis on spiritual cultivation and a community of shared values.\textsuperscript{596} The Confucian academies were so successful that before long they began to enjoy governmental support and later turned into official government institutions.\textsuperscript{597} Song policy makers were increasingly sympathetic towards local initiatives as they realized that they played an important role in the new political and social model that was emerging. More broadly, progressive reformers supported the emerging free market and came to terms with the growing power of local communities. Therefore, in spite of factional disagreements regarding the future of China, most ideological parties, including the Neo-Confucians, agreed that private wealth and the growing accessibility of private education should be encouraged. Due to the general prosperity of this period, China was undergoing a process of intense urbanization and commercialization. For the first time we see the emergence of commercial centers that were independent of an administrative function. Instead of pre-Song restrictions on free commerce, Song rulers shifted to a “win-win” policy of taxing commercial activity without countering it. Before long, commercial taxation became the foundation of government revenue; this took place together with an unprecedented monetization of the economy and the introduction of government bills and paper money that gradually overshadowed the use of silver.\textsuperscript{598}

\textsuperscript{596} Carsun Chang, \textit{The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought}, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{597} The Confucian academies lost their early vitality once they became official governmental institutions. This led to another reaction during the Ming in which most academies returned to distinguish themselves from central power and thereby managed to regain their original vigor.
\textsuperscript{598} Bol, \textit{Neo-Confucianism in History}, pp. 23-4.
In the chapter on Kabbalah I looked at Idel’s notion of first and secondary elites in the Jewish world. It is clear that the circumstances in the Chinese and Jewish experiences were radically different but they nevertheless shared several important points. In both cases we see the rise of a commercially wealthy and educated social strata that was challenging orthodoxy. In both cases we witness the emergence and expansion of a new middle class at a time of unprecedented economic prosperity, urbanization, and technological advancements. And in both contexts we are dealing with periods of growing rationalization and cultural sophistication. In China such rationalization was reflected by the historical shift from a rural to a more urban mindset. A point I especially want to stress is that in both cases we see the decline in the exclusivity of the religious resources of the classical periods. As we saw, in Judaism it was the decline of the Talmudic paradigm, while in China we witness the decline of the Five Classics. In both cases the classical corpus was outstripped, or supported, by a new body of texts. As discussed in earlier chapters, these textual transformations reflect nothing short of a paradigm shift in which the traditional locus of information was no longer sufficient as a resource for future operation.

As these revolutionary changes were taking place another separate but related process was in the making. In order to understand how the social and political transformation from the Tang to the Song was related to the growing antagonism between the synthetic and analytic mindsets we need to go back to the first century CE when what seemed as the innocuous Buddhist tradition began its gradual conquest of China.
4.1.2 The Rise of Buddhism and the Decline of Confucianism

Unlike the relatively late introduction of philosophy into Judaism, Buddhism entered China approximately a millennium before the rise of Neo-Confucianism. The early Indian schools of Buddhism were extremely analytic; in fact, as Peter Berger points out, early Buddhism’s analytical approach even managed to stand out in the Indian landscape. The incipient Buddhist tradition in India reflected an unprecedented rationalization of the Hindu tradition that preceded it; Buddhism did not only universalize Indian thought by challenging the ontology of its caste system, but as Berger notes, its “rational coolness” rid itself of many of the mythological features of Hinduism. It was this type of “cool” and rational Buddhism that entered China in the early centuries of the Common Era. Since Buddhism was so drastically different from anything the Chinese had formerly encountered, its integration into China was very gradual and full of obstacles.

The exact dates of Buddhism’s entrance into China are not clear but it is generally agreed that it occurred sometime between the early and mid first century CE. This initial phase during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) was one in which Buddhism

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599 Clearly Judaism was constantly influenced by Greek, Roman, and European culture but it was only during the tenth and eleventh centuries that we see a large scale introduction of Greek philosophy into the Jewish tradition.

600 Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 67.

601 See more on the introduction of Buddhism to China in Kenneth Ch’en, Buddhism in China, a Historical Survey (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 29-35. The traditional view points to emperor Ming of the Han dynasty (ruled 58-75 a.d.) as the moment when Buddhism was officially accepted into China. Emperor Ming’s dream of a golden deity flying around the palace was interpreted as representing the Western sage—the Buddha—who was known for his body’s golden hue and ability to fly. The emperor allegedly dispatched an envoy to explore this new teaching. The envoy returned with the famous Theravadic Forty-Two Section Sutra (四十二章經). Due to many inconsistencies scholars were led to believe that Buddhism entered China some sixty years earlier to Emperor Ming’s rule.
and Daoism intermingled and became all but indistinguishable. This was to a great extent a result of their common interests, most of which were superficial rather than real. Another reason for the blurring of boundaries between these two systems was the Daoist doctrine of ‘converting the barbarians’ (花胡) according to which, upon completing the *Daodejing*, Laozi left to the West (India), converted the barbarians, and became the Buddha.\(^{602}\) This strategy legitimized the growing interest in Buddhist doctrines among Daoists and further consolidated the strong fusion between the two systems.\(^{603}\) As a consequence of this syncretism, the analytical complexity of Buddhist doctrine was almost completely ignored. Instead, the Chinese preferred to stress elements that seemed to contribute to the traditional Daoist search for immortality; certainly not a central concern of the Buddhist tradition. At this early stage the Buddhists themselves were cooperating with this syncretism since it assisted their goal of disseminating the dharma and helped them gain a hearing among the Chinese people.\(^{604}\) It was around the end of second century with Mouzi’s (牟子) famous *Treatise on the Settling of Doubts* (理惑论) that Buddhism began to actively distinguish itself from Daoism. This was further supported by the constant influx of new Buddhist material into the Middle Kingdom. The growing differentiation between these traditions was reflected by a shift from the fairly simplistic *geyi* (格义) translation in which Buddhist concepts in Sanskrit were somewhat

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\(^{603}\) Kenneth Chi’en *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51. All the different legends about Laozi’s interaction with the barbarians were compiled by Wang Fu during the Western Jin dynasty (265-316) in the *Hua Hu Jing (the Sutra on the Conversion of the Barbarians)* - 化胡經

\(^{604}\) Ibid., p. 49.
arbitrarily swapped with Daoist terms, to more sophisticated and systematic forms of translation. Such translations were best exemplified by Kumarajiva (鳩摩羅什, 334-413) and later more poignantly by Xuan Zang (玄奘, 602-664). Both philosopher/translators and their many followers abandoned Daoist terminology and began to translate Buddhist sutras on their own terms and with greater analytic nuance. Towards the end of the period of disunity (221-589 CE) between the Han and Sui/Tang dynasties, Buddhism became a major force in China, and the “Chinese began to acquire a systematic understanding of its ideas.” By this time “The Chinese had come to understand that Buddhism represented a completely different worldview, a philosophy that owed nothing to the wisdom of the Chinese sages.” It is worth pointing out that although Daoism developed its worldview in close conformity and in imitation of Buddhist ideas and institutions, it nevertheless failed to match Buddhism’s speculative sophistication and popularity. Therefore, although Neo-Confucianism is frequently perceived as a reaction to both Buddhism and Daoism, most scholars agree that the main antagonism was with the former. This was reflected quantitatively as well, once Buddhism was accepted on a

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605 The Chinese meaning of *geyi* is “matching meanings.” The earliest known critique of this dubious method of translation was voiced by the Jin Dynasty monk Dao An (道安) around 349. Recently, Victor Mair has argued that the *geyi* phase was so short lived that it hardly had time to consolidate itself as a model for translators. Most scholars are of the opinion that this form of translation was extremely central in the first phase of Buddhism’s introduction into China. See Victor Mair, “What is Geyi After All?” *China Report* Vol.48, 1-2 (2012): 29-59.


608 As an example the chapter in the Jin Silu dedicated to “Sifting the Heterodoxical Doctrines” is almost wholly dedicated to attacks against Buddhism with very little attention to Daoism. Moreover, many Daoist features that influenced Neo-Confucianism were clearly adaptations of Buddhist influences.
broader level, the Sangha’s membership far surpassed that of the different Daoist
denominations. During the Tang Dynasty it is estimated that the Daoist establishment
was only one tenth the size of the Buddhist establishment. The meteoric rise of Buddhism
was quite astonishing and by the end of the Sui Dynasty (隋代, 581–618 CE) and
beginning of the Tang, Buddhist clergymen represented two million out of the estimated
forty million inhabitants of northern China, a striking number that can probably be
partially explained by the tax exemption clergymen enjoyed.\textsuperscript{609} For all these reasons and
others I will look at shortly, my analysis will focus on the Buddhist challenge, which I
see as the predominant reason for the rise of Neo-Confucianism.\textsuperscript{610}

Once Buddhism asserted its independence we see a period in which it both
consolidates its position in China and radically transforms itself. Generally speaking, the
first independent schools of Buddhism in China were marked by the typical analytic
complexity of Indian thought and were therefore perceived as alien to the Chinese
worldview. These schools, most notably the \textit{Yogacara} or \textit{Consciousness Only School} (唯识宗) and the \textit{Madhyamaka} or \textit{Three Treatise School} (三轮宗) didn’t survive the test of
time and were replaced by sinicized schools that began to articulate Buddhist thought in
ways that conformed to the native sensibilities of the Chinese tradition.

The next phase, during the Tang dynasty, represents what many see as the climax
of Buddhist thought in China, or at least its most creative phase. Before looking at the

\textsuperscript{609} Data from Peter Bol, Harvard Lecture. available online as of 05/15/2014
\texttt{http://www.extension.harvard.edu/open-learning-initiative/china-history}
\textsuperscript{610} Judith Berling notes that Daoist were long influenced by Buddhism and continued to invent
themselves in the [Song] in light of its doctrines. Berling, \textit{The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-En}
Tang period, let us note another important difference between the Chinese and Jewish experiences in terms of their conflict with analytic systems. Although Greek thought certainly had an ongoing influence on Judaism, Jews managed to ward off extreme Hellenistic influences prior to the tenth century. It was only with the rise of medieval philosophy and mysticism that we see an intense crisis that necessitated a comprehensive reevaluation of the tradition in light of Greek thought. The Chinese experience was substantially different; somewhat ironically, the clash with Buddhism, although initially a clash of differences, slowly transformed into a suspicion towards Buddhism’s increasingly native character. In other words, Buddhism came so close to articulating itself according to Chinese values that native systems found themselves in its shadow. Sinicized schools of Buddhism such as Tiantai (天台), Huayan (華嚴), and Chan (單宗, better known as Zen in the West) began to gain influence for two central reasons. The first was that Buddhism’s indigenization meant that most Chinese no longer perceived it as a foreign system of thought. The second reason was that Buddhism tackled existential, epistemological, and metaphysical questions that were only superficially dealt with by the Chinese tradition, especially Confucianism.611 While Buddhism provided solutions to the salvational yearnings of an increasingly sophisticated audience, Confucianism remained entrenched in pragmatic concerns related to rulership and the maintenance of political stability. Wing-tsit Chan points to this spiritual ossification when he notes that from the end of the Han Dynasty until the rise of Neo-Confucianism, the Confucian worldview

611 The political and social circumstances of the age meant that something new was bound to replace the Tang model. As opposed to other factions, Neo-Confucians were successful in that they detected that one of the main issues to confront was Buddhist metaphysics and channels for spiritual fulfillment. Hou Wailu et al., Song Ming Lixue Shi. Vol.1, p. 8 [Chinese].
“became synonymous with bureaucracy.” Therefore, one of the main differences between the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic experiences is that the Chinese, in spite of reoccurring attacks against Buddhism’s corrupting effects, were unable to get rid of Buddhism, which became an integral component of their culture.

4.1.3 The Ascendency and Consolidation of Chan Buddhism

By the time of the Tang dynasty and later during the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song, Buddhism became a force to be reckoned with; it contested the Chinese worldview “in every way in which one tradition can engage another culture. No aspect of Chinese life escaped what scholars call the Buddhist conquest of China.” Considering the range and depth of this Buddhist conquest, it is no wonder that Confucians, as early as

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612 Confucianism’s ‘mundane’ function reflected the traditional Chinese view that Buddhism and Daoism were systems that dealt with the interior facets of human life, while Confucianism was in charged of “external” matters. Wing-tsit Chan, “Neo-Confucianism and Chinese Scientific Thought,” *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 6, no. 4 (1957): 317-8.

613 See Kenneth Ch’an *Buddhism in China*, p. 471 “The indian religion had become so intimate a part of the intellectual make-up of the Chinese that it was impossible for the Sung thinkers to give up Buddhism,” see also Carsun Chang, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, p. 28. Such early attacks against Buddhism could be seen in Gu Huan (390-453) who critiqued Buddhism’s Indian roots as evil and barbaric. Fan Zhen (c. 480) attacked the Buddhist notion of rebirth, while Xun ji (d. 547), criticized Buddhism from a political angle, warning against its accumulation of power and “plans” to undermine the emperor. Finally, Fu Yi (555-639) drafted a proposal demanding that Buddhism be suppressed and banished from China; his argument contained economic, political and nationalistic elements. The fundamental difference with Neo-Confucianism was that none of these thinkers sought to revive Confucian philosophy. Their arguments were mainly political, historical, and nationalistic rather than metaphysical or doctrinal.

In Judaism, by the fifteenth and sixteenth century philosophy all but disappeared. Nevertheless it could be argued that philosophical speculation continued within the symbolic framework of Kabbalah. This can be seen in the case of philosophically inclined mystics such as Moshe Cordovero.

the mid Tang dynasty, began to harbor increasingly anti-Buddhist sentiments. Early “proto-Neo-Confucians” such as Han Yu (韩愈, 768-824) and his student Li Ao (李翱, 772-836) launched an unprecedented attack against Buddhism, reflecting the growing sense of crisis that many conservative Confucians were sensing. A watershed moment in this crisis was Han Yu’s famous anti-Buddhist rhetoric which to a great extent represented a xenophobic sentiment that characterized Neo-Confucians of subsequent generations. In his unusually blunt letter to the emperor Han Yu protested the festive and official introduction of the Buddha’s alleged bone relic to the imperial court:

Your servant begs leave to say that Buddhism is no more than a cult of the barbarian people, which spread to China in the time of the Latter Han… until old and young alike had abandoned their occupations to follow Buddhism… then will our old ways be corrupted, our customs violated, and the tale will spread to make us the mockery of the world. This is no trifling matter! Now Buddha was a man of the barbarians who did not speak the language of China and wore cloths of a different fashion. His sayings did not concern the ways of our ancient kings, nor did his manner of dress conform to their laws. He understood neither the duties that bind sovereign and subject nor the affection of father and son. If he were still alive today and come to our court by order of his ruler, Your Majesty might condescend to receive him… he would then be escorted to the borders of the state, dismissed, and not allowed to delude the masses. How then, when he has long been dead, could his rotten bones, the foul and unlucky remains of his body, be rightly admitted to the palace?… Your servant is deeply shamed and begs that this bone be given to the proper authorities to be cast into fire.\footnote{William de Bary and Irene Bloom, \textit{Sources of Chinese Tradition} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 583-585. In the same letter we have a description of the popularity of the event and the enthusiastic crowds that filled the streets to welcome the relics into the capital. Han Yu almost payed with his life for this criticism but ended up being exiled to the south. His patriotism became emblematic of Confucian integrity and many Neo-Confucian academies celebrated him in a way that was reminiscent of a saint in Catholicism. See W.T.de Bary, “A Reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism,” in Arthur Wright ed., \textit{Studies in Chinese Thought} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953).}
Eighth-century conservatives such as Han Yu and Li Ao were the first to clearly point attention to the “Buddhist problem,” as something to be dealt with systematically. Anti-Buddhist attacks were not confined to individual thinkers; Buddhism experienced several violent and non-violent institutional persecutions, the most important of which was the persecution of 845, which according to some scholars represented the beginning of the decline of Buddhism’s creative phase and its gradual eclipse by Neo-Confucianism. It is important to bear in mind that in terms membership Buddhism remained highly popular and continued to attract followers well into the Song. Wang Xinzhu notes that the Song represented a new climax in the development of Buddhism, including a sharp increase in its monastic membership, the building of temples, and the translation and printing of scripture. In fact, as opposed to the formerly common opinion that Buddhism reached its climax during the Tang dynasty, an increasing number of scholars have come to agree that “if any period deserves the epithet of the ‘golden age’ of [Chinese] Buddhism, the Sung is the most likely candidate.”

It is interesting that Han Yu and Judah Halevi, who predated the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah respectively, became the embodiment of a conservative sentiment that characterized later generations of Neo-Confucians and Jewish mystics. Both thinkers lacked the developed tools to offer a mature alternative to Buddhism and Greek philosophy but they were nevertheless the earliest systematic anti-analytic proponents of their respective tradition. Their cultural temperament rather than the specific contents of their thought became emblematic of future conservative Confucians and Jews throughout the ages.

Another massive persecution took place during the 950’s. See Halperin Cloisters, p. 8.


in regards to the highly popular Chan School. During the Song, Chan Buddhism became the embodiment of the formerly fragmented Buddhist tradition as well as the main culprit in the eyes of many Chinese nationalists who blamed it for its corrosive cultural effects. Understanding Chan Buddhism as a predominantly Song phenomenon highlights the direct confrontation between Confucians and Buddhists during the twelfth century and the urgency that conservatives must have felt to articulate a more relevant paradigm for the future.

The early and solitary voices of Han Yu and Li Ao during the Tang failed to seriously impact the course of events during their own lifetimes. But their call to arms began to resonate with an increasing number of early Song conservative who were concerned with the decline of Confucianism and the simultaneous ascendency of Chan Buddhism. Not only did Chan consolidate its position as the strongest school of

(Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), pp. 147-197. Kenneth Ch’en is a notable example of a scholar that held the very common opinion that Buddhism reached its zenith during the Tang and then suffered a decline during subsequent dynasties. See his Buddhism in China, (1964).

Foulk, ibid. Halperin adds that “During the T’ang-Sung transition, Buddhism underwent a range of transformations, which rendered its Sung incarnation a markedly different entity than its T’ang predecessors. Among the key changes, pride of place must go to the formation of the Ch’an “school” and its rise to a dominant position within Chinese Buddhism. Mark Halperin. Out of the Cloister, p. 8.

From this perspective the main change that took place after the 845 persecutions was not so much the decline of Buddhism but rather a decline in the diversity of its schools and the consolidation of the Chan school as its most representative force. The ascendency of the Chan school was also related to the sharp decline of the Tiantai and Huayan schools. Due to their strong dependence on institutions, monastic discipline, and scripture, the Huayan and Tiantai schools suffered the sharpest decline in the aftermath of the 845 persecutions; it was much harder for these schools to recover from the destruction and confiscation of their abundant property, land, luxurious temples, costly religious paraphernalia, and sutras. In contrast, due to its opposition to institutional extravagance, lofty ritualism, and monastic discipline, the Chan school emerged relatively unharmed from these events. See more on the confiscation of property and gold to support the economy in Kuhn, The Age of Confucian Rule, p. 14. The devotional pure land school remained strong as well and was slowly integrated into Chanism. See more in Julia Ching, The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi, p. 176.
Buddhism, but as mentioned earlier, it became disturbingly Chinese, showing very little indication of being a foreign tradition that lacked cultural legitimacy. In referring to the increasing similarities between Confucianism and Buddhism, Feng Youlan reminds us that the Chan masters came to believe that “in carrying water and chopping firewood therein lies the wonderful Tao.”™ Chan Buddhism therefore articulated an unprecedented world-affirming vision in which the sphere of quotidian activity was seen as a legitimate platform for achieving enlightenment.™ It also advocated reaching “sudden” enlightenment, one that was intuitive and therefore recognizably Chinese. Beyond such Chinese characteristics, Chan constructed a highly accessible and simplified philosophy that did not demand an intellectualist accumulation of knowledge. More importantly, Chan’s novel meditational techniques freed individuals from institutional commitments and offered them a platform to explore the inner self. This simple introspective methodology had a profound impact on commoners, elites, literati, and emperors alike. In a famous passage the northern Song philosopher Zhang Zai (张载, 1020-1077) states:

Since the Buddhist doctrine spread in China like fire, many Confucians, who have not been able to look through the gate of the school of the Sage, have already been attracted to it and drowned in it together with the Buddhists. They consider Buddhism as the great Way. Consequently, its vulgarism has extended throughout the world, so that good and

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™运水搬柴皆是神通 or 神通妙用, 运水及搬柴. The Chan School had other similar world-affirming mottos such as “Every day is a good day” and “Everyday-mindedness is itself the Way.”

™ For more on the world affirming features of Song Chanism see Griffith Foulk “Myth Ritual and Monastic Practice.” in Ebrey, Religion in China, p. 153.
bad people, the intelligent and the stupid, men and women, and servants all have become accustomed to believing in it.\textsuperscript{624}

As we will see soon, one of the greatest insights of Neo-Confucianism was that change should begin with the individual agent rather than with institutional reform; Neo-Confucians advocated a bottom-up reform characteristic of Buddhism rather than the traditional Chinese top-down approach.

An analysis of the sinicization of Buddhism in terms of my morphological categories shows that on the level of cognition, Chinese Buddhism departed from the radical analytical atomization, systematicity, and de-contextualization of information so characteristic of earlier Indian schools. Indeed, one striking feature of the Chinese adoption of Buddhism was the ability to ignore many of the analytical procedures of Buddhist theory and forms of argumentation, while focusing more exclusively on the practical ramifications of the dharma. One of the main characteristics of the popular Chan sect was its denial of the highly discursive and textual complexity of earlier schools in favor of an anti-intellectualist focus on koans (公案) and meditational techniques. On the social level Chinese Buddhism departed from the Theravadic focus on individual enlightenment so typical of the analytic tendency towards cognitive-individualism. Instead, the Chinese adopted the Mahayanic stress on communal and universal salvation through the image of the Bodhisattva. On the cultural level the greatest change was in the was the aforementioned other-worldly inclinations of Indian Buddhism were replaced by

a metaphysics in which the world of Nirvana interpenetrated the mundane Samsaric sphere. As Wing-tsit Chan notes, the “doctrine of illusoriness underwent a radical change in China… which gives equal emphasis to the world of reality and the world of appearance.” Indeed, Buddhism adopted many of the characteristics of native Chinese thought, however, for conservative intellectuals this did not mean it became unrecognizingly Chinese; behind its indigenous appearance, important differences continued to clearly set it apart from the traditional values of the Confucianism. It was these differences that conservative literati were eager to stress as they began to rehabilitate Confucianism as an alternative to Buddhism.

There was yet another important reason for conservative concerns regarding the ascendency of the Chan school. Not only was this form of Buddhism increasingly attractive spiritually at a time when Confucianism was embroiled in bitter factionalism, but it also began to enter the political sphere where Confucianism was traditionally most influential. Indeed, Buddhism’s increasingly central position in the imperial court was extremely bothersome in the eyes of conservative Confucians. This process was supported by what Wang Xinzhu calls the “literati-ization” of Buddhism (僧人文人化), where monks became increasingly immersed in classical learning. Now that Confucianism had very little to offer spiritually, it became clear that if Buddhism became stronger politically, the Chinese tradition would be in real danger of coming under the full domination of a “barbarian” culture. During the Song dynasty Chan Buddhism started attracting patronage from lay elites and the imperial court, leading to a substantial

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intensification of its ties with the state. Not only did emperors refrain from persecuting the Chan school, most of them were sponsoring temples and the translation of sutras, while local government officials were responsible for selecting abbots for public monasteries.\textsuperscript{627} To the distress of conservative Confucians, many court literati started following Buddhism as well, claiming that both traditions had a complementary function in court life.\textsuperscript{628} Even worse, some Confucian literati began to “raise up the rules of the barbarians and put them above the teachings of the early kings, thus being not far removed from being barbarians themselves.”\textsuperscript{629} Equally alarming was that many Buddhist temples became impressive galleries of emperor portraits, a function that was formerly reserved for Confucian ancestral shrines, which were seen as the embodiment of imperial order. Furthermore, Buddhism became more dominant in state cult and even managed to penetrate the examination system, which was supposed to be exclusively dedicated to the Confucian classics.\textsuperscript{630} Charles Wei-Hsun Fu stresses just how real and palpable the Buddhist threat was when he notes that Zhu Xi often “deplored the fact that a great number of Confucian students and scholars in his times had been one by one drawn into

\textsuperscript{627} Wang Xinzhu, ibid., and Kuhn, \textit{The Age of Confucian Rule}, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{628} Wang Xinzhu, ibid., p. 14.
\textsuperscript{629} From Han Yu’s \textit{Yuan Dao} (原道, On the Origins of the Truth) see in Fung Yu-Lan and Derk Bodde, “The Rise of Neo-Confucianism and Its Borrowings From Buddhism and Taoism.” \textit{Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies}, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Jul., 1942): 95. Although this was written centuries before the Song it certainly reflects the state of affairs that led to the Neo-Confucian reaction. In fact, Buddhist influences on the imperial court during the 11th and 12th centuries were far greater than they were during Han Yu’s lifetime.
\textsuperscript{630} Kuhn, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 100-108 passim.; Halperin \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 23-26.
Ch’an Buddhism.”

The famous historian Qian Mu (钱穆) claims that “to him [Zhu Xi] belongs the great credit of keeping China from turning into a Ch’an nation.”

But in spite of the similarities between Chan Buddhism and native Chinese thought there remained essential differences. Feng notes that although Chanists recognized the spiritual potential in carrying water and chopping wood “they did not push this idea to its logical conclusion by saying that in serving one’s family and the State therein also lies the wonderful Tao. The reason, of course, is that once they had said this, their teaching would have ceased to be Buddhism.” Such a statement comes to highlight two things: the first was how successful Chanists were in integrating Buddhist thought into China, and the second is that there remained fundamental differences that were impossible to brush aside. It became the goal of many Neo-Confucians to amplify these differences in order to highlight the cultural discrepancies between the Indian and Chinese worldviews.

On a comparative note, the Confucian concern with Buddhism’s attractiveness was highly reminiscent of the way Kabbalists continuously warned against the allure of Greek thought. In his Reflection on Things at Hand, Zhuxi warns that “A student should forthwith get as far away from Buddhist doctrine as form licentious songs and beautiful women. Otherwise they will soon infiltrate him.” On the Jewish side “Greek wisdom was denounced as the alien concubine who leads Jewish youth astray from the legitimate

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631 Charles Wei-Hsun Fu “Chu Hsi and Buddhism” (quoting Qian Mu) in Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism, pp. 378.
Israelite wife, the Torah…philosophy was thought to be dangerously seductive, like the Moabite women who seduced Israel to the sin of idolatry in the Shitim. After tasting the charms of philosophy, no young man will be willing to return and devote himself to the minutiae of the Talmud.”\footnote{Halbertal, \textit{People of the Book}, pp. 111-112. In his poem "Devarekha be-Mor Over Rekuḥim,” Judah Halevi warned: "Turn aside from mines and pitfalls. Let not Greek wisdom tempt you, for it bears flowers only and no fruit…"} Such sexual allusions in both cases can help us appreciate just how attractive analytical paradigms must have seemed to young intellectuals of the time. The analytic mode of operation offered an accessible and clear road to individual salvation coupled with an inspiring and fresh metaphysical outlook, and a break from tedious scholasticism that must have been extremely attractive to the spiritually-inclined.

In the above section I have emphasized two contemporaneous processes in China. The first was the historical transition from the aristocratic Tang model to the new prosperous and educated elites of the Song. The second was the Buddhist conquest of China and the simultaneous ossification of Confucianism. Seen together, we see a period that gave rise to more intellectual freedom, democratization of knowledge, economic and cultural prosperity, together with the ascendancy of a unified Buddhist tradition (Chan) that spoke to the immediate spiritual and practical needs of growing portions of Chinese society. In what follows I will look at the unique intellectual landscape that emerged as a result of the social and spiritual changes that China was undergoing. As in the Jewish case, the early Song witnessed a striking diversity of contending schools that sought to equip China with a new social, political, and spiritual paradigm for the future.
4.1.4 The Proliferation of Schools

As the great Tang declined, rapidly changing social conditions made it clear to Chinese intellectuals that change was inevitable. A new cultural atmosphere inspired thinkers to understand their position in history in a radically new way. After the events of 755 “men began to ask not how to restore the pre-rebellion past but what the world ought to become.”636 Although the Song managed to unite China after a period of disunity, the beginning of its rule was characterized by uncertainty. This led to a heated debate not un-similar to the famous pre-Qin (221 BCE) philosophical debates of the “Hundred Schools of Thought” (諸子百家). Bol notes that “during the second half of the eleventh century, literati opinion divided into camps, each with its own ideas, creating one of the great eras of debate in China’s history… they were searching for the key to the unity that they believed had existed under the sage-kings in antiquity.”637 It is important to bear in mind that the split into contending groups was an anomaly in Chinese history, where political culture strove towards consensus such that dissident ministers were usually demoted, sent to serve far from the capital, forced to leave office, and frequently exiled. Many conservatives who were resisted change attacked the new proliferation of ideologies as a breaching of custom and an encouragement factionalism (朋黨). According to Dieter Kuhn, creating a faction meant challenging orthodox bureaucracy, which was “trained in subservience based on personal relations and dependence.”638 But change was inevitable,

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636 Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, p. 9
637 Ibid., p. 57; T.W. de Bary following Robert Hartwell notes that there is a general consensus among scholars that the Song period is a time in which intellectual pluralism surpassed any previous dynasty. See de Bary, Learning for One’s Self, p. 33.
638 Kuhn, The Age of Neo-Confucian Rule, p. 53.
the famous Ouyang Xiu composed a memorial *On Factions (Pengdang lun, 明體論)* in which he argued that “superior men form factions based on principles, whereas inferior men come together for selfish interests.” Fractionalism was therefore supported with an ethical and philosophical underpinning and presented as a positive and patriotic phenomenon. The following hundred and fifty years represented the ongoing struggle between these contending factions to articulate a new vision for China’s future.

This is a good place to point out an important difference between Jewish and Chinese factionalism. Leaders of Jewish communities were practically devoid of political power and were therefore at the mercy of Muslim and Christian political authority. Due to their small size they lacked the institutional complexity of highly stratified systems with several governmental levels and responsibilities such as maintaining armies, allocating land, and practicing diplomacy on a broad regional and international scale. The Chinese, on the other hand, boasted one of the most complex and advanced bureaucratic systems known to any culture. The main implication for this study is that the cultural crisis China was facing became manifest in diverse fields and was most obvious in the political sphere where central power was held. In other words, the debate during the early Song period was also related to taxation, commerce, farming, military, and many other aspects that were not so relevant to Jewish communities. What further complicates this picture is the fact that Buddhism, the main factor that Neo-Confucians reacted against, was not clearly associated with any of these political factions. Nevertheless, as we shall see soon, the more politically progressive factions were more tolerant towards Buddhism.

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639 Ibid.
while the conservative Neo-Confucians were adamantly opposed to it. The fact that the
type of factionalism we see in China took place on a broader political arena than the more
theologically-based factionalism in Judaism, should not divert us from the similar
processes that are taking place in both cases. The shift towards a more urban,
technologically advanced, economically prosperous, and cosmopolitan reality in both the
Chinese and Jewish environments meant that the necessary conditions for the acceptance
of analytical systems on a broader level were in place. This was clear in the way
progressive Jews displayed a greater tolerance towards philosophy and how certain
factions during the early Song were more accepting towards Chan Buddhism. In both
cases progressive camps were analytically inclined while conservative camps such as
Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists perceived the analytical stance and the new cultural
conditions that emerged as a clear threat to the Confucian and Rabbinic worldviews.

In order to understand the position of Neo-Confucians we need to become
familiar with the different ideological factions with which they were contending. The
beginning of this factionalism can be traced back to the early reforms of Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹, 989-1052). The details of these initial unsuccessful reforms are less important
than the general impact Fan’s policy had on subsequent generations of Confucians.
Generally speaking, Fan and his followers represented an official acknowledgement that
the current system, inherited from the Tang, was no longer adequate. More importantly,
the crux of Fan’s message was a demand to think creatively about the future, this was
reflected in his attempt to reform the examination system from a model of recitation and
rote memorization of the Five Classics towards their reinterpretation in light to new
realities. Fan’s reformations also made it clear that the central function of government was to serve the people rather than the other way around. He called to take active measures against corrupt officials and to recruit those who were dedicated to healing their nation rather than seeking their own interests. During his tenure “Fan and his followers bombarded the court with requests for reform of a diverse range of fields in political and social life.” In 1050, Fan Zhongyan’s faction drafted a protocol that summarized all the central points of their reform plans. In spite of their failure, these early efforts symbolized a new era of change. Soon after we can detect four major factions in the Chinese political and intellectual landscape.

The first faction was an extension of Fan’s early ideology represented by Ouyang Xiu (歐陽脩, 1007-1072) and later Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037-1101) who stressed the importance of culture (wen, 文). These thinkers or the ‘Ancient Prose’ faction (古文) advocated a more accessible literary prose that stressed one’s opinions and ideas rather than stylistic virtuosity. They believed that government should be dynamic and that

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640 Bol argues that “The spread of the Ancient Style made learning an ideological enterprise. It encouraged its proponents to write about the great issues of the day irrespective of their rank …” He claims that literary style gave precedent for ideas over culture. In regards to Buddhism, Fan Zhongyan denounced its growing influence on the population but especially on the literati class. See Bol, This Culture of Ours, pp.55-56; 170.

641 Berthrong, Transformations, pp. 89-90

642 It is worth noting that by the time of the Song most intellectuals from all factions were using the ancient prose style. Wang Anshi, when still a minor civil servant, used the ancient prose style to advocate a revolutionary approach regarding the role of government. The main difference with Ouyang Xiu’s faction was that instead of stressing literature and art the Wang Anshi faction stressed the Classics while other factions such as the one led by Sima Guang stressed historical analysis. The ancient prose style also represented a new form of transparency and a way to combat hypocrisy among self-seeking civil servants who could formerly hide their real views behind an over-emphasis on the prestige of style and form, a trend that originated with the parallel prose style (pian ti wen, 駢體文) that became popular during the Han Dynasty. Once
thinkers could only be properly cultivated through the study of literature and art. One of the distinguishing characteristics of this factions, perhaps to Fan’s dismay, were its Buddhist undertones; some of its members were Buddhist monks, while others, such as the illustrious literatus Su Shi, showed strong Buddhist inclinations.\textsuperscript{643} The next major faction was associated with the prominent statesman and historian Sima Guang (司馬光, 1019-1086) who advocated modest reformation of the bureaucratic system but strongly opposed a radical restructuring of society. The conservative inclinations of this camp could be discerned in its attempt to reach a stable and static dynastic structure rather than a dynamic one that changes to meet new realities. These conservatives also sought to halt the democratization of the examination system by reintroducing the old recommendation model. This may be a testimony of their attempt to secure the narrow interests of old northern elites, in the same areas in which many Neo-Confucians were working.\textsuperscript{644} The conservative Sima Guang was the main opponent of the most dominant faction composed of radical reformers led by Wang Anshi (王安石, 1021-1086). Wang’s famous New Policies (新法), were probably the most ambitious structural reforms since the Han dynasty. Wang and his faction believed that the political, social, and military systems required a comprehensive overhaul based on strong governmental intervention in content became a central concern, intellectuals were forced to reveal their positions publicly while government could choose officials based their opinions rather than their poetic abilities.\textsuperscript{643} Bol, \textit{Neo-Confucianism in History}, p. 57. 
\textsuperscript{644} Ibid., p. 35. More on the northern aristocrats see p. 56. The elite landowners, especially lenders, were doing everything to impede reforms that diminished their influence in politics. The dramatic reforms of the Song were mainly launched by southerners from a humble background such as Fan Zhongyan, Ouyan Xiu, and Wang Anshi. Unsurprisingly, the conservative Sima Guang who was opposed to reforms was a wealthy northerner that sought to secure the interests of the Luoyang aristocracy.
providing a social safety net for the poor, government loans for farmers, the elimination
of private monopolies and abuse of power by the rich, the promotion of more efficient
agriculture, the encouragement of private commerce, and a more specialized and
professional training of government officials. Wang’s reforms were extreme and
controversial, they promoted a highly progressive approach that sought to get rid of the
old China in favor of a more open and pluralistic educational, bureaucratic, and social
system. Under strong attacks form conservatives Wang’s exceptional efforts at reform
were eventually abolished. One of his main opponents were the fourth faction in our
story, also known as the ‘School of the Way’ or Daoxue (道學) or better yet, what
Western scholars have termed Neo-Confucianism.

The Neo-Confucian school later split into various different strands of thought; the
one we will specifically be concerned with is the School of Principle or what I will
interchangeably refer to as the Lixue School (理學). The lixue thinkers were politically
conservative and tended to support the anti-reformist policies of Sima Guang but they
were also advocating a radically new approach to solving China’s problems. A peculiar
characteristic of the Neo-Confucian school was that it was the most non-political faction

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in its highly competitive environment. Its early leaders Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐, 1017-1073), Zhang Zai (張載, 1020-1077) and later more prominently Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033-1107) were mainly pre-occupied with education, philosophy, personal cultivation, and the propagation of the dao.\textsuperscript{647} They saw the individual, rather than governmental institutions, as the primary channel for the betterment of the world. As mentioned earlier, this camp was also the most explicitly anti-Buddhist school of thought, a point that is of particular importance to this study. As in the case of Kabbalah in its confrontation with philosophy, Neo-Confucianism sought to answer a set of questions raised by Buddhism, and thereby adopted many of its traits in the process. Influenced by Buddhism, the Lixue School argued that reality was founded upon a set of intelligible Principles, or li (理). They argued that through the meticulous investigation of things (wu, 物) and affairs (shi, 事) one could discover these Principles and thereby penetrate ultimate reality and ultimately experience self-transformation. Through the attainment of sagehood, which was a Neo-Confucian equivalent to Buddhist enlightenment, one could contribute to the greater transformation of society and the world. The Neo-Confucian stress on metaphysics gave it a universalist and normative characteristic that made it distinct among other faction which offered seemingly conventional solutions to China’s problems. A point to bear in mind is that all the contending camps in the early Song period sought to dismantle the

\textsuperscript{647} Tillman, \textit{Chu Hsi’s Ascendency}, p. 18. Benjamin Schwartz notes that the Neo-Confucians attacked Wang Anshi’s “emphasis on professional specialization and his reliance on institutional machinery, for the most part maintained their dedication to the perfection of society…men like the mystical Chou Tun-i, who renounced all public office to devote himself exclusively to a life of philanthropic meditation and self-cultivation.” See in “Some Polarities in Neo-Confucian Thought,” in \textit{Confucianism in Action}, p. 53.
Tang paradigm and its claim to antiquity, and they all argued their positions represent the real path of the ancient sages. As in the case of Kabbalists, it was the culturally conservative but speculatively advanced Neo-Confucians that emerged victorious from this cultural factionalism. Neo-Confucians believed that change was to emerge from the grassroots by supplying the Chinese person with a new understanding of his position in the cosmos, and it was in this sense that they were predominantly concerned with spirituality, cosmology, and ethics rather than political reform.

4.1.5 The Decline of the Five Classics

The Song dynasty represents a period in which the Five Classics were slowly supplemented and over shadowed by the Four Books. The Five Classics were the central textual body of classical Confucianism; Gardner claims that “from the Han through the T'ang period, the Five Classics maintained unchallenged their authoritative status in the tradition; they were, without question, its central texts, the ones thought to convey its basic teachings most effectively.” In short, the Five Classics represented the sacred and highly esteemed literature of traditional China; their position was not unlike that of the

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648 Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, p.58.
649 Gardner, “Confucian Commentary and Chinese Intellectual History,” The Journal of Asian Studies 57, no. 2 (1998): 410. Without the guidance of the Classics there was no map for understanding reality and the Way (道): “those who learn them will grow; those who do not learn will fall. When in the great enterprise of governing the ruler honors [these texts], he completes his imperial virtue; when a common fellow can recite them, he wins the respect of nobles.” See Wei Zheng (魏徵) and Linghu Defen (令狐德棻), Sui Shu (隋书) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 32.903 [Chinese]; The Chinese believed that the Five Classics “revealed how the sage-kings had created civilization, governed the empire, and created an ideal integrated social order…” The Classics also had a solid cosmological foundation, the Tang court stated that with them one could make “heaven and earth constant [and] regulate yin and yang.” Bol Neo-Confucianism in History, p. 47.
Bible and Talmud in Judaism. They were the indisputable authoritative body of texts that spawned one of the greatest commentarial traditions in world history. For the Chinese, the Classics were a reflection of an eternal and unalterable truth that generations of Confucians investigated and interpreted in an attempt to understand the nature of reality.

Conservative Song thinkers were advocating a return to native Chinese resources; they warned against the seductiveness of Buddhist philosophy and demanded that people “reject the foreign teachings of Buddhism and embrace anew the cherished values of the native tradition.”650 According to Gardner this cultural crisis fueled the growing interest in classical studies among eleventh century thinkers. Song intelligentsia “turned to the classics with an almost missionary commitment… the foremost intellectuals of the early centuries of the Song all dedicated much of their lives to studying the classics and writing commentaries on them.”651 Through these new commentaries, Song intellectuals attempted to reinterpret the Five Classics in a way that conformed to the new post-Tang realities. Most thinkers pointed out that simply understanding the Classics, especially through the common method of rote memorization was useless. As I have already noted, many demanded a more active and creative approach in which the literatus was expected to offer his own creative interpretation of the text. The main shift that took place in this period was a move away from pre-Song philological exegesis (xungu xue, 訓詁學) to methods of ‘meaning through reason’ (liyi, 理義). As we shall see, the character li (理)

651 Ibid.
although often translated as *principle or pattern*, as in the case of the Neo-Confucian school of Principle, frequently represents the idea of rationality (*lixing*, 理性) or intellect (*lizhi*, 理智). This is a testimony to a the general conceptual shift from the Tang reliance on cultural models to the Song concern with underlying principles and the rational, unified foundations of knowledge. In regards to this shift, Peter Bol notes that the new Song tendency “to develop strategies that could reveal the hitherto unapparent significance of the Classics themselves… undermined the authority of the exegetical tradition of the Han through Tang, as it liberated the new generation to read the Classics for themselves with the aim of developing their own insights.”\(^\text{652}\)

The new elites that dominated the early Song court were clearly signaling to prospective students of the tradition that they were expecting groundbreaking readings of the Classics rather than the regurgitation of past information. This new environment of intellectual freedom led to the gradual reformation of the examination system in which the central portions dedicated to memorization were supplemented with essays, written in a more colloquial and less ornamental language, and oriented towards the “greater significance” (*dayi*, 大意) of the texts.\(^\text{653}\)

\(^{652}\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, p. 62. Similarly, de Bary notes that “The Ch’eng-Chu school, which became known as the school of reason or principle (*li*), since it stressed the objective reason or principle in all things as the basis of learning and conduct.” see “Common Tendencies in Neo-Confucianism,” p. 39.

\(^{653}\) Bol, ibid., pp. 48-53. The Ancient style faction (*Guwen*) was inspired by Han Yu (韓愈) especially by his *The Original Dao* (*Yuan Dao*, 原道). This strand of thought was later associated with Fan Zhongyan, Ouyang Xiu, Hu Yuan, and Su Dongpo. This faction believed that understanding the sages meant returning to their forms of literary writing. It was only through this style, Han Yu argued, that one could comprehend the way of the sages (*聖人之道*). Bol translates it as ‘ancient-stye prose.’ A.C. Graham uses ‘Ancient-Prose.’
The problem Song literati faced was that the classics as they were read with their accepted Tang commentaries such as the official Correct Meaning of the Five Classics (Wujing Zhengyi, 五經正義), were no longer relevant to the new realities of the eleventh century. As in the Jewish case, many Chinese intellectuals started to doubt the ability of the Classics to provide solutions to the urgent problems of the day. In addition to new approaches towards exegesis, Song intellectuals began to problematize the Classics in unprecedented ways. Some, like the reformer Wang Anshi, claimed the Classics were after-the-fact compilations; Wang’s reformist school was known for its new interpretations of the Book of Poetry (詩經), the Book of Documents (書經), and the Zhouli (The Rituals of Zhou, 周禮), which gave this school its name the “New School” taken from their motto ‘the new meaning of the Three Classics’ (三經新義). Others went further by promoting a trend known as “doubting the Classics” in which China’s central corpus was seen as a product of different historical layers. Su Xun, Su Shi’s father, went as far as claiming that the Yijing (The Book of Changes) “was merely a strategy aimed at mystification, a means of getting the populace to think that the order being imposed on them was not a political construction but somehow a natural one.” Such claims demonstrate the exceptional rationalization that was taking over intellectual discourse in China. As in the case of Jewish philosophy, we see an audacious conventionalization of the most fundamental features of the traditions. In China the

654 Works such as Wang Boze’s (王柏撰) Doubting the Songs (時疑), and Doubting the Classics (書疑) emerged at this period.
655 Su Xun Jiayou ji (嘉祐集) 6.1a-2b. see ibid., p. 63.
Classics were suddenly relativized and put into a rational historical context; intellectuals of various faction were denying the “connection between Heaven-and-Earth and the society sages created…[and] because the Classics mediated the present’s understanding, it was not possible to be sure of anything about antiquity.”

All the different factions were wrestling with the Classics, and it was through the traditional channel of commentary that they sought to reinvent their tradition. As part of the trend of “doubting the classics” some intellectuals started showing signs of more radical approaches arguing that the portions of the Classics that did not conform to the principle of rationality (理) and therefore to the true meaning of the sages, did not really belong to the Confucian tradition. But it was only the Neo-Confucians who went a crucial step further by thoroughly revolutionizing China’s classical tradition. Zhu Xi, the greatest articulator of Neo-Confucian philosophy “brought the skepticism towards ancient Classics to new heights.” Instead of confining themselves to reinterpretation, Neo-Confucians became the architects of a textual transition to the Four Books, which gradually replaced the five Classics as the new encapsulation of the timeless dao. As in

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656 Ibid., pp. 62-3.
657 James T. C. Liu, *Ou-Yang Hsiu, an Eleventh-Century Neo-Confucianist* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 92. One of Ou Yangxiu’s main arguments was that the Ten Wings to the Yijing were not composed by Confucius. See Hou Wailu et al., *Song Ming Lixue Shi*, p. 7.
659 Cheng Yi, the early leader of this Lixue School made it clear that “traditional literary and classical studies were no longer adequate to identify a person as being a Confucian,” certainly an assertion that would be unthinkable prior to the Song period. See Tillman, *Zhu’s Acendency*, p. 6.
the case of the Talmud, the Five Classic paradigm was weakened and marginalized by a new textual layer that became the foundation for a new revolutionary worldview.660

4.2 The Three-Phase Progression of Neo-Confucianism

In the chapter on Kabbalah, I divided the tensions between conservatives and progressives into roughly three historical phases: the emergence of philosophy, the confrontation between philosophy and conservatives during the Maimonidean controversies, and the final stage in which conservatives successfully devise a counter-attack to philosophy in the form of theurgic Kabbalah. Since in China similar synthetic/analytic tensions became manifest in both the political sphere and somewhat separately on a more popular religious and philosophical level, a neat periodization is harder to establish. Nevertheless, I do believe that, here too, we see a general three-phase process. In fact, Carsun Chang was aware of this peculiar dynamic when he argued that the historical interaction between Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism was one of a) reconciliation, b) appropriation, and c) counter proposal.661

A short historical comment is important in order to better understand the underlying logic of my periodization. In stark opposition to the undisputed supremacy of the great Han and Tang dynasties, the Song was frequently defeated and forced to pay

660 For more on the reformation of the examination system see David S. Nivison, “Protest against Conventions and Conventions of Protest,” in The Confucian Persuasion, pp. 176-201.
661 Carsun Chang, op. cit., p. 130.
tribute to hostile non-Chinese powers, especially the strong Liao and Jin dynasties.\footnote{Although the Song dynasty was culturally and economically advanced, its shift form Tang militarism (武) towards a reliance on men of culture (文) led to its relative weakness vis-a-vis bellicose barbarian tribes from the north.} For the first time, China was one among other equals, which represented a shift from a traditional unified empire towards a multi-state world, a situation that constantly disturbed the more conservative and nationalistic factions in Chinese politics.\footnote{Bol, \textit{Neo-Confucianism in History}, p. 10.} As a result of this military weakness the Song court was eventually forced to retreat to the south and re-establish its capital at Hangzhou. The Song dynasty is therefore traditionally divided into two periods: the Northern Song (960-1127) and the Southern Song (1127-1279).

In order to avoid confusion, I will focus on the two central factions in the Chinese story, namely, reformers, initially led by Fan Zhongyan and later more prominently by Wang Anshi,\footnote{Although Fan and Wang are usually associated with two different factions, both were nevertheless countered by the conservative camp that the Lixue School was associated with.} and conservatives, represented by the Neo-Confucians.\footnote{Politically, Neo-Confucians had a tendency to support the Sima Guang camp, but this support was never guaranteed, while philosophically they were substantially more creative. One example of philosophical differences was that as opposed to the Lixue School, Sima Guang was not committed to the Mencian lineage of transmission. See Benjamin Schwartz, “Some Polarities in Confucian Thought,” in \textit{Confucianism in Action}, p. 57.} The three phases I will highlight in this story are the following: the first phase is represented by the ascendancy of the analytic threat in the form of Buddhism. The early anti-Buddhist voices of the conservative Tang Confucians Han Yu and Li Ao, were to a great extent a failed attempt to bolster confidence in a waning Confucian tradition at a time when Buddhism was becoming stronger both as a spiritual paradigm as well as a power within...
Chinese politics. This first phase approximately stretching from 800 to 1050 CE was one in which Confucians lacked the intellectual resources to battle Buddhism’s attractive worldview. Readers are reminded that in the Jewish case the first phase was one in which philosophy rapidly gained popularity; Judah Halevi was a solitary anti-rationalist voice that came to represent a kind of prototype of later conservative mystics. Both Halevi and Chinese conservatives such as Han Yu and Li Ao expressed a strong dissatisfaction with new foreign trends in their respective intellectual environments but nevertheless lacked the speculative tools to confront the sophistication of Greek philosophy and Buddhism. Both traditions needed time to gradually devise a mature counter attack to the analytic trends in their respective environments.

The Second phase ran between 1050 to the end of the Northern Song in 1127. This period represents the rise of factionalism with Fan Zhongyan’s early reforms and the emergence of a more acute confrontation between progressive political trends and the conservative Neo-Confucians. In this stage we witness the continued consolidation of Buddhism’s position together with the rise of Wang Anshi’s New Policies; the most ambitious attempt at restructuring the Chinese bureaucratic and social system for over a millennium. In other words, the intensification of rational/analytic trends became apparent both in the form of Buddhism as well as in the form of factions that advocated radical reform to the traditional Confucian system. Two points are worth mentioning with respect to this period. The first is that the progressive Wang Anshi camp represented the increasing rationalization of the bureaucratic system; it was this faction that advocated specialization and the abandonment of the traditionally admired well-rounded generalist.
C.K. Yang argues that this led to an acute conflict between a tendency towards rationalization and specialization on the one hand, and the Chinese traditional reliance on social norms based on consensus and ritual on the other. Wang’s New Policies relied on bureaucratic machinery to achieve social goals, a tendency that was strongly opposed by conservatives who associated such practices with the tragic Legalist experience of the infamous Qin dynasty (221-207 BCE). Edwin Pulleyblank claims that the re-emergence of legalistic trends during the Song disclosed a cold and methodical rationalism, while Benjamin Schwartz notes that Wang Anshi’s progressive rationalism “was not the Confucian “ordering of society” but rather the Legalist goal of “wealth and power”.”

As Schwartz demonstrates, the Wang faction was reminiscent of the rationalism of Xunzi (312–230 BCE) and his students Li Si and Han Feizi who placed “a high valuation on the coercive force of penal law as supplement to li [ritual] in achieving social order and harmony.” In discussing the first indications of an escalating rationalism during the

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668 Schwartz, op. cit., p. 56. Neo-Confucians chose Mencius over Xunzi as the orthodox transmitter of the dao. Xunzi’s rational stance was therefore expelled from the official Neo-Confucian lineage of transmission. In addition to ritual Xunzi stressed penal law and government as supplements to control while Mencius, in line with Neo-Confucianism, focused on one’s inner resources and moral value. Much like Wang’s faction, the Legalists “offered themselves as experts in the arts of enriching and strengthening the state. They strove to create a “rationalized” military and state machine…” Schwartz claims that “Wang was clearly a Legalist; his insistence on new laws and institutions put him on the outer side of the outer realm.” In stark opposition to the stress on the specialized bureaucrat and the refinement of political control, the Lixue School “opposed further tendencies towards bureaucratization in the form of new laws, institutional
Tang dynasty, Pulleyblank notes that these trends culminated in the reform movement of the Northern Sung, best represented by the Wang Anshi camp and its New Policies.669 The progressives endorsed dramatic change, greater equality, and the growing power of the new middle class. They advocated a radical restructuring of traditional models, greater specialization, and the promotion of external formal law as a corrective to the over-reliance on traditional social conventions. Therefore, the tensions between Wang Anshi’s ideology and the Neo-Confucian camp can be seen as a conflict between a progressive rationalism that was very much in tune with the analytic mindset, and a conservative traditionalism reflective of the synthetic worldview.

The anti-conservatisms of the Wang Anshi camp was also expressed in its sympathetic, or at the very least, lack of antagonism towards Buddhism. Wang’s faction did not see Buddhism as a pressing threat; instead, many of its members advocated a form of syncretism with strong Buddhist undertones. This must have been very disturbing for conservative Neo-Confucians who saw the foreign Buddhist tradition as a major danger to the Chinese way of life. It can be said that while progressive factions downplayed the alien origins of Buddhism, conservatives, especially the Neo-Confucian school of Principle, were adamant in drawing a clear line between the Chinese and Indian

669 History shows that these nationalistic sentiments were not misplaced; throughout the Northern Song the Liao managed to annex substantial parts of northern China, or what came to be known as the lost sixteen prefectures. When the Chinese made an alliance with the Jin to win back the lost prefectures, the Jin ended up turning against the Song, which led to the tragic fall of the dynasty in the north and its subsequent humiliating retreat to the south. Pulleyblank, op. cit., p. 114.
worldviews. This xenophobic position was echoed politically as well; one of the most apparent characteristics of Neo-Confucian ideology was its hawkish position towards foreign powers in the north.\textsuperscript{670} Wang and his followers were blamed for the dynasty’s weakness, humiliating surrender to the Jin Dynasty, and the retreat to the south. The second phase between 1050-1127 therefore represents the coming together of several features that led to the intensification of analytic trends in China: Buddhism became a major cultural force at the same time that Wang’s progressive camp was promoting an unprecedented form of political rationalism together with a relative tolerance towards Buddhism, and a weak and pacifying policy towards foreign encroachment. The tragic fall of the Northern Song represented the decisive termination of the progressive camp and the ascendancy of conservative politics during the Southern Song period.

The second point to stress during the second phase was that during the northern Song we witness the gradual emergence of a conservative reaction to the progressive and rational tendencies of the age. While progressives were forcefully promoting Wang’s New Policies, the five Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Northern Song were diligently laying the foundations for a mature and systematic Neo-Confucian paradigm.\textsuperscript{671} This is a phase in which Confucian thinkers, all of whom were very familiar with Buddhism, were beginning to articulate a more mature counter-attack to Buddhist thought. Therefore the second phase is one in which all the threats with which Neo-Confucians were concerned gained the upper hand; Chan Buddhism was threatening to conquer both the hearts of the

\textsuperscript{670} The Liao (907-1119) were Mongolian Khitan people. The Jin were Jurchen people (1115-1234) the predecessors of the Manchus who established the Qing Dynasty in 1644.

\textsuperscript{671} The five Northern Song philosophers are Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Shao Yong, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi.
people as well as the hearts of emperors and many Confucian literati. The radical reforms of Wang Anshi were threatening to replace traditional Confucian conventions with a more specialized and rational bureaucratic system. And barbarian dynasties were humiliating China on the battlefield. The second phase, as in the Jewish case, represents the climax of analytic tendencies together with the gradual ascendency of a more mature conservative position that countered the exaggerated universalism of Buddhism and political reforms.

The third phase was during the Southern Song from 1127 to death of the towering Neo-Confucian Zhuxi (朱熹) in 1200. Zhu Xi was the leader and final articulator of the school of Principle; he successfully systemized the thought of the Northern Song philosophers into a coherent worldview that outstripped all other contending political factions, including Buddhism in the sphere of religion. As in Kabbalah’s reaction to philosophy, this phase is one in which Neo-Confucians offer a well articulated and mature counter attack to the analytic worldview. The third phase is therefore one in which confidence in an updated conservatism reached fruition. Zhuxi himself claimed that “as for Buddhist doctrines, it is all the more necessary to be cautious at all times. [But] after we have come to our own and gained self-confidence, they cannot confuse us anymore.” In stark contrast to the initial phase in which Han Yu deplored the loss of faith in Confucianism and the turn of literati to the foreign Buddhism, in the third phase, attacks against Buddhism became systematic and increased in quantity. Zhuxi represents

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the culmination and completion of the Neo-Confucian project and its reaction to the threats of Buddhism. Like Averroes, Maimonides, and Aquinas, he was behind the important medieval project of integrating analytic thought into systems that were based on a predominantly synthetic worldview.

In conclusion, the three-phase progression I am proposing is as follows; the first phase between 800-1050, represents the beginning of a period of crisis when Confucianism lacked the resources to confront the ascendency of Buddhism. The second phase, between 1050-1127, saw an acute cultural crisis, the proliferation of contending ideologies, the escalation of progressive and rationally inclined political factions, and the beginning of the articulation of Neo-Confucian philosophy in light of Buddhist ideas. Finally, in the third phase during the Southern Song, from 1127 to Zhu Xi death in 1200, we see the counter-attack of a mature Neo-Confucian philosophy that consolidates itself as a new orthodoxy that outstripped progressive factions politically, and Buddhism spiritually.

4.3 THE NEO-CONFUCIAN SCHOOL OF PRINCIPLE (LI XUE)

From a comparative perspective, it is important to stress the direct relationship between the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and the Buddhist challenge, and the similar connection between the rise of Kabbalah and Greek philosophy. Keeneth Ch’en notes that “the Neo-Confucian system would be incomprehensible to one not familiar with the prevailing Buddhist ideas of the age,” while Carsun Chang notes that “the twin motives of a return to Confucianism and the struggle against Buddhism spurred the founders of
Neo-Confucianism to build a philosophical system which was, in a sense a counter-argument against the Buddhist doctrines.” Such statements could easily apply to the relationship between medieval Jewish mysticism and philosophy. Scholars agree that the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic reactions to analytic philosophical systems took the form of appropriation, in which Confucianism and Judaism absorbed Buddhist and Greek ideas respectively. Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah were ultimately oriented towards equipping the synthetic Chinese and Jewish worldviews with analytic tools that were crucial for preserving their relevance in a rapidly changing world. It is perhaps for this reason that the characterization these “defense theologies” by scholars often sounds strikingly similar. Xiang Shilin notes that the Neo-Confucian school of Principle (lixue) was predominantly a “philosophization of Confucianism” (理學是哲學化的儒學). This echoes Gershom Scholem’s claim that the confrontation between medieval philosophy and mysticism led to the “philosophization of Kabbalah.”

Conservative Neo-Confucians attacked those who preferred different forms of syncretism between Confucianism and Buddhism. They were especially opposed to

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673 Kenneth Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, p. 471; Carsun Chang, *Neo-Confucian Thought*, p. 43. Dieter Kuhn claims that the main goal of Neo-Confucianism was the reestablishment of the superiority of Confucianism over Buddhism and Daoism, while in the process it absorbed many of their influences.” *The Age of Confucian Rule*, p. 99. For more on the direct reaction of Neo-Confucianism to Buddhism see Halperin, *Out of the Cloister*, p. 7; Xiang Shiling, *In between Principle, Qi, Nature, and the Mind*. p. 7; Yao Xinzhong, *Introduction to Confucianism*, p. 97.


675 Intellectuals such as Liu Tongyuan and Liu Yuxi called to “harmonize Confucianism and Buddhism” (統合儒佛), while similar calls from Buddhists such as master Qisong (契崧) advocated treating “Confucianism and Buddhism as one thread” (儒釋一貫), see Wang Xinzhu, *Lixue yu Fo Jiao*, p. 27.
Confucian intellectuals, such as the influential literatus Huang Tingjian (黄庭坚, 1045-1105) who continuously stressed the merits of Buddhism and advocated a policy of accommodation rather than confrontation. Other central Confucian intellectuals such as Su Shi and Wang Anshi were fond of Buddhism to different degrees, and generally failed to address its rising position in Chinese culture. Not so with the lixue thinkers, whose solution to the Buddhist conquest was confrontation through appropriation and synthesis; as Carsun Chang notes, the Neo-Confucian project “was not a cross-breeding with Buddhism but rather a declaration of independence from it.” Much like conservative Kabbalists who were familiar with Greek philosophical ideas, most conservative Neo-Confucians went through a Buddhist phase before they returned to passionately defend their native traditions. In both the Jewish and Chinese contexts we see that it is precisely those thinker who were familiar with the challenging systems of philosophy and Buddhism, who became instrumental in articulating a native counter-attack to the analytical paradigm. Here I want to focus on the Neo-Confucian School of Principle as an outcome of direct reaction to the Buddhist system.

676 Also see Edwin G Pulleyblank, “Neo-Confucianism and Neo-Legalism in T’ang Intellectual life,” where a Confucian Literati praises the Tiantai Buddhist Liang Su and one of the forerunners of the Guwen movement: “who but this man could move great Confucians?” Pulleyblank uses this as an illustration of how little conflict was felt between Confucianism and Buddhism prior to Han Yu’s “intransigent attitude.” p. 95.
677 Carsun Chang, op. cit., p. 43
678 Even the staunchest critics of Buddhism such as Han Yu forged very close relationships with prominent Buddhist monks. See Judith Berling claims that Confucian intellectuals publicly attacked Buddhists but privately admired many of their teachings. Indeed, almost all of the most prominent Neo-Confucians were well versed in Buddhism and were very much aware of its intellectual allure and cultural merits. The Syncretic Religion, p. 31; 133.
A few historical details are necessary in order to understand Song Neo-Confucianism in a broader context. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) when Confucianism was declared as state orthodoxy under the influence of the famous official Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179-104 BCE), we witness a successful integration of Confucius’ political and social philosophy with Yin Yang and Five Element cosmology. Inspired by Dong’s commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Classic* (*Chun-Qiu Fanlu*, 春秋繁露), Han dynasty Confucianism provided a coherent and comprehensive worldview that established a crucial link between the mundane and trans-mundane spheres such that political and social activities resonated with transcendent realities. It provided Confucianism with a crucial metaphysical legitimacy that managed to persevere for the four centuries of Han rule. By the end of the Han, however, this model fell from grace followed by a period of disunity and social chaos of over three centuries, known as the Wei-Jin Period (222–589, 魏晋南北朝). It was during this period, when Confucianism was pushed to the background, that Buddhism and Daoism went through one of their most creative phases. Although Confucianism reemerged as state orthodoxy during the Tang period, it failed to support itself with a convincing and updated metaphysical underpinning. It fell into a dogmatic slumber at the same time that Buddhism was making inroads into every possible enclave of Chinese society.

679 Dong Zhongshu’s commentary is usually referred to as the *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*. Dong helped further develop what A.C. Graham called a ‘correlative philosophy.’ Beyond the cosmologization of Confucianism the new Han ideology perceived Confucius in spiritual terms as China’s greatest sage king, rather than a mere teacher or transmitter of culture (文). This is another indication of the normative and religious undertones of the Han model.  
680 More accurately, the “Wei-Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties Period,” sometimes referred to as the Six Dynasties Period.
Among the contending factions during the early Song, it was the School of Principle that stressed the urgency of establishing a relevant metaphysical foundation for the Confucian tradition. It is for this reason that Neo-Confucianism saw countering Buddhism as such a pressing task. They also understood that the construction of a new cosmological foundation went hand in hand with providing individuals with private channels for spiritual cultivation. One of the greatest achievements of the conservative school of Principles was its ability to re-equip Confucianism with the cosmological and spiritual foundation it lacked since the Han dynasty. The painstaking work of lixue thinkers provided a viable alternative to the new needs of a population that was increasingly attracted to Buddhism. The Neo-Confucian project successfully integrated the individual, social, political and metaphysical aspects of reality into a unified and comprehensive native ideology. This synthesis integrated the powerful tools of the Indian analytic worldview with local synthetic sensibilities thereby offering an alternative to the attractive Buddhist model. Consequently, Buddhism gradually lost its vigor while Neo-Confucianism came to dominate the Chinese religio-philosophical landscape until the modern age. In the following pages I will look as how the school of Principle managed to accomplish this successful synthesis, and most importantly, how lixue thinkers successfully outstripped other contending Confucian schools in their highly polemical intellectual landscape.
4.3.1 The Four Books

In discussing the decline of the Five Classics, I showed that early Song thinkers began doubting their traditional canon. However, in spite of doubts regarding the normative status of the Five Classics, this period was characterized by a clear intensification of commentarial activity and a simultaneous move from philology towards a more probing examination of the meaning of the texts. As Gardner notes, the increase in commentarial activity “arises often in the Confucian tradition as a response to the presence of cultural or religious tension and discontinuity.”

681 Being aware of the striking similarities between the Confucian and Rabbinic commentarial traditions, Gardner claims that just like Confucian commentary reacts to “cultural and intellectual pressures that must be addressed… Midrash comes into play as a way of resolving crisis and reaffirming the traditions of the past.”

682 As Gardner states, in both traditions the strong reliance of commentary meant that thinkers resorted to commentarial reinterpretation as a means for dealing with changing environments and cultural pressures. In Judaism, this intensification was apparent in the multiple commentaries written on Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Creation) as well as the publication of the Zohar, which was formatted as a Midrashic commentary on the Torah. Both traditions focused on interlinear commentary,

a literary genre “that gives interpretive elasticity… permitting the tradition to reshape
itself in response to changing times and audiences, to meet the intellectual and cultural
challenges it confronts.”

But by the Song period, even such creative commentaries were no longer
sufficient. As in the Talmudic case towards the tenth century, the Five Classics seemed to
lack the internal resources for articulating a potent alternative to the spiritual and social
yearnings of a population that was increasingly finding answers in Buddhism. As part
of this grand reappraisal of the classical tradition Confucians started searching beyond the
Five Classics; the natural place to begin was in the wider corpus known as the Thirteen
Classics (shisan jing, 十三經). Through a long process of selection that can be traced
back to Tang Confucians, a new group of texts came to the fore. By the time of the great
synthesizer Zhu Xi during the Southern Song, these texts were printed together and
known as the Four Books (四書). The Analects (論語), The Mencius (孟子), The Great
Learning (Daxue, 大學), and The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong Yong, 中庸) were singled
out as the new classical corpus of the Chinese tradition and were expected to be mastered

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684 Gardner, Four Books, p. xxi. As Gardner notes this was especially the case with the Chan sect
that attracted many literati who were supposed to be the defenders of Confucianism.
685 The Thirteen Classics consisted of the Five Classics including the further division of the
Classic of Ritual into three parts (the Liji, Zhouli (周禮), and Yili (儀禮)), the three commentaries
on the Spring and Autumn Annals (the Zuo Zhuan (左傳), the Gongyang (公羊傳), and Guiyang
(穀梁傳)), the Analects of Confucius, the Mencius, the Xiaojing (Classic of Fliial Piety - 孝經),
and the Erya (Dictionary for ancient characters - 爾雅).
686 Sometimes referred to as the Four Masters (四子書).
before the traditional Five Classics. In 1315 the Yuan dynasty institutionalized them as the central learning material for the imperial exams, a trend that continued until the fall of the imperial order in the early twentieth century.

The prioritization of the Four Books over the Five Classics represents a thorough reorientation of Chinese thought. While non-dramatic changes could have been dealt with through commentary, the new realities of the Song required a bold step towards a reappraisal of the literary corpus. As opposed to the contingent status of historical analysis advocated by Sima Guang or the new commentaries on the Classics proposed by Wang Anshi, lixue thinkers offered a radically innovative ontology to support their new views. Like Buddhists, they presented their ideas in the form of the “really real” or the “things in themselves.” The new informational locus of the Confucian tradition was now the Four Books, which constituted a coherent religio-philosophical system. Most importantly, these books were accompanied by Zhu Xi’s meticulous interlinear commentary, which interpreted them in light of Neo-Confucian philosophy. From a comparative perspective, the point to stress here is that in both the Chinese and Jewish traditions we see a cultural crisis in which the central textual corpus of the tradition is found to be unsatisfactory for a new age. In both cases, old classics are not jettisoned but rather supplemented by a new corpus that is presented as the true meaning of the sages. According to both groups, these new texts penetrated deeper metaphysical layers of reality that were not made explicit in the older texts. As I have shown earlier, medieval mystics were never reluctant to stress that rather than the Talmud, it was the Kabbalistic

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687 The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean were originally two chapters in the Classic of Ritual (Book of Rites).
interpretation of the Bible that gave access to the deepest truths of Judaism. Neo-Confucians similarly argued that the Four Books contained the true and more profound meaning that the sages sought to transmit.

The decline of the Five Classics meant that the whole Chinese pedagogical system was transformed as well. All contending factions in the early Song period were arduously seeking for inventive ways to reform the examination system, but it was only the Neo-Confucians, much like the Kabbalists with the Zohar, who managed to supply the tradition with a new textual body that successfully synthesized traditional concerns with features that derived from the analytic mode of operation. In doing so, both Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists had to somehow legitimize the radical and abrupt changes they introduced into their respective traditions. Both groups labored to prove the authenticity of their new textual orientations: the Zohar was attributed to the great second century Tannaic figure Shimon Bar-Yohai, while the Four Books were attributed to Confucius and his students. As mentioned, Neo-Confucians also followed Chan Buddhists in creating their orthodox lineage of transmission (daotong, 道統) which established the wisdom of the Four Books as originating with the great sages of the Shang and Xia, and transmitted to the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, Mencius, and finally the Neo-Confucians themselves. I will say more about the specific contents of the Four Books later; in this section it was important for me to stress that Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah do not represent mere change but rather the rise of a new paradigm that

688 The Great Learning was traditionally attributed to Confucius’ most influential disciple Zengzi, while The Doctrine of the Mean was attributed to Confucius’ grandson Zisi. This version of the authorship of the Four Books was promoted by Zhu Xi but has been frequently questioned by later Chinese intellectuals.
necessitated the construction of a brand new textual orientation on which a groundbreaking worldview could be established. As in the case of all sacred religious texts, the Four Books functioned as an informational kernel from which a complex and coherent worldview regarding metaphysical realities, ethics, self-cultivation, and education radiated. Together with the official commentaries that supplemented them, the Four Books were an encapsulation of the new lixue philosophy, oriented towards all the themes that were relatively scarce in classical Confucianism. This was especially clear in their focus on a more metaphysical worldview and a greater concern with self-cultivation. As for their structure and language, one of the most obvious characteristics of the Four Books was their accessibility and clarity.

4.4 THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

I showed earlier that medieval Jewish thinkers consciously tried to make religious discourse more accessible to ordinary people. This was one of the central goals of Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah and it was certainly the case in the unprecedented dissemination of accessible Kabbalistic manuals in late thirteenth-century Castile. I have shown that the new types of theologies that emerged in Judaism were ones that downplayed the role of the Talmudic institution with its complex and inaccessible methodologies and time consuming training, in favor of systems that could be grasped as a coherent unity that was relevant to the needs of a more sophisticated population, especially individuals who were not affiliated with any official institution. In other words,

689 Julia Ching, Chinese Religions, p. 158.
medieval philosophers and mystics started a new page, so to speak, from which the ordinary believer could embark. These systems, in spite of their speculative sophistication, were more accessible to the participation of an educated audience that had very little prospects, and perhaps little interest, in establishing itself in Talmudic studies. I also discussed the new forms of transmission that became prevalent in this period enabling broader dissemination; this was especially apparent in the shift from conservative oral transmission to more easily transportable and concise written formats. Technologically, the use of paper became more pervasive and much cheaper than the earlier parchment. These new conditions facilitated an unprecedentedly broad and pluralistic participation in religious discourse. Although the Neo-Confucian story is substantially different, a very similar dynamic is nevertheless apparent. Both Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism attracted members by presenting coherent and attractive systems that offered people an accessible and unified theory of reality. Most importantly, these systems democratized knowledge such that their target audiences were not expected to be part of the orthodox establishment.

In the case of Neo-Confucians the move towards the democratization of knowledge could not be more apparent. The most dramatic event with respect to this

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690 As in the shift from oral transmission among the circle of the Rabad, or Nahmanides’ conservative mystical allusions in his commentary to the Torah, to written transmission in Castile.
691 Once Kabbalah managed to popularize itself on a broad scale it “returned” to the restricted and highly opaque discourse of the Zohar while Jewish philosophy slowly left the scene, or more accurately, was assimilated into the speculative theology of Kabbalah. Isaiah Tishby shows that there was a constant oscillation between mystically inclined and philosophically inclined thinkers among Kabbalists. See Tishby, “Berur Netivei Ha-Hagshama ve Ha-Hafshta Ba-Kabbalah,” in Netivei Ha-Emuna U-Minut: Masot U-Mehkarim be-Sifrut Ha-Kabalah Ve-Hashabta’ut (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964).
growing accessibility of information was first and foremost the shift from the Five Classics to the Four Books. According to Zhu Xi, the Four Books were characterized by “ease, immediacy, and brevity” that ensured the essential teachings of the Neo-Confucian traditions would reach the widest audience possible.692 Gardner argues that “to restore the Way (dao 道) — socially, politically, and intellectually—the Way had to be made accessible… the original Five Classics were too lengthy, linguistically archaic and challenging, and, in places, almost incomprehensible. Over and over again in writings and in conversations, Zhu Xi encourages students to begin their study of the Way with the Four Books…”693 Not only were the Four Books short, clear, and accessible, they were also traditionally printed with Zhu Xi’s “user-friendly” interlinear commentary that further helped students understand the meaning of the texts. Of special relevance is that the style in which people were writing during the Song dynasty, including Zhu Xi, was much more accessible than the language of the Five Classics. Today it is customary to differentiate between the archaic and complex ‘classical’ Chinese and the more accessible ‘literary’ Chinese of the Song. In his overview of the evolution of written Chinese, A.C Graham specifically highlights Chan Buddhists and Neo-Confucians as a new phase in which information was communicated in a highly colloquial form.694 Coupling these schools together is not a coincidence; as scholars have pointed out, the new accessibility of Neo-Confucian works was to a great extent modeled upon the new

693 Gardner, Four Books p. xxiv; Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, p. 8.
694 Graham, Disputers, p. 390.
and highly popular literary genres of the Chan school. Halperin and Gardner claim that Neo-Confucians were influenced by Chan Buddhism’s *Lamp Histories* (*denglu*, 燈錄) and *Recorded Conversations* (*yulu*, 語錄); the former was used by Chanists to establish their lineages of patriarchal succession which were later emulated by Neo-Confucians, while the latter genre, the *Recorded Conversations*, was the origin of important Neo-Confucian texts such as the *Recorded Conversations of the Cheng Brothers* (*Er Cheng Yulu*, 二程語錄). Instead of archaic classical language, scholasticism, and commentary, Chanists and later Neo-Confucian works, focused on an accessible pedagogy, lectures, and stories in a semi-vernacular language that presented information directly to the individual without assuming a direct contact with a master or a prior understanding of the classical tradition.\(^{695}\) So clear and accessible were these new genres that the Song literatus Huang Tingjian was worried lest individuals reach enlightenment without the supervision of a teacher.\(^{696}\) According to Gardner, the new accessibility of Chan literature “played a major role in how Sung literati learned about the [Chan] religion.” Neo-Confucians came to appreciate the instrumentality and efficiency of Chan methodologies and went on to emulate these literary formats in their own writings. As opposed to the Tang dynasty, these new formats “had a wider and more popular audience in mind.”\(^ {697}\) The abundance of these accessible Chan genres “permitted Sung clergy to create a new discursive space, releasing them in part from the weight of scriptures and commentaries inherited from the

\(^{695}\) Halperin, *Out of the Cloister*, pp. 10-11. Fung Youlan contends that the conversations of the Chanists were recorded for those who didn’t have a direct master, a custom that was later taken up by Neo-Confucians. *Short History*, p. 257.
\(^{696}\) Halperin, ibid., p. 11.
\(^{697}\) Ibid., p. 11-12.
past...[they] presented Buddhism in a novel way and could well have prompted the laity to approach Buddhism from new perspectives.”698 This characterization of Chanism could not be more appropriate in describing the essence of the Neo-Confucian project, which offered initiates an unprecedentedly accessible platform to enter the tradition while avoiding the informational burden of the old Classics.

Meng Peiyuan notes that Neo-Confucianism reflects an unprecedented rationalization and popularization of what he calls literati religion (人文宗教), stressing the new spiritualistic tendencies of Confucianism.699 Beyond the borrowing of literary genres it has also been convincingly argued that the famous Neo-Confucian academies (书院) were themselves modeled upon Buddhist monasteries that specialized in preparing monks for the Confucian examination system.700 Linda Watson shows clear parallels between the institutions both in physical architecture as well as in religious and social function. She also claims that there was a clear “element of competition between the Buddhist community and the supporters of the academies for both material and human resources as well as territorial claims.”701 More importantly, Watson notes that the popularity of Buddhist institutions “created the perception of need for a Confucian—and distinctly elite—counterpart, the academy, which contributed both to the construction of

698 Ibid. [my brackets]
701 Linda Walton, Academies and Society, p. 17.
a new social and cultural identity for the *shih* [literati] and to the “transformation through education” (*chiao-hua*) of local society.” Finally, the Neo-Confucian academies that emerged all over China functioned as a network of local institutions that facilitated the efficient transmission of information among those who were distant from centers of power.

Beyond the language used and the clarity of the newly selected textual nexus of Neo-Confucianism, *lixue* thinkers authored introductory works to the Four Books, the most famous of which was the *Jin Si Lu* (*Reflections on Things at Hand*, 進思路), co-authored by Zhu Xi and Lu Zuqian (1137–81). This influential work introduced the most central ideas of Neo-Confucian thought selected from the philosophies of the four early masters of the Northern Song that preceded Zhu Xi. The highly popular *Jin Si Lu* functioned as a gateway to Neo-Confucian philosophy and was successful in luring in some of its most gifted thinkers. The important Neo-Confucian Chen Chun (陳淳, 1153–1217), author of the famous *Beixi Ziyi* (*Neo-Confucian Terms Explained*, 北溪字義) became a passionate advocate of Neo-Confucianism after reading the *Jin Si Lu*. This is only one famous example of how the new literary accessibility of Song works attracted young intellectuals to Neo-Confucianism. Chen Chun’s *Beixi Ziyi*, being a glossary or basic Neo-Confucian terms, was itself an example of how Song intellectuals sought to make their philosophy more accessible to a rapidly growing pool of educated people.

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702 Ibid. [my square brackets].
703 These were, Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. There were five masters of the Northern Song but Zhu Xi did not include Shao Yong in the *Reflections* since he found his thought was too Daoist.
Technological advancements were another important factor in the growing accessibility of information. In spite of continuous complaints by thinkers such as Su Shi and Zhu Xi regarding the negative consequences of mass printing, it is clear that printing technology was one of the major factors behind the meteoric dissemination of Neo-Confucian thought.\(^{704}\) As Bol notes “Neo-Confucianism was spreading at precisely the moment when commercial printing was becoming common, and many counties had a printer or two, thus ensuring that more texts were put into circulation and more survived…private wealth was increasing, making it possible for Neo-Confucians to raise the money necessary to print their books…”\(^{705}\) Dieter Kuhn, draws a parallel between advancements in printing technology during the Song and the appearance of the personal computer in the twentieth century; in both cases, he argues, we see complete revolutions in the way people conceive of information, its availability, and channels for its dissemination.\(^{706}\)

This section has provided a general background of the political, social, and economic conditions that gave rise to the Neo-Confucian School of Principle (lixue). In spite of many differences with the story of Kabbalah, we can detect general processes that are common to both the Jewish and Chinese experiences. In both contexts, we see the

\(^{704}\) Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 42. Both Zhu Xi and Su Shi were concerned that the quality of scholarship will be compromised as a result of the growing accessibility of printed texts. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, pp. 39-41.

\(^{705}\) Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, pp. 39-40. *Neo-Confucianism in History*, pp. 2-3. See also Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule*, pp. 3-4; 41. Interestingly, Buddhists began to use advanced printing techniques close to two centuries before they became prevalent among Confucian circles. I think this is related to the interest in disseminating information among analytic traditions.

\(^{706}\) Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 43. Both Kuhn and Bol agree that printing became the main channel of communication among Confucian circles during the Song.
growing influence of analytic systems that were exerting pressures on the native Neo-
Confucian and Rabbinic paradigms. Such analytic worldviews found a fertile ground
during a period of unprecedented literacy, individualistic thinking, technological
advancement, and economic prosperity among a new dynamic middle class. In both cases
we see that analytic pressures were countered by conservative schools of thought that
sought to protect their native traditions. In both cases, these adaptations necessitated a
profound reorientation of a traditions’ textual orientation reflected by the abrupt rise of a
new textual corpus that claimed to contain the authentic meaning of the tradition. In both
cases, the people behind these revolutions belonged to a second elite of dynamic and well
educated conservative intellectuals that were destined to replace the old elites that
preceded them. In the following three sections I will show how Neo-Confucians went
through a similar process to that of Kabbalists. Both managed to successfully synthesize
cognitive, social, and cultural elements from the synthetic mode of operation with
analytical features that originated in the Indo-European traditions they were challenged
by.
4.5 THE COGNITIVE LEVEL

In the following sections, I will explore the changes that Confucianism underwent in its attempt to restructure its classical worldview to suit the new realities of the Song dynasty. This restructuring of the Confucian way is what we generally refer to as Neo-Confucianism, which consisted of two central strands: a) the more dominant and influential Neo-Confucian School of Principle or the Lixue School with which this study concerned, and b) its rival school, the Neo-Confucian School of Mind (or Mind/Heart) also known as the Xinxue School (心學). That these schools continuously blamed each other for being too Buddhist is a reminder of how profound the Indo-Buddhist impact on Neo-Confucianism was. Contrasting these schools can be helpful in understanding the different strategies traditions use in their confrontation with foreign pressures. As in the case of theurgic Kabbalah and ecstatic Kabbalah, understanding why one school managed to prevail over the other can give us clues as to what consists of a successful restructuring of a tradition.

Before I proceed to explore the analytic strategies that Neo-Confucians adopted from the Indo-Buddhist worldview, it is important to stress an important difference between the Chinese and Jewish experiences. In the chapter on Kabbalah, I highlighted a dynamic of appropriation of Greek analytic features and their subsequent subordination to synthetic sensibilities. This was an effective conservative strategy for safeguarding the exclusive nature of Judaism, a defense mechanism against assimilation in a hostile

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707 Beyond mutual attacks within Neo-Confucianism, the Qing dynasty School of Evidential Research (考證) which was dedicated to philology and historical analysis also represented a revolt against Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Scholars of evidential research frequently attacked Neo-Confucianism as being too Buddhist.
Due to the very different historical, sociological, and political conditions of China, and especially due to the fact that Chan Buddhism came to adhere to increasingly synthetic modalities of operation, the Neo-Confucian reaction to Chan was very different from the Jewish reaction to philosophy. As mentioned earlier, Chanists discarded many of the analytic features of Indian Buddhism such as the intricate and logically oriented discussions of the *skandhas*, the *nidanas* (dependent origination), structured forms of argumentation, and complex classificatory schemes. Unlike the Neo-Confucian School of Mind that confronted the Chan school with an approach reminiscent of Chan doctrines, the Neo-Confucian School of Principle resorted to many features of the Huayan school which was substantially more rational and analytic in nature. In other words, while Chan Buddhism was becoming increasingly Chinese, the Neo-Confucian School of Principle tapped into some of the most analytical features of Buddhism that Chan sought to downplay. To mention only three obvious cases, *lixue* philosophers adopted Huayan and Tiantai’s highly analytic inclination towards interpreting reality in terms of reified categories, especially the familiar Indo-European duality between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds. They also followed the Huayan notion that “one is all, and all is one” or as Neo-Confucians called it “Principle (理) is one, its manifestations are many” (理一分殊). Finally, the *lixue* school adhered to a gradualist approach towards the attainment of sagehood rather than the intuitive method of Chanists that was distinctly Chinese. This influence has been noticed by scholars who have traditionally argued that whereas Chan Buddhism was more influential on the Neo-Confucian school of Mind (心)

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it was the more rational and analytical Huayan and Tiantai schools that had the strongest impact on the School of Principles.\textsuperscript{709}

The result of this strategy was that unlike Kabbalah, in which analytic features were guised and eclipsed by synthetic tendencies, in some cases, the Lixue School represents an intensification of analytic tendencies in respect to Chan Buddhism. Ironically, it confronted the successful “synthetification” of Chan with a Confucian leaning towards analytic strategies of meaning. Whereas Buddhism had to assimilate itself to the Chinese mindset, Neo-Confucians went in the opposite direction and used the powerful analytic features of Buddhism as a potent tool for confronting the Chan school. It is important to note that the process of appropriation and subordination is not at all absent in Neo-Confucianism but it was used more selectively than in the case of Kabbalah. As we shall see in the social and cultural levels, in many respects Neo-Confucians borrowed Buddhist features and went on to prioritize traditional concerns over those borrowings, just as Kabbalists did. The next section however, which will deal with the cognitive level of these borrowing is a good example of how the Neo-Confucian School of Principle disclosed an escalation in rational tendencies vis-a-vis Chanism.

\textbf{4.5.1 Atomization of Data}

As demonstrated in the second chapter, classical Confucianism lacked the type of stratification of data characteristic of Indian philosophy and early Buddhism. This substantially changed during the Song dynasty. The Lixue School can be seen as the first

\textsuperscript{709} Hou Wailu, Qiu Hansheng, Zhang Kaizhi, \textit{Song Ming Lixue Shi [The History of the School of Principle during the Song and Ming Dynasties]}. Vol. 1. (Beijing: Renmin Press, 2005), p. 7.
time that the Confucian tradition demonstrates a highly analytic approach towards presenting information. As in the case of Jewish philosophy, and later Kabbalah, Neo-Confucians found it crucial to clearly define their metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical concepts. The notion of li (理, Principle) for instance, a fairly marginal term prior to Neo-Confucianism, was used as a mechanism to stratify reality into a matrix of ordered and interrelated categories.\footnote{Scholars have offered many different translations for the concept of li: Feng Youlan suggested “Platonic Form,” see A History of Chinese Philosophy, vol. 2, p. 537; Joseph Needham suggested “organization” or “organism,” in Science and Civilization in China (Taipei: Caves Books, 1985), Vol. 2, p. 302; A.C. Graham’s translation was “Correlative Pattern,” see “The Ch’eng-Chu Theory of Human Nature,” in Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), p. 421; Willard Peterson, followed by Bol offer “coherence,” see Peterson “Another Look at Li,” Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies 18 (1986): 14; Anthony Cua translated li as “reasoning” or “reason” in Ethical argumentation: A Study in Hsun Tzu’s Moral Epistemology (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985). I follow Wing-tsit Chan’s the “Principle.”} Every object and affair in the universe had its Principle. Under the influence of the Huayan school, Zhu Xi created a dichotomy between li and qi (氣) which became the foundation of Neo-Confucian thought. The latter, qi, is fairly well known and represents the material force that constitutes reality.\footnote{The Huayan distinction was between li and shi (事), best exemplified in Fa Zang’s Treatise on the Golden Lion.} Li represented the most fundamental organizing principle of reality as a whole, as well as that which makes distinctions between categories or family resemblances. In other words, whereas classical Chinese philosophy understood the world as composed of qi, it never provided an explanatory framework for understanding what makes qi form into a tree rather than a human or a chair for instance. Following the typical Indo-European distinction between form and matter, or phenomena and noumena, Neo-Confucians introduced the notion of li as a patterning concept that differentiated qi into different
categories of existence. Since qi has no boundaries and no clear laws of operation, li was introduced as a notion that patterns qi according to objective rules. Qi manifests itself as a tree because it “clings” to the universal Principle or Form of a tree. This same logic was applied to all categories of existence, both things, such as the li of a dog, the li of leaf, or the li of hand fan, as well as to social affairs, such as the li of filial piety, or the li of benevolence. The famous Neo-Confucian dictum li yi fen shu (理一分殊) or “principle is one, its manifestations are many” reflects this greater tendency towards the clear fragmentation of the phenomenal world in Neo-Confucianism. This new interest which has been explored in depth by Buddhists, represents a typical Indo-European concern with the nature of reality as a collection of ontological categories that are unified under a coherent cosmic principle. Such questions had never been of particular interest before the advent of Buddhism, which introduced into Chinese thought a more nuanced interest in the relationship between reality’s presumably fragmentary nature and man’s attempt to understand that reality in terms of unity and coherence.

Neo-Confucian terminology was derived from the Classics, especially the Yijing from which important terms such as shu (數, numbers), xiang (象, Images), wu xing (五行)

712 In the Zhuzi Yulei (朱子語類) Zhuxi states: “In terms of the myriad things considered as a whole there is only one principle, but in terms of individual things, each thing has its own principle.” 合天地萬物而言, 只是一個理, 及在人則又各自有一個理 (語類, 卷一). A frequent metaphor Zhu uses to express the relationship between the one and the many is “The moon’s reflects on a thousand rivers” 月印萬川. This metaphor was borrowed from Chan discourse.

713 Most commentators agree that Zhuxi’s ”principle is one its manifestation are many“ (理一分殊) is derived from Hauyan’s “the one and the many reflect each other” (一多相攝). See for example Chen Lai, Zhuzi Zhexue Yanjiu (Shanghai: Haudong Shifan Daxue Chubanshi, 2000), p. 117.
行, five elements), *li* (理, Principle), *taiji* (太極, The Supreme Ultimate), *sheng sheng bu xi* (生身不息, ceaseless change), and *dao* (道, the way) originated. Although these terms came from Chinese native resources, the way Neo-Confucians used them was nothing short of revolutionary; and most importantly, all these terms take on a more distinct and focused meaning. Before Neo-Confucianism, one was forced to extract the meaning of Confucian philosophy from the narrative of the Classics, there was no explicit explication of central terms, only examples or ‘pronouncements.’ With Neo-Confucianism this dramatically changes; important books such as Cheng Duanmeng’s *Glosses of Terms for Nature and Principle*, and Chen Chun’s *Beixi Ziyi* (Neo-Confucian Terms Explained) were authored in order to give young enthusiasts a clear and accessible exposition of the meaning of central Neo-Confucian concepts. A wide range of terms such as *xin* (heart-mind, 心), *ming* (destiny, 命), *cai* (capability, 才), *qing* (emotions, 情), *xing* (nature, 性), *yi* (will, 意), *zhi* (purpose, 志) were explicated in detail in an attempt to eliminate ambiguity. Neo-Confucianism fragmented existence into clear categories that

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714 The central concept of *li* (Principle) is especially important in the Neo-Confucian context. In the famous *xici* or the Great Treatise of the *Yijing* we see the phrase: 易簡, 而天下之理得矣；天下之理得, 而成位乎其中矣 - “once one attains ease he will receive the patterns of Heaven. Once the patterns of Heaven are attained one will adequately position himself between Heaven and Earth (*xici* 1:1). Among Confucians the term *li* is especially common in the rational philosophy of Xunzi where it is frequently contrasted with chaos (*luan*, 亂). e.g. *Xunzi* 2:3: 少而理曰治, 多而亂曰秏, “Doing little but conforming to principle will lead to order while doing a lot but avoiding principle will lead to confusion.” [my translation based on James Legge]. Another important terminological dyad 形而上, “the world above things” and 形而下, the “world within things” denoting the metaphysical and physical worlds respectively, also originated in the *Ten Wings* of the *Yijing*. Other concepts were taken from other classics; the important distinctions between the Human Mind and the Mind of Heaven originated in the Classic of History in the section known as ‘The Plan of Yu the Great (尚書, 大禹謨). Naturally, many important terms came from the *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Two central examples are the former’s 格物, “investigation of things” and the Mean’s 慎獨 “vigilance in solitude.”
made it more neat, differentiated, and rationally decipherable. This was a fairly abrupt departure from classical modes of analysis. Meng Peiyuan notes that as opposed to the past and even in contrast to the Neo-Confucian School of Mind, “the ‘model of deconstruction’ reflects one of Zhuxi’s central characteristics where he emphasizes the distinct differentiation of concepts.”

Carsun Chang stresses Neo-Confucianism’s heightened interest in terminological exactitude and logical interpretation when he notes that in Zhuxi’s controversies with Lu Jiuyuan, Chen Liang, and others, “hardly a sentence occurs in which there is not reference to one logical principle or another, such as definition, law of contradiction, universals or particulars, inductive or deductive method, or line of demarcation between the metaphysical and physical spheres… Though Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi] wrote nothing explicit about logic, there can be no doubt that he was a logical thinker.” On the cosmological level, Livia Kohn notes that Neo-Confucianism discloses a clear shift towards the substance metaphysics of Buddhism. Here again, we see a more analytical temperament that strives to pinpoint the ontological foundations of reality in terms of discrete substances. The analytic inclinations of Neo-Confucianism were also apparent in Cheng Yi’s theory of concentration, or jing (敬, seriousness). According to Cheng Yi, the student is expected to concentrate the Mind (心) such that it becomes focused on the

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715 Meng Peiyuan, *Zhuxi Zhexue Shilun*, p. 96. [my translation].
716 Carsun Chang, pp. 274-275. Chang claims that Zhuxi “attached great importance to definition. It is known that he weighed every word before he wrote it down, and that he made strenuous efforts to determine the precise meaning of every word in the text.” In another instance Chang notes that Zhuxi was “remarkably acute, his analytical powers were exceedingly keen…” ibid. pp.281.
717 In Neville, *Ultimate Realities*, pp. 20; 22.
distinctiveness of its object of investigation. He argued that the “mind cannot be occupied with two things .... Ching [jing] means the ‘singleness’ or the ‘being devoted to one thing’ of the mind.”\textsuperscript{718} The new obsession with concentration on specific and secluded objects and affairs, represents a dramatically new strategy of analysis and a considerably more analytic mode of cognition. These new strategies of analysis were Indo-European and analytic \textit{par-excellence} and far removed from the ambiguity of traditional modes of thought and synthetic knowledge. Neo-Confucian strategies of analysis required the honing of cognitive skills that were rarely used in native Chinese thought.

Beyond the analytic differentiation of basic terms, Neo-Confucian literature disclosed a substantially new tendency towards topical distinctions. Their approach to philosophy was based on a more careful categorization of ideas, which clearly distinguished them from what John Passmore called the “piecemeal pronouncements” of classical Confucian philosophy.\textsuperscript{719} A good example is Zhuxi and Lu Zuqian’s \textit{Reflections on Things at Hand}, a central book that was divided into fifteen chapters, each exclusively dedicated to a confined and focused topic of discussion. As opposed to the lack of topical distinctions in classical Confucian works, there are no digression to discussions not directly related to the topic of the chapter. Below, I will examine this approach in relation to the emergence of a more systematic thinking among Neo-Confucians; here, I merely want to stress that a prerequisite to systematicity, is the clear fragmentation of a data into distinct constituent parts that relate to each other logically.

\textsuperscript{718} Carsun Chang, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 223
Another point to consider is the Neo-Confucian *Investigation of Things* (格物), in which the traditional interest with human affairs (事) was extended to include the nature of things (物). Although this did not lead to the emergence Western empiricism, the Song dynasty represents a clear escalation in scientific thought and specialization in China. In fact, Neo-Confucianism was so much in tune with the spirit of empiricism that many prominent scholars have debated why science never emerged in China during the Song dynasty. Most of them agree, however, that Neo-Confucianism represents a more rational and scientific mindset, and that this necessitated a more nuanced approach towards investigating things as independent phenomena. The eminent Joseph Needham has noted that “whenever one follows up any specific piece of scientific or technological history in Chinese literature, it is always at the Song dynasty that one finds the major focal point.” Carsun Chang argues that Zhuxi “was fascinated by the immense variety in the realm of nature…I have no hesitation in saying that as a student of the phenomenal world he was an Aristotelian.” Indeed, Neo-Confucianism represents a view that gave unprecedented attention to the atomization phenomenal world into distinct categories.

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720 See good analysis of Zhuxi’s interest in the sciences and the emergence of specialized knowledge during the Song in Yung Sik Kim, *The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi (1130-1200)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2000), especially pp. 133-326 *passim*. Although a Western empirical method never emerged in traditional China, Neo-Confucianism was showing signs of a greater reliance on real empirical data. Zhuxi criticized Su Shi who “did not see the condition of the southeastern waters himself, [but] merely thought [about them] and insisted on his sayings.” He continued to argue that those who verified things with their eyes established reliable theories that can still be studied today. See Zhuzi Yulei 79.2b2  
This more analytic spirit is beautifully expressed in the charters of the Neo-Confucian academies that emerged during the Song era. One section of the charter demanded that students "study extensively, inquire accurately, think carefully, analyze clearly, and put into practice earnestly." This is emblematic of the more analytic approach of the Song era in which precision, analysis, and accuracy become central concerns.\footnote{Ibid., p. 67.}

4.5.2 De-Contextualization

The de-contextualization of data is yet another apparent characteristic of Neo-Confucian philosophy. As in the case of Judaism, Neo-Confucianism represents the “cosmologization” of Chinese thought. This was a clear adoption of the analytic stress on metaphysical speculation. The fact that this new tendency represents a shift from the field of ethics to the field of cosmology meant that context and the analysis of specific situations were marginalized in relation to the classical period. When a central ethical term such as ren (仁, humanity) is transformed into a cosmological category, it comes to denote an ethical cosmos that is beyond the particulars of a specific situation or event. This is a clear shift from the ren of the Analects in which the reader is forced to reach conclusions based on examples of behavioral situations, to the overarching capital “R” Ren of Neo-Confucianism.\footnote{Wang Guoliang, “Shilun Zhuxi Lixue De Fachou Tixi (a Discussion of Zhuxi’s System of Categories),” In Ru Lin (Confucian Literati), p. 223.} This shift from the world of things (xing er xia) to the world above things (xing er shang) is a shift from the domain of action and history to a kind of Platonic realm of decontextualized Forms. In other words, while the ren of the Analects
is discussed in terms of function (用), Neo-Confucians almost exclusively discuss it in terms of substance (體), especially the substance of the Mind. The rationalization and de-contextualization of Chinese thought is similarly apparent when terms such as gui-shen (ghosts and spirits, 鬼神), are stripped from their somewhat superstitious connotations and understood as positive and negative cosmic forces that operate according to the expansion and contraction of material force (qi). This process of objectification takes place with a wide range of Neo-Confucian terms that take on a substantially new meaning divorced from time and context.

The de-contextualization of information is fairly apparent in the famous Neo-Confucian Taiji Diagram (太极图), which was the equivalent to the Kabbalistic tree of life. In both cases we see cosmological architectonics that were unknown to the Confucian and Jewish traditions prior to the rise Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah.

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726 An important Neo-Confucian work on this new conceptualization of ren is the Zhu Xi’s Treatise on Humanity (仁説). While Cheng Yi drew a stark distinction between ren as substance as opposed to function, with Zhuxi we witness a more synthetic understanding in which ren as substance is the “the character of the Mind” while as function it is “the principle of love.”
The Taiji Diagram, came to represent the foundational structure of lixue cosmology. It is the first time that Confucianism presents a metaphysical worldview that is composed of cosmic entities that relate to each other hierarchically and according to a linear progression based on formal relations. Like the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, the Taiji Diagram represents an eternal and static cosmological structure that remains unchanged in face of fluctuations in the human sphere. Although a certain dynamic can take place within and between the different components of this metaphysical reality, the structure

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727 This Diagram was borrowed from an earlier Daoist diagram by the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhou Dunyi. See more in Julia Ching The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi.
itself is changeless, thereby transcending the world of context. The progression from the highest Wuji (Boundless) and Taiji (symbolized by the uppermost circle), towards yin and yang, through the five elements, down to the hexagrams of Qian (male) and Kun (female), and finally to the “world of myriad things,” is presented in the form of constant and logical relations. This is very different from the traditional Chinese and Jewish understanding of reality in which history, human relations, and a certain narrative were central. Indeed, both the Taiji Diagram and the sefirotic tree reflect a higher, objective sphere of existence that is changeless and therefore highly reminiscent of Greek and Buddhist cosmological structures. In fact, as in many other areas, where we see Buddhist influences, it has been suggested that the Daoist diagram on which Neo-Confucians based their own diagram, was a re-working of the Buddhist “Storehouse of Consciousness Diagram” (Alaya Vijnana); and that the central similarity between the two diagrams was the distinction between the world of action and change and the eternal, decontextualized world “above shapes.”

Beyond objectified cosmological structures, Neo-Confucians advanced revolutionary methodologies for gaining knowledge. The aforementioned Investigation of Things is especially relevant here. Beginning with Cheng Yi, the formerly ethical notion of li as used by Mencius was transformed into a law of nature. The investigation of things was oriented towards penetrating the internal essence of the Principle of one’s object of inquiry. Like others, Meng Peiyuan notes that although the investigation of things was

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predominantly concerns with human affairs, the fact that the Chinese turned an objective
gaze towards the world of natural phenomena was an unprecedented development in
Chinese history.\footnote{Meng Peiyuan, \textit{Zhuzi zhexue shilun}, p. 98.} The search for eternal and constant Principles meant that there was a
concern with the features of reality that transcended change and context. There is a
famous story about Wang Yangming who decided to follow the instructions of earlier
Neo-Confucian masters, and sit in front of a bamboo in an attempt to discover its
underlying Principle. Of relevance is that instead of knowing any particular bamboo, the
Neo-Confucians were after the essence of “bambooness.” Therefore, the dualistic
approach of the Lixue School in which the intangible \textit{li} is “without smell and without
shape” created a stark distinction between abstract trans-mundane pattern and the world
of action and context. It is for this reason that Lu Jiuyuan,\footnote{Anne Birdwhistell, “Social Reality and Lu Jiuyuan (1139-1193),” \textit{Philosophy East & West} 47, no. 1 (1997): 63.} Zhuxi’s main opponent from
the School of Mind argued that “Zhu’s ontological dualism between \textit{li} and \textit{qi}, even if
made only for heuristic purposes, was an impossible position, for it separated \textit{li} as
patterns of order from the tangible particulars that humans experienced.”\footnote{Gardner, \textit{The Four Books}, p. xxii.}

The de-contextualization of information was also apparent in the Four books, which
were qualitatively different in content from the Five Classics that preceded them. As
Gardner notes the Four Books were much less historical and “considerably more
discursive and abstract than the Five Classics.”\footnote{Gardner, \textit{The Four Books}, p. xxii.} As in the case of \textit{Sefer Yetzirah} in
Judaism, the new texts that Neo-Confucians brought to the fore disclosed an objectivity
that made them likely candidates to confront the a-temporal cosmologies of the analytic
paradigm. Neo-Confucians introduced the world of noumena into native Chinese thought; they believed that the only way to give their ethical, social, and political system a greater significance was by creating a connection between the mundane and super-mundane spheres. This is one of the most important features that Chinese thought appropriated from the Indo-European worldview, namely, the introduction of a pure realm that transcends, as well as informs, the world of affairs. As opposed to the correlative stance of earlier philosophical systems, Neo-Confucianism created a more stark distinction between the physical and metaphysical, in which the latter was superior by virtue of being changeless and eternal.

The de-contextualization of Chinese thought by Neo-Confucians was not always well received. The more utilitarian factions of Confucianism such as the one headed by Chen Liang, continuously blamed Zhuxi’s School of Principle for its “empty talk.” They argued that Zhuxi’s dao was detached from the flow of events, while what was right and wrong was divorced from everyday utility. As a reaction to the Li Xue School, Chen Liang’s pragmatic faction sought to change many examination themes from the type of detached speculative topics that were advocated by the School of Principle towards more practical domains that had an immediate impact on state affairs. The misgivings many intellectuals had with regard to Neo-Confucian thought underscore the substantial departure of lixue thinkers from the traditional Chinese concern with real life events and historical analysis. Although the move towards de-contextualized and metaphysical

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733 Tillman, *Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy*, p. 137. Chen Liangs faction of utilitarian, or political Confucianism, was known as the Zhedong shigong faction, 浙东事功学派.

speculation struck many Confucian thinkers as odd and lacking real value, Neo-Confucians were aware of the importance of supporting traditional Confucian ethics with a cosmological underpinning that transcended the particulars of time and space.

4.5.3 Systemization

Neo-Confucianism represents the most systematic exposition of Chinese thought since the arrival of Buddhism to China. It was already with the forerunners of the movement that we see a relentless striving towards doctrinal unity and coherence. The early Northern Song thinkers Shao Yong (1011-1077) and Zhang Zai (1020-1077) show the first clear tendency towards a more systematic approach of dealing with knowledge. Shao Yong managed to successfully integrate various ancient approached towards the study of "images and numbers" (象數) into a coherent and highly influential cosmology. Yung Sik Kim notes that it was only with Shao Yong that we see a systematic integration of earlier Yi jing (Book of Changes) speculation, with the ancient River Diagram (河圖), the Luoshu Diagram (洛書圖) and the Pre-Celestial Diagram (先天圖). Shao Yong’s project was representative of the general tendency among Neo-Confucians as well as Kabbalists, to integrate and synthesis former strands of thought into an updated and unified system. Zhang Zai, although still limited in terms of the conceptual tools at his disposal, represents an escalation in Neo-Confucian systematic thought, especially when contrasted with his predecessor Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073). Zhang's important Zheng Meng (正蒙, Correcting Ignorance) represented one of the most unified theoretical systems.

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735 Kim Yung Sik, op. cit., p. 267.
Confucianism has ever produced prior to the Song period. Zhang tried to express a doctrinal and cosmic unity in terms of the pervasiveness of qi. He argued that “existence and non-existence, emptiness and substantiality, are all a single thing, not to be able to unify is not to realize the nature.” Of importance is not only that this is an initial attempt to demonstrate the unity that stands behind contradictions, but more importantly, that this unity is directly related to human nature (xing, 性). Therefore, the idea of coherence and unity became a symbol of perfection and truth, which was reflected both in the unity of all Principles, the unity of humans with the cosmos, as well as the aesthetic unity evoked by a systematic and well organized philosophy. This is a clear move from the fairly fragmented and open-ended classical Confucian philosophy towards a sense of systematicity and conceptual coherence.

These early attempts at systemization continually escalated and reached maturity with Zhu Xi, where we witness a structured and methodical linking of human consciousness, society, culture, and cosmos. The greatest innovation of Neo-Confucianism can be seen in its ability to establish a logical connection between the human mind (xin, 心) and the cosmos, thereby producing a self-enclosed system that tries to present itself as an indisputable universal truth that transcends cultural particulars. The shift from the piecemeal and unsystematic Confucianism of the classical period to the self-enclosed systematic thought of the Song was certainly a reflection of the Buddhist impact on Chinese thought. The anchoring of ethics in a cosmology that includes a resonance

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736 Zhang Zai, Zheng Meng, 17 in Zhang Zai ji, p. 63. Also see Bol, Neo-Confucianims in History, p. 200.
between the structure of the universe and human cognition (or in the Platonic case, the soul) is a quintessential characteristic of analytic Indo-European systems.

In the *Collected Works of the Cheng Brothers* (二程集), it is said, “how could one understand the way of man but not understand the way of heaven? The Way is one... when one realizes his nature, he is able to realize the nature of others. When he is able to realize the nature of others, he is able to realize the nature of the myriad things. And, when he is able to realize the nature of the myriad things, he is able to participate in the transformative and nurturing processes of heaven-and-earth.”

This weaving of Individual nature, the mind, and the cosmos into a coherent metaphysical and epistemological doctrine was one of the most compelling achievements of Neo-Confucianism. Bol claims that the correctness of lixue thought was predicated upon the scientific claim “that Neo-Confucians had a correct understanding of how the human as a biological being is integrated into the physical universe.”

He goes on to argue that the “Neo-Confucian belief in unity has to do with learning to experience and maintain a mental state of unity. This is related to the mental experience of coherence, the moment of seeing how everything one understands is connected together in a seamless whole, as if of a single thread.” The tendency towards the construction of a more systematic and consistent worldview had important ramifications that gave Neo-Confucianism its unique religious undertones. As in the Buddhist case and other analytic traditions such as

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738 Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, p. 204.
739 Ibid., p. 211.
Neoplatonism and medieval Aristotelianism, Neo-Confucianism gave rise to a cosmos in the Greek sense of the word: a universe as a well-ordered and harmonious whole.

The work of Zhuxi was the undisputed climax of Neo-Confucian systematic thought. He managed to integrate a wealth of information; old and new, Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist, into a coherent worldview that disclosed an unprecedented coherence. Carsun Chang notes that Zhuxi “envisaged the universe as a unity, and its different aspects as coherent parts of that unity… like Aristotle, who first broke knowledge down into its various branched of sciences, Chu Hsi [Zhuxi] strove to bring all Chinese learning under his scrutiny… [such that it] seemed to be woven into a masterpiece of art. The thoroughness of his mind prevents him from omitting anything that was necessary for the completeness of his system.” In another instance, Chang claims that Zhu Xi "evolved a mighty system… his thought was never scattered. Rather it operated with a focal point bringing all departments of knowledge into an impressive unity.” Gardner offers several examples of how Zhu Xi went about at synthesizing different strands of the tradition into a cogent whole. Discussing one of the Four Books, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, he convincingly demonstrates that Zhu Xi’s “commentary seeks more than to demonstrate the internal coherence of the Chung-yung text [Doctrine of the Mean]; it seeks also to demonstrate that the text of the Chung-yung coheres with the rest of the Confucian canon. Indeed, Chu [Zhu] assumes that all the texts in the canon are interrelated…” Through equating terms from different texts of the tradition, especially terms from the Four Books with those found in the Five Classics Zhu, “legitimizes and

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741 Ibid., p. 281.
gives deeper meaning to each; at the same time the point is made that the texts of the canon are interrelated...[it shows] the community of readers that this canon, for all of its variety of parts, is entirely coherent and speaks in a powerfully consistent voice.”\footnote{Gardner, “Confucian Commentary,” pp. 414-415.} The institutionalization of the Four Books and their presentation as the embodiment of classical Confucian thought, required a daunting process of synthesis in which Zhu Xi, through careful commentary, gave Neo-Confucian philosophy a seamless continuity with the earlier tradition of the Five Classics.

One of the implications of systemization is a certain rigidity regarding truth-value. Hoyt Tillman shows that such rigidity was one of the main characteristics of Neo-Confucianism. It is interesting that the more systematic Neo-Confucianism became, the more jealously it defended its apparent indisputable truth.\footnote{Tillman, \textit{Chu Hsi’s Ascendency}, p. 21.} We saw in the Jewish context that Maimonides’ rather rigid definition of Jewish dogma raised concerns among conservatives who were worried about the lack of flexibility and communal inclusiveness that such final definitions entailed. This process was clearly taking place in China where Neo-Confucianism began to present its worldview as a complex of interrelated ideas that supported and depended upon each other. Such internal coherence and logical hierarchy meant that undermining ideas at any given point had destabilizing effects that reverberated throughout the system as a whole. Thus, coherence and the elimination of contradictions became more important than ever. In the \textit{Classified Dialogues of Master Zhu} (朱子語類) Zhu Xi states: “There is only one single way (dao) under Heaven and the student needs to comprehend the one principle of the way. It is only in this manner that he
can gain insight with regard to the dialectical relationship between heavenly principle and human desire, righteousness and profit, impartiality and selfishness, good and evil.

Nothing will be left unknown."\(^{744}\) This is what Zhuxi referred to as *yiguan* (一貫) or the “single thread” that went through his whole system and connected the “roots and branches” into a consistent whole.\(^{745}\) As Metzger notes, Neo-Confucians harbored a type of resentment towards modes of learning that disclosed “disconnected details presented without a sense for the whole to which they belonged.”\(^{746}\)

Neo-Confucians gave and published lectures on the systematic nature of their thought, they compiled systematic introductions to Neo-Confucianism, and introduced several detailed diagrams that were meant to display the interrelatedness of concepts in their system.\(^{747}\) Such tendencies were a clear departure from classical Confucianism’s unsystematic methodologies. In comparing the shifting perspectives of Confucian literati between the Han and Song dynasties Gardner notes that as opposed to the Wei period (386-589) in which we see a fairly flexible interpretation of the classics, during the Song there was “a tendency towards defining a “correct” body of thought, an intellectual orthodoxy that would “save” the Chinese tradition and protect it from foreign

\(^{744}\) **天下只有一箇道理，學只要理會得這一箇道理。這裏纔通，則凡天理，人欲，義利，公私，善惡之辨，莫不皆通。** *Zhuzi Yulei* 8:18.

\(^{745}\) The notion of *yiguan* was initially discussed by Confucius when he told his disciple Zengzi “Shen, my doctrine has one single thread running through it,” *(Analects* 4:15)


\(^{747}\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, pp. 159-160. The use of diagrams is a curious tendency shared by Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists. Bol claims that diagrams “focus attention on the *relations* between and among concepts and thus give the student a means of seeing in one glance that many different concepts form a *system* of relationships.” [italics in original].
influences." Neo-Confucians, for the first time in their tradition’s long evolution, constructed a unified and “closed system” that served as a reaction to Buddhism’s systematic and “single truth” nature.

4.5.4 Conclusion

The above examples all indicate a more analytic approach towards information, but it is important to note that Neo-Confucianism disclosed synthetic features that were clearly in tune with traditional Chinese modes of thought. With regard to the atomization of data, in spite of a clear tendency towards the differentiation of information, Neo-Confucians tended to conflate different terms in a way that is relatively rare in Indian and early Buddhist thought. It is for this reason that Neo-Confucian philosophy may be somewhat confusing to the Western reader; central terms such as *li*, *taiji*, *dao*, and *xing* (*nature*) may be equated at one instance but later differentiated and discussed separately. The Chinese had a greater tolerance for such terminological overlapping. Their application of the rules of logic was not as strict as we would expect from one trained in Western philosophy or from the linear and logically structured Abhidharma argumentations of Buddhists. Such tendencies notwithstanding, Neo-Confucian philosophy represents a new climax of analytical tendencies in Chinese history and this new attitude was instigated by the profound impact of the Buddhist tradition.

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that on the cognitive level, Neo-Confucianism did not seem to follow the pattern of subordinating analytic borrowings to

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synthetic sensibilities as in the case of Kabbalah. That the same process does not take place in Neo-Confucianism, at least not to the same extent, should mainly be attributed to environmental conditions. Since Confucians were not operating in a foreign and hostile surrounding, they were less inclined to resort to defense mechanisms that were absolutely essential in the Jewish case. While Jews were dealing with the worrisome prospects of conversion and assimilation, the Chinese operated within their own ethnic and linguistic sphere, and in the relatively secure confines of their cultural orbit and geographical homeland. The way Neo-Confucians dealt with the Buddhist challenge was therefore more open to compromise and flexibility. In some cases they masterfully appropriated features from the more analytic schools of Huayan and Tiantai Buddhism to combat the highly sinicized school of Chan Buddhism. In such cases Neo-Confucianism represents a clear escalation in analytic tendencies. In other cases, such as that of the de-contextualization of information, Neo-Confucians clearly prioritize native approaches of anchoring their search for “eternal principles” in the everyday world of ethics and real life events. Environmental conditions are therefore fundamentally crucial in our understanding of the way cultural systems operate and react to destabilizing effects.
4.6 THE SOCIAL LEVEL

In the second chapter I explored the fundamental differences between traditions that conformed to a model of “social embeddedness” as opposed to those that disclose different forms of “social autonomy.” I argued that although analytic traditions of the classical period (prior to Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism) did not yet develop the type of individualism we are accustomed to in the modern West, the Greco-Christian and Indo-Buddhist traditions were nevertheless based on religious and philosophical paradigms that positioned the individual at the heart of spiritual fulfillment. In contrast, synthetic traditions, classical Confucianism and Judaism being excellent examples, perceived the family, rather than the individual, as the most fundamental social unit and the locus of religious life. In the following section I will show how the Lixue School, under the direct influence of Buddhism, shifted towards a substantially more individualistic worldview, which it nevertheless subordinated to the familial and communal ethos of classical Confucianism.

4.6.1 Growing Individualistic Trends

In my analysis of the Tang-Song transition I discussed the collapse of the old Tang order with its strong aristocratic clans and the subsequent emergence of the literati class which rose to prominence through scholarly merit rather than pedigree. One of the major changes that took place as a result of this transition was the reformation of the examination system. During the Tang, Confucian intellectuals were expected to write exams in the spirit of the “correct” or orthodox view of the Confucian classics, or what
was jointly compiled as the official *Correct Meaning of the Five Classics* (五經正義).

The escalating suspicion towards the official commentaries used in the imperial examinations reflected a need among intellectuals to challenge the status quo. As I mentioned earlier, for the first time, examinees were encouraged to speak up and actively air their opinions regarding state policy and social reform. Edwin Pulleyblank notes that “a new critical spirit was abroad which made men seek in the Classics for interpretations consonant with reason rather than merely consistent with orthodox commentaries.”

This undermining of the tradition required a sense of critical independence and individual creativity that became one of the hallmarks of Song intellectual culture. From the pioneers of the Tang all the way to the heyday of the Song, these intellectuals were characterized by a “cool, detached, and methodical rationality with which they attempted to get to the truth.” Something new was happening in China that was extremely reminiscent of the rise of individualism and critical thought among Jewish philosophers between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. As the explanatory power Five Classics and the Talmudic paradigms weakened, new form of suspicion towards tradition emerged, marking the beginning of a long process of reinterpretation. In both cases this was conducive to a new spirit of individualism, critical thought, and creativity that was crucial for the construction of a new and relevant cultural paradigm.

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750 Ibid., p. 90. Pulleyblank further notes that the first signs of this trend during the Tang “stood at the very beginning of the critical scholarship which eventually flourished under the Song.”
Another commonality with the Jewish experience is that during the Song we see the emergence of authored works that reflect the opinions of individual thinkers. Revolutionary commentaries on the classics were now supplemented by privately authored books, glossaries of terms, and a striking amount of short treatises. Zhou Dunyi’s *Interpretation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*, Zhang Zai’s *Correcting Ignorance*, several works by the Cheng Brothers, Chen Chun’s *Neo-Confucian Terms explained*, and Lu Zuqian’s and Zhu Xi’s *Reflection on Things at Hand* are good examples of this new creativity that was based on the thought of independent individuals. Similarly, a “shift from official histories towards a growing number of private historical accounts gained momentum.”751 This more autonomous intellectual atmosphere explains the polemical environment that emerged during this period. Speaking independently in relative detachment from the communally sanctioned Classics made it easier for Song thinkers to attack each other on an increasingly personal level. A similar reality transpired in the highly polemical environment of thirteenth century Castile in which secondary elites that were not directly associated with first elite authorities felt free to challenge each other on theological issues. In both cases we see how the diminishing power of central authority enabled intellectuals to engage in a more confrontational dialogue without appearing to undermine tradition. The Chinese custom of relying on coalitions of consensus in politics was replaced by a fragmentation of ideas in which different school claimed to represent orthodoxy and attacked each other as straying from traditional norms.

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Earlier, I mentioned the new literary forms that started to emerge in Neo-Confucianism which were modeled after Chan’s Lamp Histories (denglu, 燈錄) and Recorded Conversations (yulu, 語錄). These works were clearly diverging from the archaic and inaccessible language of the Classics. The knowledge they presented was directed towards the individual without assuming any prior knowledge in the classical tradition. The private person was seen as the primary audience of these works, and their content provoked independent thought rather than being oriented towards scholarly elitism. An interesting characteristic of works in the recorded conversation genre was that they were associated with the familiar and admired philosophers of very recent times rather than the paradigmatic sages of the distant and mythological past. This engagement with familiar and recent thinkers such as Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao provided readers with the reassurance that the content of such works were truly implementable and realistic. This new accessibility of information and its tailoring to the needs and of the secluded intellectual were a major liberating factor for young and ambitious thinkers who were in search meaning and spirituality rather than political advancement and power.

It is also relevant that the five philosophers of the Northern Song represented a new type of intellectual. This was especially obvious with important thinkers such as Shao Yong and Zhang Zai who refused to hold official positions but were nevertheless presented as role models; a testimony to a new appreciation of public intellectuals that deliberately chose to avoid government. Zhu Xi dedicated a whole chapter in the his Reflections on Things at Hand to a discussion of serving or alternatively not serving in government. Similarly, many Confucian academies frequently venerated individuals
whose very careers were associated with a critique of the governmental system.\textsuperscript{752} The fact that the possibility of avoiding public office was treated as a legitimate mode of behavior is an indication of a substantial change in mentality among Song literati. The individual had a new set of considerations that provided him with the legitimacy to dedicate his time to his own perfection. This is not to say that in the past Chinese intellectuals did not avoid government. Although it is well known that many exemplary Confucians refused to serve in corrupt courts well before the rise of Neo-Confucianism, the fact that there emerged a new appreciation of the individual’s ability to reform society away from, or in reaction to government, and that such a stance was seen as a model for intellectual integrity was certainly a new phenomenon.

The new academies that emerged all over the country departed from official government schools that were strictly dedicated to preparing students for examinations and civil service. Instead, the Neo-Confucian academies focused on the self-improvement of the individual as a more pressing goal than passing the exams. Much like the custom in Buddhist temples in which knowledge was transmitted from master and student, Neo-Confucians focused on transmission from individual to individual, which included writing personal diaries in which students reflected upon their daily routine, insights, flaws, and general progress.\textsuperscript{753} Another factor to consider was that the academies were also the result of an influx in talented intellectuals that could not be absorbed by


\textsuperscript{753} Neo-Confucians saw governmental education as motivated by a selfish desire for position and power. They opposed this to their own education, which was motivated by righteousness and “depends of teachers who discourse privately.” Bol, \textit{Neo-Confucianism in History}, p. 223.
governmental institutions. This meant that academies were providing jobless intellectuals with new channels of employment that were formerly unavailable. Enthusiastic individuals could now find ways to lead a life of an intellectual on a more local and non-governmental level. It is equally important to note that the general affluence and economic prosperity of the Song led to a greater division of labor and opportunities for those who were not inclined towards learning or spirituality. Wealthy people could invest in academies and thereby become part of a communal effort to promote Neo-Confucianism without committing themselves to a life of scholarship.

One of the clearest reflections of this new mentality could be seen in the Lixue School’s construction of a systematic procedure for self-cultivation and the attainment of sagehood. For the first time, the Mencian ideal that “every person is like a Yao and a Shun,” was taken literally and presented as a real option for individuals interested in self-realization. As Steven Angle has observed, the pre-Song dynasty notion of sagehood was an unattainable goal, but under the impact of Buddhist procedures of enlightenment, Neo-Confucians constructed a clear and relatively accessible method for achieving sagehood which was focused on the individual and seen as a native equivalent to Buddhahood (成佛). Neo-Confucianism reversed the traditional worldview; for the first time the individual was seen as the fundamental unit of change. As an example, one of the main attacks against the progressive school of Wang Anshi was that his institutional reforms were futile without rectifying the private self. Neo-Confucians leveled the same kind of criticism against negligent emperors and ministers who avoided self-cultivation and were

754 Tillman, *Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy*, p. 16.
therefore seen as the central reason behind China’s weakness. The Neo-Confucian dictum of “learning for one’s self” (為己之學), reflected a reorientation of the tradition towards a greater emphasis on the individual in which the previously unattainable ideal of sagehood came to represent an achievable goal. The accessibility of these new procedures was a liberating factor that enabled private people to delve into their own spiritual needs without necessarily being versed in the classical commentarial tradition. As in the case of Judaism where philosophers and mystics circumvented the inaccessible Talmudic tradition, so did Neo-Confucians provide Song intellectuals with a model of cultivation that could theoretically be grasped and implemented in independence from social institutions and traditional literary formats. Neo-Confucians sought to educate and direct “young lads in isolated villages” they appealed to the Great Learning’s “reverence of the self” as a guide for “serving the edification of unlearned Shih [literati]” such that old class distinctions were challenged in favor of the human potential seen as inherent to every person regardless of social background. As in the Jewish reaction to Greek religio-philosophical forms of self-realization, in which the ancient idea of prophecy was reinterpreted as a mental state that could be attained by individuals through a systematic procedure, so did Neo-Confucians detect the previously lofty and idealized state of sagehood as a counter response to the Buddhist concern with enlightenment. These new and radical interpretations of sagehood led to the composition of works such as Cheng

756 Theodore de Bary, *Learning for One’s Self*, p. 37. Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi adopted the notion of “learning for one’s self” form the Analects 14:28 where it says "in ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement [為己]. Nowadays, men learn with a view to the approbation of others.” 子曰: 古之學者為己，今之學者為人.
757 William de Bary, ibid., p. 41.
Yi’s “A Treatise on what Yanzi Loved to Learn,” in which Confucius’ most talented disciple and paradigmatic model Yan Hui (顏回, 521-490 BCE) is portrayed as one fully dedicated to the attainment of sagehood through self-reflection.\(^{758}\) Although in reality sagehood was clearly not a central concern during the times of Confucius, portraying Yan Hui as dedicated to self-transformation helped Neo-Confucians redefine old conceptions of sagehood in a new accessible and practical way.

In the next section I will discuss the emergence of the kind of cognitive-individualism and introspective techniques typical of analytic traditions; here I want to stress the fact Neo-Confucianism clearly followed the Buddhist focus on the spiritual needs of the individual. Notions such as “getting it by one’s self” (自得), “learning for one’s self”, and “self effort” (自力), highlighted the position of the individual as a discrete agent and the locus of both personal and social transformation.\(^{759}\) The historical socio-economic and political changes during the Song and especially the rise of a more confident, nationalistic, and more confrontational attitude towards Buddhism, fostered in individuals “a new sense of their own importance, a lively esprit de corps, greatly reinforcing their own self-image and self-confidence.”\(^{760}\)

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\(^{758}\) 顏子所好何學論. This was Cheng Yi’s systematic response to Zhou Dunyi’s call to learn from the life and experience of Yan Hui. In this important treatise Yan Hui is portrayed as one committed to inward self-reflection and outward conformity to ritual. See Hon Tze-Ki *The Yijing and Chinese Politics: Classical Commentary and Literati Activism in the Northern Song Period 960-1127* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 85.

\(^{759}\) Learning for one’s self as opposed to “learning for the sake of others” 學者為人, as well as self-effort (自力) as opposed to “other’s effort” (他力).

\(^{760}\) William de Bary, ibid., p. 34.
4.6.2 Individualism in the Service of Communalism

The above examples are all indications of a clear historical shift towards the growing importance of the individual vis-à-vis the community, but it would be a mistake to assume that Neo-Confucians transitioned from the family model towards the typically analytic mode of social autonomy. Although the greater focus on the individual was certainly a Buddhist influence, it was important for Neo-Confucians to stress their fundamental differences with Buddhism. One reoccurring critique was that Buddhists were motivated by selfish interests oriented towards private salvation. In order to accentuate this difference the Lixue School used the traditional distinction between the Confucian search for righteousness (義, yi) and the Buddhist focus of profit (利, li). In spite of their stress on the individual, Neo-Confucians constantly reiterated that the perfection of the private self was first and foremost oriented towards the improvement of the human condition on a communal level. Charles Wei-Hsun Fu claims that one of Zhu Xi’s central achievements was his ability to expose the failure of the Buddhist theory of mind to solve problems on the social sphere. According to Fu, Zhu Xi’s success lies in the Neo-Confucian transformation of the Chan Buddhist way of actualizing the original mind such that it engaged the “socio-moral” world. In other words, Neo-Confucians constantly argued that the Buddhist worldview was fundamentally selfish in that it neglected the good of society at large. They claimed that even the lofty Buddhist ideal of communal salvation through the compassionate effort of Bodhisattvas could not hide the self-centered goal of the monk in search of enlightenment. Therefore, the Confucian ideal

761 Charles Wei-Hsun Fu “Chu Hsi on Buddhism” in Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism, pp. 379-381. Wei-Hsun Fu refers to this as the relationship between “primordiality” and “actuality.”
of sagehood, although certainly influenced by the notion of Buddhahood, was oriented
towards social engagement and the traditional Confucian stress on familial and social
relationships.

The appropriation of analytic elements from the Indo-Buddhist tradition can
clearly be discerned in a turn towards individual, but such changes were made in the
service of traditional concerns that were typical to the synthetic worldview of China. This
process was very reminiscent of the Kabbalistic experience, in which new procedures for
self exploration were devised, but only as a way to support a communal, nation-based
mysticism in which the family unit and the social organism remained stronger than ever.
Indeed, Neo-Confucians made sure that their new procedures for self-transformation
created a seamless continuity with the family unit and social life. One of the most famous
passaged in Neo-Confucian philosophy, taken from the Great Learning states:

By investigating things one will be able to extend his knowledge to the utmost; once
knowledge is extended one’s intentions become complete; once intentions are complete
the mind is rectified; once the mind is rectified one’s personality will become cultivated;
once the personality becomes cultivated the family is put in order; once the family is
ordered the empire is well controlled; and once the empire is controlled, peace will
prevail under Heaven.\footnote{物格而后知至，知至而后意誠，意誠而后心正，心正而后身脩，身脩而后家齊，家齊而后國
gi，國治而后天下平. My translation, based on Gardner, Zhu Xi and the Four Books.}

This passage shows a clear progression from the personal sphere of one's intentions (意),
mind (心), and personality (身), towards the social level of the household (家), the
empire (國), and the world at large (天下). In other words, as opposed to the Buddhist
belief that individual perfection directly leads one towards ultimacy, Neo-Confucians insisted that harmony and heavenly peace must go through the familial and social domains. In the Buddhist case, typical of analytic traditions, we see a concordance between the structure of consciousness and ultimate reality, while in the Confucianism, as in Judaism, the central metaphor is family unity and the social organism rather than the individual. Since one of the main Neo-Confucian innovations was the introduction of greater individualism, the model that emerged is one in which the individual related to ultimate reality but only through the mediation of the family and society. Without an ordered family and a stable and harmonious society the ultimate goal of Confucianism cannot be achieved; the individual as an independent entity is therefore powerless; he must remain a social animal, a father, a husband, a filial son, or a loyal minister. The Neo-Confucian individual, in spite of his unprecedented freedom and the new tools at his service to explore his interiority, remained deeply embedded in the fabric of society and active familial life.

I mentioned earlier that one of the central misgivings Confucians raised against Buddhism was its advocacy of leaving the family unit in favor of individual liberation. Although Chinese Buddhists tried to reduce these tensions by claiming that sons leaving the household were actually demonstrating filiality by securing their parents’ souls in the afterlife, it was clear that the monastic institution was fundamentally in tension with the native Chinese worldview. Zhu Xi claimed that the Buddhists “renounce the family to attend to their own virtue in solitude. This shows they are deficient in the substance of the
Way.”\textsuperscript{763} The Buddhist anti-family ethics undermined the Confucian idea that order was based on family relationships that were extended to the political sphere.\textsuperscript{764} The Confucian sage was not expected to leave the house, not even temporarily; on the contrary, sagehood was a reflection of traditional values such as the establishment of a large household, bearing children, remaining filial to one’s parents while they were alive, and offering sacrifices when they passed away. More generally, the Confucian sage, like the Jewish Rabbi, was expected to take an active and responsible part in communal affairs and to function as a role model for those around him. In the political domain, Neo-Confucians saw the Buddhist undermining of the socio-political world as a devaluation of their ideal of serving in government. According to Neo-Confucians the monastic order was selfishly involved in its own affairs and operated as a secluded microcosm detached from the reality and activities of the “real world.” The Buddhist Sangha’s engagement in celibacy was seen as an offensive severing of one’s family lineage. Not only were monks not procreating and contributing to the manpower of society, but they also lived off the tax money of hard working people that ultimately sustained their unproductive lifestyle. And finally, the Buddhist interest in lofty matters that were irrelevant to practical and immediate social concerns was seen by Neo-Confucians as a form of escapism that was responsible for China’s weakness.\textsuperscript{765}

In all these cases we see that the Neo-Confucian idea of self-cultivation, in spite of its unprecedented stress on the individual, was oriented towards a communal ethos that

\textsuperscript{764} Tillman, \textit{Chu Hsi’s Ascendency}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{765} Ibid., pp. 13-4.
was dramatically differed from the Buddhist worldview. One of the most representative examples of this approach can be seen in the way Neo-Confucians believed that the emperor, the embodiment of the socio-political world, was expected to dedicate himself to the goal of self perfection. Just as an ordinary person would be expected to perfect himself as a prerequisite for ordering the family, so was the emperor, with the dedicated assistance of his ministers, expected to focus on self-cultivation before the predominant goal of social harmony could be achieved. In a memorial to the imperial court Zhu Xi urged the Son of Heaven to dedicate himself to the rectification of his mind through continuous self-effort (*zide*, 自得). Zhu argued that this was the initial and crucial step in the ruler’s responsibility to all under Heaven. Neo-Confucianism represents an ingenious harmonization of synthetic and analytic features such that it created a powerful paradigm that managed to both pay unprecedented attention to the needs of the individual, while simultaneously it linked the self to the family and the social organism by arguing that self-transformation represents the root of communal transformation and social and political stability.

Neo-Confucianism remained in line with the model of social embeddedness in which the family and clan played an extremely important role. Although the individual is addressed, he never undermines the centrality of the family; on the contrary, in stark contrast to Buddhism the role of the Neo-Confucian household was further reinforced. It was precisely in this regard that the Neo-Confucian academies that were emerging all over China were fundamentally different from the Buddhist monasteries after which they

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were fashioned. In contrast to the Buddhist monastery that was composed of members who chose to leave the traditional household, the Neo-Confucian academies found their roots in family initiatives. Linda Walton claims that “in many of the cases…an academy founded by a particular family was expanded to include members of the local shih community, or a family school was transformed into an academy.” Indeed, the family schools, or family academies (家書), functioned as the foundation of state education. In an inscription to the Guang Ping Academy the Neo-Confucian Wang Yinglin claims that the family functions as the basis of the state. In other words, familial institutions came to play a central role in the social and political sphere, which often resulted in the cooperation between elites and government officials in an effort to extend the activities of the family towards broader kin networks known as Zong (宗) or Zong Zu (宗族).

Although many family academies slowly transformed into local community academies, many of them remained confined to specific clans. This is a typical example of what I have referred to as the synthetic family-society model, which could be clearly contrast to the individual-society model characteristic of analytic traditions. The family-society paradigm is where the family functions as an aid to governmental rule such that the two institutions work in a complementary fashion in which tensions and conflicts of interest are relatively scarce.

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769 Ibid., p. 148.
Private family institutions frequently admitted relatives and even local literati into their ranks and functioned as “one of a range of institutions in the “middle space” between the individual chia, or household unit, and the state or “official” (官, guan) level. There are examples during the early Song where families were “rewarded for their efforts with imperial recognition of their adherence to Confucian family ideals.” Therefore, not only did individualistic trends in Neo-Confucianism not undermine the family structure, but the family emerged as a fundamental institution in the regulation of the Chinese empire. As Denis Twitchett demonstrates, the central institutional role families and clans came to play was an innovation that can be traced back to the beginning of the eleventh century. He also notes that “the close-knit clan which we tend to think of as the norm [in China] is to a very large extent the product of Sung times, just as the more extreme expressions of Confucian familism begin with the Neo-Confucians.” The more central role the family came to occupy in society, the more important it became in the minds of the people, especially officials who appreciated its crucial function in maintaining social stability. Twitchett describes this as a “semi-religious conception of the family as a continuous organism in which the individual member is the product of the accumulated virtue—for good or ill—of his ancestors.” Although this conception was certainly influenced by the Buddhist notion of karma, the difference with Buddhism could not be clearer; while karma was the private affair of the

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770 Ibid., p. 121.
771 Ibid., p. 125.
773 Ibid., p. 100.
individual monk, in Neo-Confucianism we see it as the accumulated achievements of lineages of ancestors.

Once the Song examination system shifted from Tang nepotism to selection based on merit, the family and family academies became one of the primary institutions that supported individuals in their effort to reach scholarly distinction. Family-supported schools and “charitable estates” (yizhuang, 義莊) also functioned as an important safety net for individuals who failed to enter government, providing them with financial support and the promise of alternative career paths such as teaching locally, tutoring prospective students preparing for the examinations, managing family charitable estates, or supervising printing projects. Simultaneously, family academies that managed to expand their activities and accommodate the participation of non-related local literati could enhance their position and become more influential socially, economically, and politically. The accumulation of power helped families construct more elaborate ancestral shrines, which occupied a central space in the academy. This led to the dual goal of educating their children as well as enhancing “the cohesion of the kin group by commemorating ancestors.”\textsuperscript{774} The Confucian stress on the veneration of past generations and family lineages can be contrasted with the way Buddhist monks who took full vows “ceased to figure on the family register.”\textsuperscript{775} This shows that in spite of the striking similarities between Buddhist monasteries and the Neo-Confucian family schools and academies, the two institutions were based on opposing social sensibilities. For the former, abandoning the family for the greater good of salvation was seen as a merit,

\textsuperscript{774} Walton, \textit{Academies and Society}, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{775} Twitchett, “The Fan Clan’s Charitable Estate,” p. 104.
while for Confucians it led to one’s exclusion from the pages of history, and after death, to his exemption from the necessary care and veneration provided by his descendants. In another instance, Zhu Xi attacked monastic life and urged nuns to return to their homes. Zhu argued that “the most important of the three relationships, should not be abandoned… Buddhist and demonic perverse teachings… have confused people’s minds, leading grown men and women to give up marriage and abandon family life for what is called the cultivation of the way, in vain hope for reward in the next life. If the whole world should follow such practices, there would be no human being left after only one hundred years.”

The Neo-Confucian reaction to Buddhism appropriated the model of the monastery, but instead of basing it on a collection of individuals, it established the academy of the foundation of the family, kin relations, and ancestral worship.

Neo-Confucians were very much involved in providing the family with an agreed-upon set of customs that could govern everyday life. This was to a great extent an outcome of a growing disorder and confusion regarding ancient rituals and the fact that by the eleventh century Buddhist and Daoist ceremonies increasingly infiltrated the daily routine of commoners and elites. Beginning in the Northern Song notable figures such as Ouyang Xiu, Zhang Zai, and most notably Sima Guang and Cheng Yi began to redefine the ancient rituals of the old classics, especially the important *Ceremonies and Rituals (Yili, 儀禮)*, in an attempt to battle foreign influences.

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776 Zhuzi Da Zhuan 100:4a-b, in Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi*, p. 87.
777 The famous *Classic of Rites* consists of three works: the relatively philosophical *Classic of Rites* or *Liji* (禮記) which contains discussions on the nature of ritual, its role, and its origins but also contains rituals form the Zhou era. The *Zhouli* (周禮) is mostly a collection of rituals performed in the Zhou court. Finally the most practical and widely used *Yili* or *Ceremonies and Rituals*
topic in my analysis of contemplation vs. orthopraxy in the cultural level, here it is important for me to stress the centrality Neo-Confucians attached to the cohesion of the family and its role in social affairs. Twitchett argues that “quasi-religious” dimension of the family “found its final expression in the Neo-Confucians’ remolding of the family rites.” This trend reached a climax with Zhu Xi, who wrote the highly influential Family Rituals (家禮), which became the defining manual for the organization of the family for the remainder of the imperial era. This important guide “expressed and reproduced the key principles underlying the family system: the relationships between ancestors and descendants, men and women, parents and children, and families linked through marriage.” Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals reflects how important it was for Neo-Confucians to reinforce the traditional family relationships and articulate them in a more updated manner that was in tune with the new social, political, and religious realities of the Song period. Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals provided an alternative to the state mandated ritual program that was overwhelmingly focused on official rituals, or ceremonies that pertain to families of high ranking officials. Zhu and his students made sure that their Family Rituals was relevant to families of the middle class and commoners as well, thereby establishing the family unit as a central social institution that transcended exclusive official circles. Due to the central role the family came to play in Neo-

Rituals also referred to in English as the Etiquettes and Ceremonials, was a manual for the performance of the most common rituals in Chinese life. These three books are also known as the Three Rituals (三禮).


Ebrey, op. cit., p. xiv.

State ritual was still following the New Policies’ official New Meaning of the Five Categories of Rites of the Zhenghe Reign, (Zhenghe wu li xin yi, 政和五禮新儀).
Confucian thought, it was important for literati to devise a unified and strictly Confucian system of rituals to support it. Theresa Kelleher notes that Zhu Xi, along with other Song intellectuals, sought to:

reassert the family as well as the public realm as the field of action for people as opposed to the monastery of the Buddhists. And yet, he does not wish simply to settle for a purely “secular” view of the family as many others of the Sung were doing. He wishes to champion a vision of it that primarily emphasized its moral and spiritual values rather than its social or economic utility. Thus, he argues for a return to a classical model of the family, yet it is one that could be adopted by all classes of society... It seems to me that Chu Hsi ends up, consciously or unconsciously, trying to imbue the Confucian household with some of the spirit of the monastery.  

The standardization of family conduct was further supported by the general preference among people to follow normative and universal systems of operation rather than conventional and local ones. This more universal approach provided the Family Rituals with a religiously sanctioned and orthodox aura, one that purported to be the only mode of correct behavior. Zhu Xi’s efforts, building on Sima Guang and Cheng Yi’s earlier work, proved extremely successful, his Family Rituals became one of the most important and widely used books in post-Song China, surpassing the status of governmental manuals and especially the traditional Ceremonies and Rituals.

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781 M. Theresa Kelleher, “Back to Basics: Chu Hsi’s Elementary Learning (Hsiao-Hsueh).” In Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage, Theodore de Bary and John W. Chafee eds., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 250. Kelleher notes that Zhu Xi struck a balance between Buddhist discipline away from the family, and secular approaches to the family advocated by other Song Confucians. This is yet another testimony of the Li Xue School’s fine balancing of opposing approaches.

782 Ebrey, ibid., p. xxviii.
In conclusion, it is important to bear in mind that although the family remained an extremely central institution, the fact that new channels for expression and self-cultivation were devised meant that one had more leeway, so to speak, to engage in practices that were detached from the traditional family and social institutions. This was to a great extent related to the fact that new standardized procedures for self-cultivation provided Neo-Confucians with ways to evaluate the individual according to newly accepted objective parameters. In other words, a new language developed to talk about the individual as an independent agent. While the classical positional model, or social embeddedness, certainly remained dominant, and to certain extents even strengthened, there emerged orthodox ways to appreciate the individual in personal terms that were not strictly positional.
4.7 THE CULTURAL LEVEL

The following section will look at the cultural level, or the domain of ideas and meaning. Although features on the cultural level certainly overlap with what has been discussed on the cognitive and social levels, it is nevertheless important to analytically differentiate these domains. One example is that my discussion of the individual on the social level should not be confused with my analysis of cognitive-individualism on the cultural level. The distinction is subtle but important: individualism on the social level is mainly concerned with structural considerations, focusing on the changes in the formal relations between the private person, the family, and the social sphere. In contrast, my analysis of cognitive-individualism is more phenomenological, focusing on the individual as a unit of cognition engaged in a form of self-transformation that involves new contemplative techniques.

As opposed to the chapter on Kabbalah, the following discussion of culture will not include a section on linguistics. The main reason is the highly analytic forms of expression that Neo-Confucians adopted. Unlike Kabbalists who initially appropriated an analytic conceptual terminology but then guised it in a highly opaque and symbolic language, Neo-Confucians never felt compelled to cloak their new language in a symbolic vocabulary. On the contrary, one of their greatest advantages was their more conceptual and analytic approach; a position that was formerly seen as alien to China, but won legitimacy once it was expressed through a native Confucian medium. In what follows I will discuss the three morphological distinctions on the cultural level:
contemplation vs. ritual, other-worldliness vs. this-worldliness, and universalism vs. particularism.

4.7.1 Contemplation vs. Ritual

Confucianism was always understood as a tradition that dealt with the practical or manifest features of human life. The famous Daoist alchemist Ge Hong (葛洪, 283-343), used the common characterization of Daoism and Buddhism as belonging to the “inner camp” symbolized by the roots, while portraying Confucianism as representing the “outer camp” or the branches. One of the most substantial changes the Lixue School introduced into Confucianism was an unprecedented focus on the inner, mental aspects of individual life. The new lineage of transmission (道統, daotong), which Neo-Confucians modeled after the famous Chan lineages, reflected this new mentalistic reorientation. Han Yu’s exclusion of Xunzi (荀子, 312–230 BC) from the daotong in favor of Mencius may seem natural to the modern reader but it was actually a move away from the mainstream of Han Confucianism in which Xunzi occupied a more prominent position than Mencius. As scholars have observed, this new direction reflected a new urgency to stress the spiritual dimensions of the tradition. Mencius offered an introspective mind-based philosophy of intuition that Neo-Confucians reinterpreted in light of Buddhist introspective procedures. The Mencian method of cultivation advocated “nourishing the

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784 According to Julia Ching the Neo-Confucians represented the “legacy of the mind and heart that we may call spirituality. It was a new development, quite different from the direction of Han Confucianism, which oscillated between the rationalism of Hsun-tzu [Xunzi] and the superstitions of signs and omens.” Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, pp. 156-7.
mind” (養心, yangxin) and “making fewer the desires” (寡欲, guayu), ideas that became a foundation for answering dilemmas raised by Buddhism. In another instance, Mencius famously argued that “all things are complete within us. There is no greater delight than to achieve sincerity (誠) through self-examination.” Such statements caught the attention of Neo-Confucians as a possible native foundation on which they could construct a more introspective and contemplative worldview.

It is important to bear in mind that although Mencius functioned as a foundation for a new introspective approach, it is apparent that the Neo-Confucian interpretation of the heart-mind (xin, 心) substantially departed from the Mencian view. During the time of Mencius, the Confucian notion of xin was mainly, but not exclusively, concerned with the idea of the intuitive heart and emotions, whereas in the hands of Neo-Confucians, under clear Buddhist influences, it increasingly becomes associated with one’s cognitive faculties and the idea of the mind. In Neo-Confucianism, we have a far greater stress on xin as the seat of consciousness that is not only intuitive and emotional as in the Mencian case, but also distinctly discursive and rational. When scholar translate the character xin as heart-mind it could be generally argued that the Mencian xin was more concerned with the heart, or the moral heart, while the Neo-Confucian xin was more of a rational ethical mind and the seat of consciousness and intentionality.

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786 Mencius 7a:4: 孟子曰: 萬物皆備於我矣. 反身而誠, 樂莫大焉. 強恕而行, 求仁莫近焉.
787 There are also clear overlaps between the Mencian Heart and the Neo-Confucian Mind. In both cases the notion of xin is both the seat of emotions, or ethical awareness, as well as
The choice of the Four Books is yet another indication of the turn inwards towards an increasingly contemplative attitude. Scholars such as Feng Youlan, Julia Ching, Judith Berling, and more recently Daniel Gardner have all pointed out that the shift from the Five Classics to the Four Books reflected a new interest in the internal facets of human existence, which were rather scarce, and some would argue non-existent, in classical Confucianism. The Four Books were more clearly focused on metaphysics and spirituality in which the concern with self-transcendence became more important than simply “rising in a bureaucratic ladder through exams.” Apart from the book of Mencius which provided Confucians with spiritualistic and even mystical conceptual tools, the Great Learning, and perhaps most importantly, the Doctrine of the Mean played a central role in the Neo-Confucian turn towards a more contemplative philosophy. In the Great Learning Neo-Confucians found their procedure for the investigation of things in which we see a progression from one’s internal world and the rectification of the mind (正心) towards the outer sphere of the family, society and politics. As we shall see, the Doctrine of the Mean equipped Neo-Confucians with a theory of emotions while emphasizing the idea of introspection in solitude. The Four Books and the Neo-Confucian lineage of transmission are therefore typical examples of how a tradition radically reorients its ultimate concerns while preserving an appearance

consciousness. Although the differences are mainly a matter of stress they nevertheless represent an important distinction between classical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism.

789 Julia Ching, ibid.
of continuity with the past. They were also conducive to a new interest in contemplation, which equipped Confucianism with tools to respond to the Buddhist challenge.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the central components of the Neo-Confucian project was the construction of a systematic procedure for the attainment of sagehood. In the social level I looked at the way this entailed an unprecedented focus on the individual agent. Here, I would like to highlight the dramatic shift from the classical sage characterized by ritualistic acumen, towards the introspective Neo-Confucian sage who transcends the human mind (人心, renxin) and attains the original mind of the way (道心, daoxin). As Judith Berling has argued, the process of self-cultivation shifted from learning from past models, ethics and refinement of the arts, to a deepened Neo-Confucian concern with spirituality. In the important chapter titled “Preserving One’s Mind and Nourishing One’s Nature” in the Reflection on Things at Hand, the student is urged to resort to a meditative calmness as a means to rectify the mind. Zhu Xi claimed that:

In daily affairs, at all times and in all places, keep the mind-and-heart alert and do not let it wander. In this regard always observe principle, discuss what you seek and thoughtfully ponder it, deeply immerse yourself in it and go over and over it, and then you will be close to the teachings of sages and worthies. Gradually, you will gain a tacit understanding of them and naturally come to see the characteristics with which we are endowed by the Dao of heaven that are really within us.

790 Judith Berling, op. cit., p. 37.
Zhu Xi’s words give us an idea of the exceptional focus Neo-Confucians laid on “thoughtfully pondering” the mind and the nature of things and affairs. According to the Lixue School, preserving the mind is done through different means such as tranquility, concentration, attentiveness, immersing oneself in the task of self-cultivation, and meditation. The goal was to gain insight into the nature of reality and its underlying Principles (li). Such new contemplative concerns were indicative of the unprecedented complexity and nuance in which Neo-Confucians came to understand the internal life of the individual. Neo-Confucians brought the mind to the center of their system and they went on to advance a host of contemplative techniques that equipped the individual with ways to refine the mind. In what follows I will look at some of these introspective features and their striking relationship with ideas and practices that were central in Buddhism.

Consider the notion of shendu (慎獨), which appears in the opening passage of The Doctrine of the Mean as well as in Zengzi’s commentary to The Great Learning; it is sometimes translated as “vigilance in solitude,” “vigilance over one’s mind,” or “self-inspection.” In the hands of Neo-Confucians this relatively unimportant and rather scarce term is brought to the fore to reflect a greater concern with the concordance between one’s inner mental state and one’s actions. In a sense this reflects a certain distaste towards the mechanical nature of traditional Confucian ritual. Indeed, highly ritualistic traditions such as Confucianism and Judaism have been well aware of the

dangers of orthopraxy and its possible decline into hypocrisy and the loss of meaning. As a corrective, Neo-Confucians constantly reminded their students that one should be watchful and reflect upon his actions, not only in public life but especially in solitude. “Caution in one’s actions” (戒慎, jieshen), and “vigilance in solitude” reflect a new interest in the state of mind that accommodates one’s deeds, as well as an interest in affairs that are taking place away from the public eye. Shendu, reflects a new demand for authenticity and sincerity that is fundamental to analytic traditions; it expresses a new intellectual disposition that sees dry orthopraxy as insufficient for leading a rich spiritual life. The demand for internal authenticity is also suggested in the third step of the process of self-cultivation, which tells us to make our intentions sincere (意誠). Zhu Xi claimed that “outwardly doing good things but inwardly in fact feeling quite different is ‘self-deception.’ It may be compared to a piece of copper that is coated with gold on the outside — inside it is not true gold.”793 That Zhu uses the symbol of gold to represent a person’s internal world brings to mind similar Buddhist metaphors of inner purity and the primacy of one’s state of mind.

The new interest among Neo-Confucians in man’s inner sphere naturally led a greater stress on the nature of desires and beliefs. As an example, Cheng Hao’s student was tormented by the endless thoughts that entered his mind. In a very Buddhist manner he complained that it “is like resisting robbers in a ruined house. Before you chase away the one who had entered from the east, another one comes from the west. They come in

from all directions and there is no time to chase all of them away." The student’s qualms demonstrate a new urge to learn about controlling one’s mental faculties and understanding the nature of the mind. In another instance the famous Neo-Confucian commentator Ye Cai claimed that “brilliance and intelligence result if the mind is tranquil and calm. Still water can reflect, but running water cannot” Ye Cai’s words suggest the image of the mind as a mirror, a metaphor that was used by Zhu Xi as well, but was especially central in Buddhist discourse. Neo-Confucians were therefore promoting a new method of examining a person’s internal states of consciousness through the “honest monitoring of one’s own unique development as one’s humaneness is recovered from within.” This introspective tendency is clearly analytic in nature. In fact, As Wolfgang Bauer convincingly demonstrates, the unique interpretation of the concept of vigilance in solitude was an adoption of an interpretation of the same concept by Buddhists. Neo-Confucians modeled most of the contemplative features of their philosophy after Buddhist ideas that were gaining popularity in China. The idea of shendu or vigilance in solitude introduced a new Confucian person, one with a solitary private life of

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794 Zhu Xi and Lu Zuqian, Reflections on Things at Hand, iv.10.
795 Ibid., IV. 69.
796 In the Platform Sutra the mirror metaphor was a famous point of contention between Shen-Xiu and Hui Neng.
797 Berry Keenan, Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), p. 44..
798 Wolfgang Bauer has demonstrated that the New Discourses (新論, xinlun), an important sixth century text that shows Buddhist influences, pioneered the “reclusive” interpretation of the idea of shendu prior to the rise of Neo-Confucianism. The author of the New Discourses detected The Doctrine of the Mean and its concept of vigilance in solitude as an instrumental resource for speaking about a monastic, and introspective solitary life. This was happening during what Bauer calls the “golden age” of eremitism centuries prior to the institutionalization of The Doctrine of the Mean as one of the Four Books by Neo-Confucians. See Bauer in Munro, Individualism and Holism, p. 178.
contemplation and self-reflection, a life with a “focus on what may be called the subjectivity of the profound person.”

The notion of jing is even more central than shendu and is frequently used in Neo-Confucian discourse to denote an intense mental concentration, or heightened form of mental effort. It is often translated as seriousness, reverence, or as I shall use it, reverent attentiveness. It is yet another example of the Neo-Confucian attempt to build a conceptual framework to describe the inner world of the individual. Reverent attentiveness was central to the process of self-cultivation; it required the student to reach a meditative state of mind in approaching his object of investigation. The practice of reverent attentiveness in the correct manner enabled one to unify the mind in order to penetrate the inner essence of things. Although this action was directed to the outer world it nevertheless originated in an internal manipulation of consciousness that was central to one’s transformative potential. When Zhu Xi stated that “abiding in reverence (居敬, ju jing) and exhaustive recognition of principle (窮理, qiong li) are the two phases of moral self-cultivation,” he was highlighting a uniquely Neo-Confucian state on mind that was expected to accommodate the student in search of truth. Jing is also related to notions such as shoulian (收斂), “collecting oneself” or shoushi (收拾) “collecting the mind,” and demonstrates a new demand to hone and refine one’s mental faculties in the process of self-cultivation. Cheng Yi who made this term central to Neo-Confucian discourse resorted to the Yijing where it is said that “Ching [jing] keeps straightforwardness

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800 Wittenborn, op. cit., pp. 200-201.
inside… straightforwardness means singleness. No lie, no negligence, no shame… all belongs to the work of mental concentration.”

Zhu Xi’s student Chen Chun is helpful in contrasting the Neo-Confucian idea of attentiveness with earlier traditional interpretations of the term. He states:

The word *ching* has been talked about in earlier classics quite often, but only in the sense of being slow and cautious. The two Ch’eng brothers (Ch’eng Hao and Ch’eng I) were the first to discuss it from the point of view of the student’s effort, from which we can see that the principle is exceedingly urgent and of great importance.Originally the word *ching* was a function word, similar to words like “awe” and “fear”. Now that it is taken as concrete effort, its meaning has become very strong, resembling a concrete, substantial thing.

From this description we get a sense that *jing* which formerly denoted a type of respect of caution, becomes a term that designates an active state of mind, a “substantial thing,” a “concrete effort,” or what Keenan describes as an “inner mental attentiveness.” In a different paragraph Chen Chun describes attentiveness as a state on “internal respect,” a kind of reverence to what one is engaged in and an acute ability to focus on a certain matter with utter intensity. As in so many other instances of Neo-Confucian borrowings, the readers will probably recognize the resemblance between the notion of *jing* and the Buddhist idea of *mindfulness* (*正念*, zhengnian) or *mindful alertness*. In both cases there is a demand for an intense presence and awareness. This is clearly reflected in Zengzi’s commentary to the *Great Learning* where he states that “if the mind is not present one

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802 Chen Chun, *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained*, p. 100.
looks but does not see, listen but does not hear, eats but does not appreciate the flavor.’

Without *jing*, or mindfulness, we are not aware of the world as it really is.

Finally, the Lixue School introduced into Confucianism the practice of meditation, which was the hallmark of Chan Buddhism and the clearest indication of what I call cognitive-individualism.\(^{805}\) The practice of *jingzuo* (靜坐), or “quiet sitting” was a clear sign of the contemplative aspects of Neo-Confucianism in which the student was expected to sit in silent concentration and reflect on the nature of the *dao*, on principle, and on his ongoing spiritual progress.\(^{806}\) Some Neo-Confucians, following a comment by Zhu Xi, went as far as advocating a routine in which half a day was dedicated to meditation and half a day to studying (半日靜坐, 半日讀書).\(^{807}\) The emergence of meditation in Neo-Confucianism could already be discerned in the initial stages of the tradition when it was advocated as an integral part of the process of self-cultivation by the Northern Song philosophers. Zhou Dunyi practiced it as part of his emphasis on the *centrality of quietude* (主靜, zhujing), Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi both practiced and taught quiet sitting, and their students Luo Congyan (羅從彥, 1072-1135) and Li Tong (李侗, 1092-1163) represent a climax in the promotion of meditation in Neo-

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805 It was the highly analytic Theravadic Buddhism that had the greatest impact on Chinese Buddhism in terms of meditative techniques, which were later incorporated into the Mahayanic tradition. See Yao Weiqun in *Ru Lin (Confucian Literati)*, Peng Piao ed., (Shandong: Shandong Daxue Chubanshi, 2011), pp. 295-6.

806 *Jingzuo* was sometimes referred to as *dazuo* (打坐).

Confucianism. Li Tong taught Zhu Xi techniques of meditation which left a lasting mark on the young scholar and subsequent generations of literati.

Although Zhu Xi ended up departing from Li Tong’s exaggerated stress on meditation, there are several indications that he continued to practice quiet-sitting, together with many passages in which he teaches and advocated it to his students. When the disciple Zhou Shenfu encountered difficulties in studying, Zhu told him: “shut your door and begin sitting for half a month. After ten says have passed pick up a book to study and you will see the truth of these words.” In other instances we see examples of quite-sitting being framed in the language of Mencius where it is said that “the way of learning is nothing other than seeking the mind that has strayed.” In the light of this important passage, the Neo-Confucian Chen Lie understood meditation as a way to recover the lost mind (放心) “he shut his door and practiced quiet-sitting without reading any books at all, after about a hundred days he recovered the mind that had strayed…” Zhu Xi supported this method of meditation as a way to recover the mind, thereby allowing many of his students to engage in protracted periods of meditation. The changes that took place in Confucianism meant that the spiritually inclined were no longer confined to Buddhism and Daoism. During the Song period a literatus could both be an engaged and socially responsible Confucian as well as a person that practices contemplative techniques that were uniquely Confucian. In fact, those who showed an

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808 Taylor “Chu Hsi and Meditation,” p. 46.
809 Zhuzi Wenji, 63:37b-38a (Collection of Literary Works by Master Zhu Xi).
810 Mencius 6a:11: 學問之道無他，求其放心而已矣
811 Taylor, “Chu Hsi and Meditation,” p. 57.
812 Ibid.
exaggerated focus on social engagement were frequently criticized. Cheng Hao, for instance, used to instruct his students to practice quiet sitting as a corrective to their over-reliance on study to the exclusion of internal affairs.\textsuperscript{813}

Many Neo-Confucians used the notions of \textit{yi-fa} and \textit{wei-fa} to construct a uniquely Confucian form of meditation. These concepts which appear in the first passage of \textit{The Doctrine of the Mean} refer to the \textit{manifest mind} (已發, \textit{yifa}) and \textit{unmanifest mind} (未發, \textit{weifa}).\textsuperscript{814} Some Neo-Confucians argued that through a meditative process one could reach a state of consciousness that predated the emergence of emotions. They contended that by reaching a state of consciousness prior to the arousal of feelings, one could make contact with the primal and pure state of the \textit{unmanifest mind}. Luo Congyan claimed that “in quiet-sitting one is capable of seeing pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy while they are yet unmanifest (\textit{wei-fa}) and have not assumed material form.” Li Tong taught Zhu Xi that “through the practice of quiet-sitting he would come to see the Principle of Heaven within the unmanifest mind.”\textsuperscript{815} Here again, it is not hard to recognize the strong Buddhist characteristics these theories.\textsuperscript{816} I will soon discuss why the practice of meditation seemed too Buddhist in the eyes of many Neo-Confucians and how the more conservatively-inclined sought to temper these extreme forms of introspection with a more grounded

\textsuperscript{813} Ibid., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{814} This can also be referred to as “the mind before the manifestation of emotions” and “the mind after the manifestation of emotions.” See Zhong Yong 1:1: 喜怒哀樂之未發, 謂之中; 發而皆中節, 謂之和.
\textsuperscript{815} Huang Tsung-hsi, \textit{Sung Yuan Xue An} (Philosophical Records of Sung and Yuan Scholars, Taipei: shih-chieh shu-chu, 1974), 10:63. Also see Rodney Taylor “Chu Hsi and Meditation” pp. 46-47.
\textsuperscript{816} Wing-tsit Chan notes: “Taoist and Buddhist influence on the Neo-Confucian practice of quiet-sitting cannot be denied.” See Chan “Chu Hsi and Quiet-Sitting” p. 260.
theory of concentration. The point to stress, however, is that meditation became an accepted and legitimate part of the Neo-Confucian way of life, a fact that represents a striking departure from classical Confucianism which was confined to the external features of reality.

Although Neo-Confucians were very wary of coming too close to Buddhism, they were also well aware of the changing times and the importance of providing their students with contemplative channels for self-cultivation. Quiet-sitting represents a clear move towards a uniquely Confucian form of cognitive-individualism that was skillfully associated with the Mencian notion of mind and other concepts that originated in the classics. The central notion of xin (mind), and ideas such as shendu (vigilance in solitude), and jing (attentiveness or reverence) are all important examples of how Neo-Confucians reinvented their tradition using terms that originated in their own native repository of meaning. The shift to the inner sphere of the individual represents a striking reorientation of Confucianism and a clear departure from Herbert Fingarette’s description of classical Confucianism as a tradition in which “the metaphor of an inner psychic life, in all its ramifications so familiar to us, simply isn’t present… not even as a rejected possibility.”

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4.7.2 Contemplation in the Service of Social Engagement and Ritual

In the above discussion I tried to demonstrate the substantial departure of Neo-Confucianism from traditional themes characteristic of classical Confucianism. One important aspect of this historical change was a move towards an analytic stress on contemplative techniques tailored for the private benefit of the individual. Such innovations notwithstanding, Neo-Confucians refused to lean too heavily on a contemplative worldview. They appropriated contemplative features from Buddhism but made sure to subordinate them to an active life based on ritual and human relations.

In all the examples that I provided above we can detect strong Buddhist and Daoist influences on the one hand, as well as a peculiarly Confucian interpretation of these borrowings on the other. Consider the idea of reverent attentiveness (jing). Cheng Yi was the thinker who brought this term to the fore and in doing so he departed from Zhou Dunyi’s suspiciously Buddhist reliance on another jing, namely, tranquility or quiescence (静). Instead of the typical Buddhist tendency toward quietude and emptiness, the Lixue School, especially after Cheng Yi, put a great emphasis on the idea of attentiveness as an intense state of awareness that was strongly implicated in the world of action and social engagement. As opposed to the Buddhist notions of tranquility and quietude, Cheng and Zhu saw reverent attentiveness as a mental disposition that was enacted both in quietude and activity, but especially in the latter. The Neo-Confucian motto was that “one is vacuous while tranquil and straightforward in action.”

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818 This passage originated in Zhou Dunyi’s Tongshu (統書) Penetrating the Yijing. Feng Youlan translates it as “vacuity in quiescence and straightforwardness in movement,” this was later
words when the sage was not confronted with affairs his mind remained empty and still, but once he became engaged in daily matters his reaction to a situation was resolute and guided by the spirit of reverent attentiveness. Therefore, in their notion of attentiveness, Neo-Confucians managed to integrate Buddhist and Confucian tendencies; quietude was seen as a natural state but attentiveness was first and foremost oriented towards “the process of learning and study… [it provided] the groundwork for the investigation of things and the exhaustion of principle.”

As I have shown, Neo-Confucians became increasingly concerned with the disruptive effects of emotions, an interest that was of central importance in Buddhism. Cheng Yi claimed that there were many different ways to avoid such disturbances, but whereas Buddhists resorted to the practice of meditation to stop the mind, Confucians alone realized that the mind cannot be stopped. Therefore, the solution is for the mind to be in “a state of concentration, or, chu-ching [jing], the state of devotion at the time of offering sacrifices to heaven or the ancestors.” Reverent attentiveness is seen as an outcome of eliminating unnecessary desires and reaching a higher level of concentration, but it never entailed the elimination of desires. Earlier, I mentioned the way Cheng Hao’s student used the idea of robbers entering a house as an analogy for thoughts beclouding his mind. The typical Neo-Confucian solution to this problem was to make sure that the “house,” or the mind, had a single master: attentiveness. As opposed to Buddhism where

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paraphrased by Cheng Hao in his “Letter on the Clamness of the Nature” to Zhang Zai, but Zhou’s formulation remained the most popular. See more in Feng, *A Short History*, pp. 271-72; 287.

819 Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

one attempts to eliminate all thoughts, Neo-Confucians taught to confine the mind to one object of investigation. By doing so, they made sure that their mental practices did not slip into the danger of nihilism and a detachment from the social and political spheres.

4.7.3 Meditation on the Concrete

The lixue idea of quiet-sitting, although clearly influenced by Buddhism, offered a uniquely Confucian version of introspection. The Buddhist philosophy of meditation caused many Confucians to feel uneasy with quietistic and reclusive practices. It is for this reason that the topic of quiet-sitting led to opposing views, and was frequently attacked as detrimental to one’s development. Cheng Yi who was generally sympathetic towards meditation, warned that “once one speaks of quietude, one has fallen into the ways of Buddhism.”821 His concerns were not misplaced; as Koichi Shinohara shows, a whole generation of Cheng Yi’s most prominent students began to interpret his teachings with an emphasis on the subjective mind such that “in their thought the “subject” that investigated rather than the “principle” that is investigated through the world of objects is emphasized; the focus is in the experience of “penetration” (kuan-t’ung) rather than on the cumulative cultivation (chi-hsi).”822 One way of understanding these concerns is by looking at the Neo-Confucian debate about the unmanifest mind (wei-fa) and the manifest mind (yi-fa) as presented in The Doctrine of the Mean. There were factions among Neo-Confucians that were strongly opposed to the emphasis on the unmanifest mind, a

821 Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, Er Cheng Yishu (Written Legacy of the Two Chungs) 8:6b.
position that was mainly associated with Zhou Dunyi and Li Tong. Such misgivings are understandable if we consider just how similar these approaches were to the Chan School’s teaching “to get back to the world of the original nature in which mind does not arise.”

Central Neo-Confucian figures such as Hu Anguo, Hu Hong, and Zhang Shi expressed their distaste towards such quietistic doctrines, which they saw as nihilistic and anti-Confucian to the core. Therefore, although meditation was certainly accepted as a legitimate practice, Neo-Confucians insisted on giving it peculiar Confucian characteristics. Zhu Xi, for instance, dedicated much effort to highlighting the distinctiveness of Confucian quiet-sitting in contrast to Buddhist and Daoist practices. Interestingly his solution was taken straight from Chinese Buddhism, especially the Tiantai and Huayan Schools. Zhu Xi argued that the unmanifest and manifest minds were actually one and the same. This enabled him to both incorporate the idea of quietude while simultaneously avoiding Buddhist nihilism.

Meditation was seen as an integral part of the process of learning and investigating things. It was first and foremost a way to become more involved and aware of the dao as it was implemented in daily affairs. Julia Ching argues that:

from 1170 on, Chu [Zhu] concentrated on Ch’eng Yi’s exhortation to abide in reverence and extend knowledge, a formula that offers more balance between action and contemplation. Meditation is not an end in itself but a means to an end, to achieve an

824 He also associated this with the interpenetration of the Great Void (wuji) and the Supreme Ultimate (taiji) thereby “accepting both transcendence and immanence in a dialectical manner.” See Julia Ching, The Religious Thought of Chu His, p. 119.
attitude of reverence (ching). Although an interior disposition, maintained in and out of meditation, reverence is principally applied to a life of activity.\textsuperscript{825}

The cultivation of reverent attentiveness through meditation was also a way to develop one’s ability to practice ritual on a more profound level. As opposed to the Buddhist and Daoist elimination of thoughts and indulgence in introspection, Neo-Confucian meditation was practiced in order to improve one’s virtue and “the fulfillment of one’s responsibilities to the family as well as to society as large.”\textsuperscript{826} Zhu Xi claimed that “we cannot leave everything in order to do quiet-sitting behind closed doors, refusing to attend to things and affairs... as human beings, we also need to serve our rulers and parents, relate to friends and spouses, govern servants and subordinates.”\textsuperscript{827} He also claimed that his teacher Cheng Yi was “afraid that if people merely seek tranquility they will not have anything to do with things and affairs.”\textsuperscript{828} Meditation helped a person collect his mind and act with reverent attentiveness in daily life and in performing rituals. Pure contemplative activities detached from action were strongly frowned upon. In a famous Neo-Confucian passage a master noted:

Formerly, seeing that students tended to become wrapped up in intellectual explanations and debate, which did them no good, I taught them sitting in meditation. For a time, this helped them see the true way and they achieved some results, but they gradually

\textsuperscript{825} Ching, \textit{The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi}, p. 119.  
\textsuperscript{826} Ibid., p. 120.  
\textsuperscript{827} \textit{Zhuzi Yulei}, 45:11b.  
\textsuperscript{828} \textit{Reflection on Things at Hand}, Chan trans. p. 143.
developed the defect of fondness for tranquility and disgust with activity, and they
degenerated into lifelessness like dry wood.\textsuperscript{829}

In another instance, when asked by Zhong Si if he should sit quietly and concentrate like
the Buddha, Zhu Xi replied: “our learning is precisely the opposite…[in] dealing with
people and handling affairs, always keep your mind alert. That is the preservation of the
mind. How can one leave all things alone and merely sit quietly?”\textsuperscript{830}

4.7.4 Ritual in Neo-Confucian Philosophy

In spite of the Neo-Confucian emphasis on social activism, many scholars
preferred to emphasize the Neo-Confucian shift towards an introspective worldview.
Berry Kennan, for instance, claims that the Lixue School “represented a shift away from
values derived from ritualized social practice and towards an emphasis on the innate
sources of human morality…[as well as] a natural focus on the moral and spiritual
development of a person.”\textsuperscript{831} As we can see, Kennan’s description assumes a shift away
from “ritualized social practice.” This is relevant to the distinction I made between the
synthetic reliance on ritual and the typically analytic emphasis on contemplation and
personal religious fulfillment. The question that comes to mind is what happened to ritual
under the impact of Neo-Confucian thought? Did the Lixue School divert Confucianism

\textsuperscript{829} Wang Yangming, \textit{Wang Wen-ch'eng Kung ch'uan-shu} (Complete Works of Wang Yang-ming, 
667-691.

\textsuperscript{830} \textit{Zhuzi Yu Lei}, 115:14 (p. 4472) in Chan, “Chu Hsi and Quiet Sitting,” p. 257. In another
instance Zhu Xi said “quiet sitting is not like Buddhist meditation, cutting off all thoughts,” \textit{Zhuzi
Yulei} 12:141 (p. 354-6) in Chan “Quiet Sitting,” p. 263.

\textsuperscript{831} Keenan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 8.
from its traditional reliance on ritual? Or in other words, did Neo-Confucians lead to a shift from the synthetic body of ritual to the analytic mind? Considering how central ritual was in classical Confucianism this question begs an answer.

In the chapter on Kabbalah, I showed how medieval mystics infused ritual with introspective qualities that elevated the commandments to a new ontological level of significance. Such mental approaches in Kabbalah were intimately related with a new concern with sincerity or *Kavannah* (intention). Neo-Confucians, much like Kabbalists, succeeded in cementing their traditional reliance on ritual in a more advanced cosmology. Indeed, during the Song, under the direct impact of Neo-Confucianism, ritual takes on a more normative function. Gardner argues that in Neo-Confucianism ritual in no longer “external to man but is merely the external expression of the principle within him. In short, ritual is “natural” to man. The place of ritual in the Neo-Confucian system of thought of late imperial China is thus deeply affected by the system of metaphysics undergirding it.”

Zhu Xi dedicated great effort to explicating and commenting on the field of ritual. In terms of breadth, his most notable achievement was the *Comprehensive Explanation of the Classic of Ceremonials and its Commentaries* (*儀禮經傳通解*), a massive work that elaborated on traditional ritual and the relationship between the three classics of ritual, the *yili* (*儀禮, The Classic of Ceremonials*), *liji* (*禮記, The Classic of Ritual*), and *zhouli* (*

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周禮, The Zhou Rituals). In popularity, his Family Rituals (文公家禮), became the most important manual of ritual in late imperial China. About six centuries after its publication French missionaries in China reported that Zhu’s Family Rituals “was second in popularity only to the Analects, and that copies of it could be found in almost every home in China.” In many ways, the Family Rituals was an equivalent to Judaism’s popular Shulchan Aruch (📱 المنزلך ערוך;); it was the most authoritative guide for domestic rituals until the fall of the dynastic order and a favorite of the literati class. Its influence went far beyond China and extended to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It became so central to the tradition that many Confucians saw it as a guide for self-cultivation and supplemented it with detailed and complex commentaries, while others who saw it a manual for commoners wrote shorter and more accessible versions of it.

Far from symbolizing the decline of ritual, the Song era represents a watershed moment in its development and intensification. Neo-Confucians were conservative thinkers who were very much worried about the declining position of ritual in society. This led some of the greatest minds of the Neo-Confucian movement such as Zhang Zai, Ouyang Xiu, Cheng Yi, Sima Guang, and Zhu Xi to write important works that were according to Zhu The Ceremonials was the central text of ritual and the Classic of Ritual was to be studied with it, while the Zhou Rituals could be used as a reference book to both. See more in Julia Ching, The Religious Thought of Chu His, esp. pp. 72-90 passim. Patricia Ebrey and Zhu Xi, Chu Hsi’s Family Rituals: A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. xiii. Taken form Witek, John W. Controversial Ideas in China and in Europe: A Biography of Jean-Francois Fouquet, S.J., (1665-1741) (Roma: Institutum Historicum S.I., 1982). pp. 285-6 n.90. Ebrey, Chu Hsi’s Family Rituals, p. xiii.
wholly dedicated to ritualism.\textsuperscript{836} Zhu was so concerned with the subject that he put together a group of talented scholars who worked under him in an attempt to provide a systematic and comprehensive compilation of classical ritual texts, together with their central commentaries. He did not manage to realize this monumental project, but he worked on it until his very last days and saw it as one of his most pressing missions.\textsuperscript{837}

I will return to the important contributions of Neo-Confucians to the establishment of ritual on a popular level, but initially I will focus on the conceptual significance of ritual and its cultural and philosophical implications. My goal is to show that the growing importance of contemplative techniques and concern with the internal sphere did not replace or even detract from the position of ritual behavior. Instead, the internal and external were harmonized, such that ritual was seen as an expression of one’s state of mind and the Principles of Heaven. Perhaps the most important change that took place during the Song was that ritual was conceptualized within the new philosophical framework of lixue thought. It was therefore understood as part of a new systematic philosophy characterized by a strong metaphysical and epistemological bent. Ritual was now understood as an integral part of the philosophy of nature, mind, and principle. Zhu Xi claimed that as opposed to Principle, which is pure, “empty”, and abstract, ritual is intended for practical application. Using the dyad of ti and yong (體用, form and

\textsuperscript{836} Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals was based on the earlier work of Sima Guang and updated with Cheng Yi’s philosophy of Principle. See Kuhn, The Age of Confucian Rule, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{837} Zhu Xi wrote to a close friend “I cannot help treasuring my remaining days on earth, especially as the work to compile a [collected] commentary on the rituals is beginning to take form but cannot be finished in a rush. Should I have more than a year to live and be able to complete the task, I shall be able to die in peace.” See Julia Ching, The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi, pp. 76-77.
function) Zhu Xi understood ritual as the concrete application (function) of Principle (form). Julia Ching notes that rituals were “dynamic expressions of the principle of Heaven, which may also be called natural law.”838 This is also related to the notion of reverent attentiveness, or jing; according to Neo-Confucians, ritual had to be performed with reverent attentiveness, which supplemented it with an intention that helped one turn ritual performance into a reflection of Principle. When ritual is enacted with the right mental attitude it comes to truly reflect the unity and patterns of Heaven.

Zhu Xi’s commentary to analect 12:1 can help us understand the changes that Confucianism was undergoing under the Neo-Confucian impact. Confucius famously stated that:

to subdue the self and return to ritual constitutes humanity. If only for a single day, someone subdues the self and returns to ritual, all under heaven will recognize this humanity. The practice of humanity rests with oneself, not with others… The master said if contrary to ritual, do not look; if contrary to ritual, do not listen; if contrary to ritual, do not speak; if contrary to ritual, do not act…839

Zhu Xi explains the phrase “contrary to ritual” as selfishness, which he interprets in terms of desires. For this he uses Mencius’ famous dictum which states that “to nourish the mind there is nothing better than to make the desires few,”840 By associating being “contrary to ritual” with selfishness and desires, Zhu Xi creates a conceptual opposition

838 Julia Ching, ibid., p. 73.
839 Analect 12:1: 颜渊问仁。子曰：克己复礼为仁。一日克己复礼，天下归仁焉。为仁由己，而由人乎哉？颜渊曰：请问其目。子曰：非礼勿视，非礼勿听，非礼勿言，非礼勿动。颜渊曰：回虽不敏，请事斯语矣。
840 Mencius, 7B:33. 孟子曰：养心莫善于寡欲。其为使人也寡欲，虽有存焉者，寡矣；其为使人也多欲，虽有存焉者，寡矣.
between ritual and desires (欲). He then notes that “when the selfish is subdued, one’s every movement will be in precise accord with ritual, and so in daily life, heavenly principle will be sure to prevail.”841 This is a telling example of the way Zhu Xi managed to harmonized Buddhist and Confucian themes, such that the Buddhist language of desire becomes relevant to the correct performance of Confucian ritual. At times this logic is reversed, such as in the case when Zhu Xi quotes Cheng Yi saying that the performance of ritual is a way to nurture what is within.842 In this case ritual behavior is a tool for internal refinement. Common to both cases, however, is the fact that the external and internal become interrelated such that correct ritual performance is seen as a reflection of internal purity, or alternatively, a tool for internal perfection and self-cultivation.

This unique interpretation of analect 12:1 is a striking example of the changes that took place in Confucianism. As Gardner convincingly demonstrates, in He Yan’s (何晏, 190-249) early classical commentary on the same analect, “there is no emphasis at all on the inner dimensions of the individual.” In stark contrast to Zhu Xi, He Yan’s ritual is strictly external to man and discloses no real connection to one’s psychological dispositions. During the Song period, He Yan’s idea of restraining the self in terms of behavior that is concrete dramatically shifts to Zhu Xi’s subduing of selfish desires.843 In Neo-Confucianism ritual becomes the manifestation of one’s mind, his innate nature, and original goodness; “with the elimination of selfish desires and the realization of one’s endowed nature, one will simultaneously act in perfect accord with the dictates of

841 Zhuzi Yulei, 41.1050. Quoted in Gardner, Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects, pp. 80-81.
842 Gardner, ibid., p. 81.
Perhaps most relevant to our discussion is the fact that “in Zhu’s view, what distinguishes the Confucian from the Buddhist—and a reason to criticize Buddhism—is that the Confucian who subdues selfish desires is sure to practice propriety [ritual], whereas the Buddhist who does so is certain only to “plunge into emptiness”.”

Fingarette famously argued that the ideal of humanity (ren, 仁) is a reflection of correct ritual performance, claiming that “ren develops only so far as li develops…” As Gardner contends, Fingarette’s position reflects He Yan’s early perception of the Analects, but it does not provide a satisfactory explanation of Neo-Confucian thought which disclosed a clear turn towards the language of emotions and the mind. The point of interest is that this contemplative turn actually provided ritual with a more robust and normative underpinning. In Neo-Confucianism, man’s psychological and cognitive apparatus is integrated with a systematic cosmology that provided an explanatory framework for the performance of ritual. As in the Kabbalistic case, contemplation is absorbed only to elevate ritual performance to a higher ontological level of meaning. The Jewish mystic was asked to perform ritual with intention, rather than mechanistically; similarly in Neo-Confucianism “the value of the performance lies not in the performance itself but in the spirit invested in the performance by the performer.”

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844 Ibid. p. 84.
845 Zhuzi Yulei 41:1045. Quoted in Gardner, ibid., pp. 84-85.
846 Fingarette, Confucius: the Secular as Sacred, p. 48.
847 Gardner, op. cit., p. 86.
848 Gardner, Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects, p. 95. In one passage Neo-Confucians go as far as suggesting that sacrificing to ancestors with “sincerity and reverence… [does] not only make the sacrificial ceremony affective and more deeply meaningful for the participants but also confers existence on the spirits themselves, guaranteeing that the sacrificial offerings will be accepted.”
classical Confucian and Jewish worldview in which the demand for intention was seen as a way to avoid mechanical behavior, in Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah we see a more elaborate connection between the internal and external such that one’s mental state had concrete metaphysical implications. Again, of special interest is that in spite of the greater reliance on man’s interiority, ritual is not compromised to the slightest extent; on the contrary, “when properly carried out, everything is ritual and music. The implication here is that one ideally is always practicing ritual and music, not only on specifically designated occasions.”

Since *li* interpenetrates the world in its entirety, it only makes sense that ritual, as its reflection, is ubiquitous to life as well. We are constantly engaged in ritual; the question is whether we are successful in performing it correctly, with the right mental intensity, such that it becomes emblematic of the principles of heaven.

On a more popular level, Neo-Confucians were successful in two central and interrelated respects: they manage to create a systematic theory of ritual, and in doing so they made ritual more accessible to the common person. As I mentioned above, Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals* could be found in almost every Chinese household. In it one could find detailed instructions for all the rituals, “from cradle to grave” that were meant to be

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849 Gardner ibid., p. 96. Ritual and Music (禮樂) were traditionally discussed in unison. Music was an integral part of ritual and was seen as a model for the realization of social harmony.

850 William De Bary tells a story of a Korean sailor who was shipwrecked on the Chinese coast. In trying to convince the Chinese that he was not a Japanese pirate he constantly pointed to his strict adherence to Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals*, which he viewed as his bible. De Bary notes that this Korean person “would seem a wholly implausible or comic figure unless we recognized the seriousness with which Neo-Confucianists viewed ritual as one of the most practical and constructive of activities as well as the most civilized and refined.” De Bary “Some Common Tendencies” in *Confucianism in Action*, p. 38.
performed at home.\(^{851}\) While the ancient *Classic of Ritual* (The Book of Rites) held the elitist perspective that “rituals do not reach down to the commoners,”\(^{852}\) Neo-Confucians wanted to supply the masses with a unified system of operation and they were extremely successful in achieving their goal. They departed from the lofty ritualism of traditional Confucianism and provided clear explanations for the performance of popular rites that were absent in the Classics, such as rituals of mourning, funerary ceremonies, and memorial rites. Such instructions for small-scale household rituals were absolutely essential for a society that upheld filial piety and ancestral worship as central virtues.\(^{853}\)

Of special interest is the fact that the traditional lack of a systematic instruction for popular rituals “was increasingly filled by Buddhist and Taoist services, which were not status related.”\(^{854}\) Indeed, the competition with contending ideologies was a major impetus for the Neo-Confucian reassessment of its ritualistic legacy. *Lixue* thinkers were very much alert to this cultural crisis and they saw the world of ritual as a central field that was in need of reform in face of a growing Buddhist and Daoist challenge. Prior to Neo-Confucianism the world of ritual was in a state of disarray, with people following a confusing mixture of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist rites. Moreover, the fact that classical Confucianism focused on elite and court rituals meant that Buddhism was becoming much more pervasive and accessible on the popular level. Neo-Confucians, to a great extent managed to halt this trend; they put an end to the un-systematic syncretism

\(^{851}\) Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
\(^{853}\) Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi*, p. 73.
\(^{854}\) Ibid., p. 73.
of their age by providing a coherent method that “fulfilled the needs of the general populace, who found the dynastic state of little relevance to their own lives.”

Indeed, it was through the revival of ritual that Neo-Confucianism had the most profound impact on popular culture.

There are many examples of the way Neo-Confucian rituals were a reaction to the ascendancy of Buddhism. Perhaps the most apparent place to detect this confrontation was in the field of funerary services, which was a clear forte of the Buddhist tradition. This may very well explain why this topic occupied the largest section of Zhu’s *Family Rituals*. As an example, the Buddhist custom of cremation was seen as offensive to Confucians who believed that deceased ancestors’ bodies must remain intact. The disrespectful burning of the dead was fundamentally contrary to the logic of filial piety, which demanded respect for the body bequeathed to us by our parents. This tension was directly related to the distinction between contemplation and ritual. The idea of cremation presupposes that what is of primary importance in human life (and the afterlife and consecutive lives) is one’s cognitive faculties, one’s soul, or the karmic lot of an individual. This is the part of our being that is associated with our mental faculties, our ability to contemplate, and meditate; it is an abstract and intangible feature of human life that is seen as superior to the material body. In this view, cremation can be seen as a form of purification in which we are relieved of the burden of our material nature. Confucians, on the other hand, saw the body as sacred both because it was given to us by our ancestors, and because it was the medium through which humans express their

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855 Ibid., p. 78.
relationship to ultimate reality. The Confucian body is the body of ritual; a vessel for the expression of the patterns of heaven and social harmony. Therefore, under the guidance of Zhu Xi, Neo-Confucians took a belligerent position on the topic of cremation. They even prioritized it over submission to our parents. Zhu Xi claimed that the “son should oppose the father’s wish even when the latter desired such [Buddhist service] for the mother, as cremation was considered demeaning to the parents’ bodies.”

In conclusion, Neo-Confucians preserved the central position of ritual in their philosophy. Like Kabbalists, they managed to devise a new doctrine that integrated the psychological and contemplative features of analytic modes of operation, and simultaneously interpret ritual behavior in light of their new cosmologies. In both traditions, the body remains central and the typical analytic degradation of material and flesh was avoided. In both cases we see a skillful balancing of contradicting analytic and synthetic tendencies with a clear preservation of the basic features of the synthetic worldview.

4.7.5 Other-Worldliness vs. This-Worldliness

In the second chapter, section 2.3.3, I highlighted the world-affirming characteristics of the Chinese and Jewish traditions in contradistinction to analytic traditions. It is important to note that in China, the distinction between the world-negating Buddhist doctrine and the Confucian stress on worldly affairs represented the most central conflict that emerged between the Chinese and Indian minds. This tension became

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apparent as soon as Buddhism became influential in China during the Wei-Jin Period (220-589 AD.), but it reached a screeching crescendo with the emergence of Neo-Confucianism. In the following pages I will look at the Neo-Confucian borrowing of other-worldly qualities from Buddhism and how these borrowings were subordinated to the Confucian stress on social and political activism.

That Neo-Confucianism shifted to an increasingly other-worldly perspective can be attested by many of the themes I explored earlier. To a great extent, the emergence of the Four Books and their greater interest in individual introspection and metaphysics reflects a simultaneous shift from Confucianism’s traditional concern with the external socio-political sphere to an exploration of themes that transcend the quotidian world of human affairs. Although Confucians were certainly adamant in remaining involved in the “here-and-now” it is important to appreciate the trans-mundane implications of their revolutionary metaphysics and theories of mind and human nature. The first indication of the emergence of a radically innovative cosmology among Neo-Confucians can be traced back to Zhou Dunyi’s *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*. The opening passage of the diagram states that “from the Ultimate-less (or Boundless, wuji) arises the Supreme Ultimate (taiji)” (以無極而為太極). It is important to note that the notion of Ultimateless includes the character for emptiness or nothingness. The Neo-Confucian use of the notion of emptiness (wu, 無) so characteristic of both Buddhism and Daoism would be unthinkable in pre-Song Confucianism. Especially striking is the fact that wuji is seen as the root and source of reality, a position that could easily be interpreted as a form of nihilism. In addition to Zhou’s Ultimateless, another Neo-Confucian, Zhang Zai, offered
his own notion of emptiness which he called The Great Void (taixu, 太虛). In the cases of Zhou Dunyi and Zhang Zai we witness a new interest in the unmanifest or hidden aspects of reality; a position that remained prevalent, albeit to a lesser degree, in the thought of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. This new interest in ideas such as ultimateless and void hint at a shift towards a more other-worldly approach that highlights the unmanifest features of reality as logically prior to the world of things and affairs. Indeed, one of the most characteristic feature of the Neo-Confucian School of Principle was its adoption of the Buddhist, and typically Indo-European, dichotomy between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. Conceptual dyads such as form and function (ti-yong, 體-用), Principle and material energy (li-qi, 理－氣), the human way and the way of heaven (rendao-tiandao, 人道－天道), the human mind and the mind of the way (renxin-tianxin, 人心－道心), and the manifest mind and the unmanifest mind (yifa-weifa, 以發－未發), were all indicative of a new logical priority that was invested in the intangible and transcendent “world above shapes” (形而上) over and above the mundane “world within shapes” (形而下). For example, many Neo-Confucians argued that the highest metaphysical notions of The Supreme Ultimate and Principle preexisted nature and creation, thereby suggesting their primacy over the world of affairs.\(^858\) It is no wonder that many scholars have convincingly argued that the School of Principle subscribed to a

\(^{858}\) Carsun Chang, *op. cit.*, p. 258.
dualistic philosophy (二元論) reminiscent of the other-worldly Buddhist and Greek paradigms.\(^{859}\)

An example can help us understand this dualistic philosophical framework. The most fundamental division Neo-Confucians highlighted was between the sphere of abstract Principles (\(li\)) and the worldly sphere of material energy (\(qi\)). In his famous *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan chose to name the Neo-Confucian School of Principle the *School of Platonic Forms*.\(^{860}\) Although some believed that as a rationalist Feng went too far in his “hellenization” of Chinese thought, his association of \(li\) with Plato’s transcendent forms is informative. Like Platonic forms, the Neo-Confucian idea of Principle is highly abstract; according to Zhu Xi Principle is without smell, sound, substantiality, and it is beyond decay or temporality. Moreover, Principle is distinct from, and logically prior to the world of things, affairs, or \(qi\). Wang Guoliang states that “Zhu Xi’s philosophy is a typical Principle-based metaphysics, a philosophy that is not unlike the “logo-centric” metaphysical systems of the West… just as in the case of Plato, Aquinas, and Descartes, Zhu Xi’s system postulates a realm of concepts that transcends and is prioritized over the sensory world.”\(^{861}\) Brook Ziporyn notes that “Neo-Confucianism is often viewed as the place to look for a decisive rift in the tradition, where something much closer to European dualistic metaphysics somehow makes its

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\(^{859}\) Meng Peiyuan, *Zhuxi Zhexue Shilun*, p. 23.
\(^{861}\) Wang Guoliang, “Shilun Zhuxi Lixue De Fachou Tixi (a Discussion of Zhuxi’s System of Categories).” p. 238 [my translation].
appearance in China. As we can see, there was something substantially new taking place in Neo-Confucianism that was completely absent in the classical tradition; a greater gap opened between an ideal transcendent reality and the mundane world of affairs. In support of this view, Willard Peterson concludes that as opposed to the classical period, the Neo-Confucian notion of Principle takes on a form of unprecedented transcendence. When Neo-Confucians wanted to stress the transcendent qualities of Principle they frequently referred to it as Tianli (Heavenly Principle) or simply associated it with the sublime notion of the Supreme Ultimate.

Germane to our topic is the fact that the rational and analytic qualities that entered Neo-Confucianism originated in Buddhism. Although the notion of li already appears in the Classic of Poetry, the Yijing, and other early Chinese texts, the unique way it was interpreted by Neo-Confucians in relation to qi bears a clear resemblance to the Huayan School’s distinction between the world of Principle and the world of Affairs, or li (理) and shi (事). This Huayan dualism is a unique Chinese version of the basic Buddhist distinction between the world of nirvana and samsara. As some scholars have correctly observed, the other-worldliness of Buddhism “infected” Chinese thought, which adopted

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864 The earliest appearance of the notion of li was in the Classic of Poetry (the Book of Songs), where Principle is associated with "dividing up land into cultivated fields in a way consistent with the natural topography," see Hall and Ames, Anticipating China p. 212. For three comprehensive studies of the concept li see; Tang Junyi, Zhongguo Zhexue Yuanlun: Daolunpian [Chinese] (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1986), pp. 21-89; Brook Ziporyn, Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought: Prolegomena to the Study of Li; Idem., Beyond Oneness and Difference.
an analytic distinction, and to a certain extent a prioritization, of an intangible and pristine world over the world of materiality. After exploring the world-affirming position of classical Chinese thought, Livia Kohn notes:

[Chinese thought] has yet also a transcendental level, a dimension of other-worldliness. This aspect of the big world picture, stimulated by Buddhism and actively taken up by religious Daoism in the middle ages (220-960), has become a firm part of mainstream Chinese culture, manifesting itself both in Neo-Confucianism and popular religion during the Song (960-1260). It proposes an ideal level of pre-being, an ultimate state before creation, which represents the ideal state of being. The human predicament in this vision, then, means the loss of this pure state of pre-existence. The main task of people is accordingly to recover it by reaching out to the higher spheres. The goal is to leave the interrelatedness of the realm of harmony behind and find a place at the source of cosmic creation and center of life, to become part of something higher, other, and latent, something that is present in the world but not identical with it.865

As Kohn’s description suggests, Buddhism introduced into Confucianism a new appreciation of another level of existence, one that we strive to reach in our search for perfection. Again, although Neo-Confucians constantly stressed that the prioritization of the realm of Principle was only logical rather than “real,” it nevertheless reflects an interest in an ideal prescriptive realm of “how things should be.”

A few examples should suffice to illustrate this idea. According to Neo-Confucians, one of the central goals in one’s attempt to reach a state of sagehood, is to purify his qi. This suggests that spiritual transformation was seen as a process in which one attempts to get rid of coarse or “turbid qi” (zhuo qi, 濁氣) in favor of a more refined and “clear qi” (qing qi, 清氣). This is a process of purification that attempts to distance

man from desires, muddled thoughts, and other obstacles associated with the world of *qi* in an attempt to bring him closer to a sublime existence that is theoretically prioritized over the world of matter. Such theories led some scholars to reach the extreme conclusion that “the world of Principle promoted by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi is the world of truth that we make an effort pursue, whereas the unreal and mundane world of *qi* is one that we seek to transform and abolish.” Neo-Confucians taught that human *nature* (性) is the Principle endowed to man by Heaven. When in conformance with Principle, human nature is understood as an idealized state of being which is associated with goodness. Unfortunately, our originally perfected nature is corrupted by the encumbering effects of *qi*, or our physical and genetic constitution. In other words, Principle in its most pristine form is ultimately perfect and to a certain extent unattainable. Departing from coarse materiality simultaneously entails coming closer to our original nature.

The point I want to stress here is an unprecedented shift among Neo-Confucians towards an interest in a world of abstracted principles logically distinct and separate from the world of affairs. It is for this reason that more than any other time in history, Confucians of the Neo-Confucians movement were predisposed towards leading a frugal, simple, and ascetic lifestyle, a life that disclosed an unprecedented suspicion towards matter and emotions. According to Carsun Chang, many Neo-Confucians “believed that the life of a sage should be dignified and ascetic, a type of life which was actually practiced by the Song philosophers.”

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stated their aversion to fiscal duties in the belief that such duties tended to compromise their moral integrity."868 This can explain why many masters in Neo-Confucian academies led a simple and dignified life, usually far away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

[They] built a detached house next to their residence or at a short distance from it, usually named Ching-She…After the coming of Buddhism from India, the term (Ching she) was picked from existing Chinese vocabulary to translate the Sanskrit term vihara, meaning a house of religious devotion. In the twelfth century it came back into Confucianism with an aura of religion or mysticism, to mean a “house of devoted learning.” Such a house was used for meditation, concentrated studies, intensive reading, and serious discussions. Its essential characteristic was its solemn atmosphere, imparting a feeling of introspection, communion with the ancient sages, and the spirit at one with the way or tao of the universe.869

As this quote suggests, these increasingly other-worldly tendencies were to a great extent motivated by Buddhism. Members of Neo-Confucianism that chose to live a life of contemplative retirement called themselves ju shi (居士) “lay devotee” or yin jun (隱君) “eremite master,” titles that were associated with Buddhism and Daoism respectively.870 Lixue thinkers, therefore perceived over-indulgence and untamed desires as serious obstacles to spiritual fulfillment. Whereas the Neo-Confucian movement adopted a unique version of Buddhist other-worldliness, it also insisted on conforming to the traditional Confucian emphasis on action and social engagement in the world of affairs.

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869 Ibid., p. 138.
870 Ibid., p. 142.
4.7.6 Qualified Transcendence

In the above discussion I have shown that other-worldly themes in Neo-Confucianism led interpreters of Chinese thought to draw a parallel between this school and Platonic metaphysics as well as Western forms of transcendence. But although the distinction between the world of phenomena and noumena and the greater transcendence of notions such as Heavenly Principle and the Supreme Ultimate certainly lent Neo-Confucianism a resemblance to analytic paradigms, scholars have justifiably argued that such an association is somewhat problematic. Indeed, the Neo-Confucian distinction between the ideal realm of Principle and the world of qi was quintessentially Chinese and very different from traditional Platonic and Buddhist dualism. In the following pages I will examine how the Lixue School successfully qualified the Indian escapist position with a typically synthetic and world-affirming perspective. Interestingly, sinicized Buddhism provided Neo-Confucians with a good model for how to accomplish such a synthesis, as well as ample reasons for attacking the Buddhist model as inferior to their own.

I have already discussed the fact that Chinese Buddhism, especially the Chan school, was far less world-negating than early forms of Indian Buddhism. Ironically, such world-affirming tendencies were to a great extent a Confucian influence. I mentioned the famous Chan dictum that “in carrying water and chopping firewood, therein lies the wonderful Tao.” Chinese Buddhism became so world-affirming that the Chan sage was all but indistinguishable from an ordinary person; he “lives just as everyone else lives,

871 運水搬柴皆是神通 or 神通並妙用, 運水及搬柴. Similar sentences with world-affirming connotations were “Every day is a good day” and “Everyday-mindedness is itself the Way.”
and does what everyone else does,” he reaches enlightenment, but then he leaves sagehood behind to “enter once more into mortal humanity.” This is what Chanists described as “rising yet another step over the top of the hundred foot bamboo,” the hundred foot bamboo representing enlightenment and “rising yet another step” referring to the sage’s last effort to return to ordinary life.\textsuperscript{872} The monk Nan Quan (南泉, 749-835), for instance, taught that “after coming to understand the other side [enlightenment], you come back and live on this side.”\textsuperscript{873} The Southern Chan School of Hui Neng was very eager to present its unique form of worldly-Buddhism (佛法在世间), as superior to other schools that promoted escapist doctrines. As an example, the ideas of discovering the essence of man within the world of affairs and reaching enlightenment in this life were major themes in the Chan School’s highly influential \textit{Platform Sutra} (壇經).\textsuperscript{874} But although Chinese Buddhism became much more world-affirming than early Indian schools, there remained something essentially different between the Buddhist and Confucian worldview. Indeed, one of the most systematic attacks of Neo-Confucianism against Buddhism focused on its nihilistic perspective, which was seen as detrimental to social stability and the imperial order.

In spite of the great strides that Buddhism took to accommodate itself to Chinese sensibilities, other-worldly temperaments that remained in the tradition became a source of endless anti-Buddhist rhetoric. Many Confucians argued that Buddhism was a

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\item \textsuperscript{872} Feng Youlan, \textit{A Short History of Chinese Philosophy}, p. 264.
\item \textsuperscript{873} \textit{Guzunsu yulu}, 古尊宿語錄 (Recorded Sayings of Ancient Worthies), Juan 12.
\item \textsuperscript{874} Yao Weiqun “Ru yu fo de “ru shii” guannian,” in Pang Piao ed. \textit{Ru Lin} 儒林 (Confucian Literati), p. 295. Frequently referred to as the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch (六祖壇經).  
\end{itemize}
philosophy that “offered no basis for a moral society, and that the idleness and parasitic existence of monks and nuns contributed nothing to the material benefit of the nation.”875

In Confucian eyes, Buddhist monasticism was offensive on many levels; young people seeking a selfish form of spirituality abandoned their families and their social duties for the benefits of a life that was essentially sponsored by the tax money of hard working people. Leaving the world of human relations and ancestral worship in favor of a life of seclusion in the confines of the monastery was also seen as the reason for draining the imperial treasury. In fact, the 845 anti-Buddhist persecutions were to a great extent an attempt on behalf of the Tang court to replenish its treasury by confiscating the vast lands, gold, property, and expensive assets owned by the Buddhist establishment. Other attacks were directed at Buddhism’s ontology of illusionism and its obsession with the emptiness of the universal mind. Therefore Buddhist other-worldliness was attacked on social and political grounds as well as on metaphysical grounds.

On the metaphysical level, it was only natural that Neo-Confucians would turn to the most suspiciously Buddhist quality in their ontology: the world of Principle. Since Principle in Buddhism was associated with the notion of emptiness (空) or the Sanskrit sunyata, it was important for Neo-Confucians to stress the concreteness of their notion of Principle. They therefore created a sharp distinction between the “empty Principle” (虚理 xuli 虛理, or 空理 kongli 空理) of Buddhism and their own “concrete Principle” (实理 shili 实理).876 As opposed to the radical emptiness of the Buddhist notion of li, Neo-Confucians insisted on

875 Kuhn, *The age of Confucian rule*, p. 111.
emphasizing the “substantiality which is in the midst of emptiness” (虛中之實), thereby integrating the Buddhist emptiness with the Confucian stress on social activism (substantiality). When Zhu Xi was asked what was wrong about Buddhism, he replied that “what is decreed by heaven is nature. This is the belief of Confucians. But the Buddhists say that essence or reality is emptiness… Li is a reality of which the Buddhists are ignorant.”

Most importantly, Neo-Confucians stressed that the emptiness of Buddhism’s Principle and its undermining of the phenomenal world was tantamount to the abolition of reality’s inherent moral content. When Zhu Xi stated that “what is decreed by heaven is nature” he was referring to the cardinal Neo-Confucian belief that nature (性) is actually Principle as it manifests itself in humans. Since human nature in Neo-Confucianism is seen as composed of the four Confucian virtues: humanity (仁), righteousness (儀), ritual propriety (禮), and wisdom (智), it also entailed that Principle had the same concrete moral content. Therefore, far from denoting emptiness, Principle represents the essence of what makes us human; like human nature in the Mencian view, it is inherently good, and as such it is anything but empty. This is one of the most central examples of the way Neo-Confucians insisted on a metaphysics that supported their moral philosophy of social engagement and political activism.

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877 Zhuzi Yulei, 126 “About Buddhism.”
878 More specifically, Neo-Confucians believed that their concrete Principle was first and foremost humanity (仁), which included the other three virtues. Mencius focused on four of the five Confucian virtues, excluding the fifth virtue of truthfulness (xin, 信).
879 Buddhist might actually argue that emptiness is good, since in their view emptiness is not really nothingness but rather ultimate reality. In any case this was the way Neo-Confucians distinguished themselves from Buddhism.
According to Neo-Confucians, Principle could only be discerned through the concrete and manifest features of life. One of the most famous Neo-Confucian dictums was that “as soon as there was principle, there was material force. As material force is everywhere, principle penetrates everything.” Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that Neo-Confucians never attached particular importance to Principle in detachment from things and affairs. As opposed to Buddhism, in which li was emptiness, in Neo-Confucian philosophy li as an abstraction was meaningless; it only became significant once it was manifest in the world of qi.

The clarification of the term dao in Chen Chun’s Neo-Confucian Terms Explained is a good illustration of the differences between the Lixue School and Buddhism. It is clear from Chen Chun’s explanation that he seeks to highlight the concrete value of the Confucian dao and Principle in contradistinction to Daoism and Buddhism:

The Tao [dao] Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu talked about bears no relation to man and things. They both regarded Tao as transcending objects and physical forms throughout heaven and earth. Take the saying “Tao is prior to the Great Ultimate”, That is to say that before the beginning of heaven, earth, and the thousand things, there was an empty principle…In talking about the Tao the Buddhists have about the same idea. However, while the basic doctrine of the Taoists is non-being, that of the Buddhists is emptiness…They want to eliminate all human affairs… They don’t realize that Tao is nothing but the principle of human affairs.

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881 The title Beixi Ziyi is usually translated according to Chan’s wording “Neo-Confucian Terms Explained.” The literal meaning is Bei Xi’s Explanation of Terms. Bei Xi was the literary name of Chen Chun, or Chen Beixi. This book was originally called *The Detailed Interpretation of Terms* (字義詳解 – Ziyi Xiangjie), or *The Meaning of Terms in the Four Books* (四書字義 – Si Shu Ziyi).
Chen Chun goes on to refines this distinction by giving a helpful example from daily life:

Take righteousness in the relation between ruler and minister. Righteousness is the Way [Dao] while ruler and minister are concrete objects. The principle of righteousness must be seen in the ruler and the minister. It is impossible that outside of the ruler and minister there is something called righteousness.  

This is a good example of the embodied nature of the dao and the relationship between universal Principles on the one hand and concrete human action on the other. Although the Principle of righteousness reflects the dao, the notion of dao without its manifestation in human behavior is meaningless. What may seem like minor differences between Neo-Confucians and Buddhists, actually had implications that extended to almost every facets of human life. The emptiness of the Buddhist notion of Principle undermined the whole Neo-Confucian project and the moral philosophy that functioned as its foundation. The weight this supposedly minor dispute carried in the eyes of Neo-Confucians is reflected in Zhang Jiucheng’s warning that “the Tao is not Emptiness (hsu) or Non-being (wu), but rather nothing more that what functions in daily life. To regard emptiness or non-being as the Dao is enough to destroy the country.”  

The importance of embodiment within the world of affairs runs like a thread through the whole of Neo-Confucian thought. Just as Principle is impossible without qi, so is form (ti) meaningless without its function (Yong). The abstract according to Neo-Confucians always manifests itself in concrete reality. This is the main difference with the Greek and Indian worlds, in which we see realms of existence that are detached from

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883 Ibid., p.107.
884 Huang Zongxi (黃宗羲) Quan Zuwang (全祖望) et al., eds., Records of Song and Yuan Confucians (Song-Yuan Xuean, 宋元學安), First printing 1838. 40.1312. Quoted in Hoyt Tillman, Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy, p.27.
material life and prioritized as the “really real.” In Chinese eyes, the experiential, embodied, and concrete features of reality are paramount. As Chen Chun himself states: “In the learning of the School of the Sage, there is nothing that is not concrete. However the Taoists want purity and vacuity and loathe to do things, and the Buddhists reject human affairs.” 885 Julia Ching notes that one of the reasons Zhu Xi returned to Confucianism after a long sojourn in the world of Buddhism was due to a short comment made by his teacher Li Tong. When Zhu told Li about his interests in the Chan school the latter replied: “How is it that you understand so much that is abstract, but not the things right in front of you? There is nothing mysterious to the Way. You need only to understand it in your daily concrete efforts.” 886 That Li Tong demanded that Zhu Xi focus on the “things in front of him” reflects a typical Confucian insistence to remain “close” to reality. It therefore makes perfect sense that Zhu Xi and Lu Zuqian decided to call their highly influential anthology of Neo-Confucian philosophy the Reflection on Things at Hand.

As mentioned earlier, Buddhists associated li with emptiness and the pure enlightened mind. Here again, Neo-Confucians who made the notion of the mind one of the most central features of their philosophy refused to define the mind in detachment from the human sphere. Instead of the abstract and universal mind of Buddhism, they argued that the mind had one side that could potentially become a pure reflection of Principle, and another, manifest side that was expressed in the form of human consciousness, cognition, and emotions. Therefore Neo-Confucians were successful in

885 Chen Chun, Neo-Confucian Terms Explained, p. 107.
886 Julia Ching, The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi, p. 175.
associating one side of the mind with abstract notions such as Heavenly Principle and a state of being before the manifestation of emotions (weifa), while on the other hand they attacked Buddhists for their separation of the mind from matter and human nature. This unique interpretation of the mind reflects a typical strategy of appropriating an analytic feature (the unmanifest mind) and the simultaneous integration of world affirming synthetic features in which the mind is seen as being in charge of human intentionality and our engagement with things and affairs. Stated more simply, one side of the mind was the universal mind associated with li while the other was the mundane and cognitive mind associated with qi; the fact that Neo-Confucians believed that li and qi were inseparable helped them argue that the mind functioned as a nexus of the world of phenomena and noumena.

Examples of the appropriation of other-worldly elements and their integration with a typically Confucian world-affirming stance can be discerned in other topics I have explored in this unit. As we saw in the discussion on meditation, while Buddhists made an effort to empty the mind, abandon the world, and forget the self, Neo-Confucians made sure that the mind was infused with attentiveness (jing) and oriented towards the penetration of Principle in the world of human affairs. With regard to ritual, the linking of social patterns to the contents of the mind, cemented the importance of embodied action in the world but also gave ritual a new metaphysical foundation. Although a new philosophy of mind became central to the Neo-Confucian worldview, cultural patterns

888 Yao Xinzhong, An Introduction to Confucianism, pp. 221-2.
expressed through ritual behavior remained central and represented a stark difference from the Buddhist attempt to abolish the conventionality of culture in favor of a normative and pure universal mind. As we have seen, unlike the reclusive Buddhist monastery composed of individuals who abandoned the family unit and retired from social life, the Neo-Confucian academy developed upon the foundation of private family schools in which ancestral worship and the goal of social engagement played a central position. Although the Neo-Confucian academies introduced a new pedagogical program focused on self-cultivation, meditational techniques, and a more introspective approach to learning, the goal of the academy was to produce moral, socially engaged, and responsible individuals who could actively contribute to the transformation of society.

As the examples above suggest, as opposed to classical Confucianism, the Lixue School disclosed a peculiar philosophical dualism in which a higher sphere of existence was logically set above the world of social affairs. The new philosophy of Principle, the universal mind (*daoxin*), and concepts such as the Supreme Ultimate all point to a more conscious distinction between the world of noumena and the world of affairs with which classical Confucianism was concerned. Scholars agree that this new philosophy of Principle and mind was the direct result of Buddhist influence, but it is also clear that the other-worldly tendencies of Buddhism were tempered by a unique philosophy of *qi*, ritual, learning, and social engagement that gave Neo-Confucian borrowings a distinctly native and world-affirming character.
In the second unit I showed how the Confucian and Jewish traditions were far more particularistic than universal traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Although the type of particularism the two traditions disclose differed, it is fairly clear that both cultures saw their worldviews as confined to an exclusive group of people that shared a specific cultural ethos. It is due to such particularism that both traditions never felt compelled to engaged in extensive proselytization and that their systems of thought never exhibited the kind of cross-cultural transportability characteristic of universal traditions. Buddhism is an excellent example of such transportability; it travelled from its homeland in India and rapidly became the most dominant religious force in Asia. Zhu Xi himself noted:

Since the Buddhist doctrine spread in China like fire, many Confucianists, who have not been able to look through the gate of the school of the Sage, have already been attracted to it and drowned in it together with the Buddhists. They consider Buddhism the great Way. Consequently, its vulgarism has extended throughout the world, so that good and bad people, the intelligent and the stupid, men and women, and servants all have become accustomed to believing in it.889

Due to its universal message Buddhism metamorphosed to suite the particular conditions of each culture with which it came into contact. Although Chinese culture certainly influenced the cultures of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, it is nevertheless a fact that prior to the Song dynasty, Confucianism never managed to take root in neighboring countries.

Chinese “cultural particularism” saw the unique civilizational patterns of the Confucian sages as the only model for the humanization and acculturation of people. Those who did not take part in the particular cultural paradigm bequeathed by the sages and implemented, to various degrees, by the Chinese imperial order, were considered uncivilized and inferior. Chinese particularism can be traced back to the origins of the Confucian tradition. In analect 3.5, Confucius stated “barbarians [夷狄] with rulers are not as good as various Chinese states without them.” This analect reflects the traditional distinction between the civilized Chinese who inhabited the center of the world, or the Middle Kingdom, and the cultureless tribal people on the periphery (夷夏之防). According to Confucius, merely having leaders is not sufficient; it is only the patterns of culture that can transform humans into an honorable and civilized community.

The cultural elitism of Confucianism was challenged by Buddhism, which introduced into China a more metaphysically inclusive system applicable to all sentient beings. Buddhist universalism was especially attractive to “barbarians” and minorities who were often looked down upon by the Chinese Han majority. As noted earlier, Buddhist universalism was related to the fact that spiritual realization was seen as a factor of humanity’s shared cognitive architecture. This meant that cultural and ethnic affiliations were marginalized. Consequently the endorsement of Buddhism provided non-Chinese groups, as well as Han Chinese from low social strata, an opportunity to be treated as equals. This important leveling effect helped Buddhism win the hearts of people who otherwise felt inferior within the exclusive and culturally specific Confucian hierarchy. In a well-known passage in the Platform Sutra, the future sixth patriarch of the
Chan School Hui Neng (慧能, 638－713) recounts his first encounter with the head abbot Hongren. The latter asked Hui Neng:

Where are you from that you come to this mountain to make obeisance to me? Just what is it that you are looking for from me? I [Hui Neng] replied: I am from Ling-nan, a commoner from Hsin-chou… I am seeking no particular thing, but only the Buddhadharma. The Master then reproved me, saying: If you're from Ling-nan then you're a barbarian (獦獠). How can you become a Buddha? I replied: Although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north and south in Buddha nature. Although my barbarian's body and your body are not the same, what difference is there in our Buddha nature?  

It is not a surprise that Buddhism’s first phase of consolidation in China took place during the Wei-Jin period of disunity, a period of social and political chaos and the emergence of non-Han powers that saw Buddhism as conducive to their greater integration and acceptance in the Chinese world.  

The fact that Neo-Confucianism, especially the School of Principle, represents the first time that the Confucian tradition exercised a profound impact on neighboring cultures, bears testimony to the new level of universalism it developed. On the most fundamental level we see the emergence of a cultural universalism, namely, a belief that “civilization was something all could learn and all could share; it did not depend on one’s birth.” This had implications on an ethnic level as well, since more than ever before it was believed that civilization could theoretically be practiced by non-Chinese people. This became especially relevant since during the eleventh century there were thousands

of Han Chinese Confucians employed in the foreign Jin and Liao imperial courts.\textsuperscript{892} Therefore, as opposed to the classical Confucian view, culture became more democratized and accessible by virtue of one’s intellectual merit rather than ethnicity. But Neo-Confucians made the biggest strides towards universalism in the field of metaphysics and ethics. One of the goals of the School of Principle was to equip Confucianism, especially its axiology, with a new metaphysical foundation. It can be said that Neo-Confucianism represent a historical shift from the outdated correlative cosmology of the Han dynasty towards a more updated metaphysics that was inspired by Buddhism (and Buddhist-influenced Daoism).\textsuperscript{893} Generally speaking, the cosmology of the Han dynasty sought to integrate the complexity of life into correlative typologies which included seasons, colors, constellations, directions, bodily organs, and endless other features. But in addition to “things,” it also sought to integrated historical change, dynastic transitions, environmental catastrophes, and ethical conduct into its cosmological scheme. In other words, it was a comprehensive integration of both things and events. When unexpected data presented itself, things were reinterpreted in light of new events such that they correlated with existing categories. This was a synthetic system par-excellence, one that is fundamentally open-ended and shows an internal flexibility that enables it to constantly integrate and harmonize new information. Such a system can be contrasted with the philosophical nominalism of Neo-Confucianism, which attempted

\textsuperscript{892} Bol, \textit{Neo-Confucianism in History}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{893} For a detailed analysis of correlative thought in China see A.C. Graham, \textit{Reason and Spontaneity} (London Totowa, N.J.: Curzon Press Barnes & Noble Books, 1985), pp. 57-60; section 1.5 \textit{passim}. The term ‘correlative’ did not originate with Graham; for more on the evolution of the notion of correlative thought in scholarship see Hall and Ames, \textit{Anticipating China} p. 295 n.22.
to reach simplicity of structure based on a de-contextualized and static metaphysics that remained generally unchanged in face of new data. It is important to stress that the idea of process and dynamism (生生不息) remained central to Neo-Confucian thought, but was expressed within a metaphysical framework that was far more stable than the Han model.

As suggested earlier, Zhou Dunyi’s *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* represents such a static, conclusive, and decontextualized metaphysical architectonic. germane to our discussion is that such qualities lent Neo-Confucian cosmology its universal applicability, a metaphysics that could theoretically be accepted by people who did not subscribe to the particularities of a specific political, cultural, or ethnic ideology. Hajime Nakamura has pointed out the relationship between static metaphysics and universalism. According to him the tendency towards universalism “generally draws more attention to nature or essence of things than to their manifestation which are always changing, and again this tendency stresses the static aspect of things more strongly than their dynamic function.”

In contrast to the cosmology of the Han dynasty, the brushing aside of cultural and historical particulars in Neo-Confucian metaphysics helped this system convey a greater cross-cultural appeal. Generally speaking, we see a move from a fairly simplistic correlation of events and things to a more causal and linear progression, as seen in the *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*. As I will show soon, Neo-Confucian universalism was qualified with many particularistic features, but the fact that we see a

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shift from a correlative perspective towards a more static cosmology based on formal
relations is a point worth noting with respect to universalism. 895

The universal applicability of Neo-Confucianism was directly related to its
philosophy of Principle. As discussed earlier, the relative de-contextualized status of the
sphere of Principle meant that it was not necessarily associated with a specific cultural
paradigm. Wing-tsit Chan argued that the universality of li cannot be overstated, and
although Principle was constantly related to the world of affairs it is beyond doubt that a
new horizon for a trans-cultural noumenal world has opened. 896 While the central channel
for creating order in classical Confucianism was ritual, in Neo-Confucianism we see a
shift to the organizing patterns of li or Principle. This reflects a move from the
conventionality of culture to the normativity of a more transcendent and metaphysically
inclusive vision. The Cheng brothers were very much aware of this universality when
they stated that “there is only one li in the world. You may extend it over the four seas,
and it is everywhere true.” 897 Li is therefore just as real for the barbarians as it is for the
Chinese. The idea that it “extends over the four seas” could hardly be said about the
localized ritualistic pattern of classical Confucianism.

Neo-Confucians claimed that the new universal paradigm they promoted was
based on the Mencian ideal of universal sagehood and the search for the “lost mind” (求
放心). But in reality their universalism, as well as their philosophy of mind, was just as
much or even more indebted to Buddhism than to the Mencian perspective. Although

895 Correlative thought has often been contrasted with the logical thought of the West.
897 I-Shu 2A:15b, in Chan ibid., p. 325, n.65.
Mencius claimed that all humans had the potential of becoming a Yao or a Shun, in reality sagehood was a lofty ideal rather than something that could actually be attained. Neo-Confucians changed this picture by providing individuals with real prospects for self-transformation. As discussed earlier, they did this by developing a philosophy of mind that transcended the specific mind of humans. The universal mind, or as Neo-Confucians called it, the daoxin (道心), was a clear emulation of the Buddhist reliance on a pan-human cognitive apparatus. Neo-Confucians, in a typical conflation of terms, believed that the mind of the way was synonymous with Principle. Lu Xiang Shan stated that “Sages appeared tens of thousands of generations ago. They shared this mind; they shared this Li. Sages will appear tens of thousands of generations to come. They will share this mind; they will share this Li. Over the Four Seas sages will appear…”898 Here again we see a philosophy of mind that is relevant to people over the four seas.

The shift towards a universal ethos in Neo-Confucianism can also be discerned in changes that took place in commentaries to the classics. As opposed to the commentary of the prolific Han dynasty scholar Zheng Xuan (鄭玄, 127-200), Zhu Xi’s commentary to the Doctrine of the Mean, although building on Zheng’s work, adds a universal dimension that was absent prior to the Song. Nylan and Wilson contend that while Zhu Xi too “reads the text as Confucius’s discourse on cultivation, Zhu universalizes its message and applies it not just to the sovereign, but to all classically educated men—to the gentleman. Indeed, Zhu Xi places his greatest hopes not in the ruler, but in men who

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898 ibid., p. 326. Lu Xiangshan (Lu Jiuyuan) was a representative of the School of Heart who made no distinction between Principle and Mind. However, his notion of the universal mind is relevant to the School of Principle as well.
resolve to practice the Dao outside of government with the hope of transforming the world…Zhu Xi’s unmistakably innovative understanding of the Constant Mean [The Doctrine of the Mean] derives from his strategic selection from the Four Books to formulate a teaching well suited to an age profoundly changed by Buddhism. These changes were directly related to the central Confucian notion of human nature. One of the most important contribution Neo-Confucians introduced in terms of moral philosophy was the view that all beings were endowed by the same inherent moral nature. Morality was no longer a product of acculturation but rather part and parcel of our original essence. Here again we see a departure from cultural particularism towards a universality that is founded upon humanity’s shared essence. It is also another example of the way Neo-Confucians anchored their axiology in their revolutionary metaphysics. The idea of a universally shared moral nature was derived from the Neo-Confucian dictum that “what Heaven impart to man is human nature.” Nature was then associated with the Principle of man and as such it was both good and shared by all human beings.

In all the examples above we see how Neo-Confucianism developed in close conformity to Buddhism. My argument has so far focused on the field of metaphysics but Buddhism also exercised a profound influence on Neo-Confucian ethics. With respect to our topic, it is important to bear in mind that classical Confucianism was very much opposed to the idea of a universal ethics. Mozi who advocated a the idea of Universal

900 Since the essence of the Neo-Confucian project was to provide traditional Confucian axiology with a metaphysical underpinning, it is impossible to detach Neo-Confucian moral thought from its metaphysics.
Love (兼愛) was bitterly attacked by Confucians for failing to see the value of the Confucian notion of “love with gradation” (愛有差等). Mencius famously said that “Mo's principle is ‘to love all equally,’ which does not acknowledge the peculiar affection due to a father. But to acknowledge neither king nor father is to be in the state of a beast.” In Neo-Confucianism this somewhat nepotistic picture dramatically changes such that we see the emergence of a much more inclusive and universal form of empathy, one that “sought to infuse the entire society with a revitalized spirit, class barriers notwithstanding.” This is where Zhang Zai’s influential *Western Inscription* (西銘) became especially important. In the famous opening passage of this treatise Zhang states:

> Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I, finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

It is not hard to detect the Buddhist undertones in this ecumenical passage. Zhang Zai’s idea of universal commiseration clearly echoes the Buddhist stress on the Bodhisattva’s compassion. His radical materialism helped him argue that reality, including things, affairs, and people, are seamlessly connected through *qi*. The *Western Inscription* became

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901 Mencius, 3B:14: 楊氏為我, 是無君也; 墨氏兼愛, 是無父也. 無父無君, 是禽獸也. For other examples see Mencius 3a:5: 孟子曰: 夫夷子, 信以為人之親其兄之子為若親其鄰之赤子乎? and 7A:26: 墨子兼愛, 摩頂放踵利天下, 為之.  
a favorite of Neo-Confucians and was generally accepted by all future generations of *lixue* thinkers. Theodore de Bary notes that Fan Zhongyan’s political motto “to be first in worrying about the world’s troubles and last in the enjoyment of its pleasures,” discloses clear “overtones of the Bodhisattva ideal of seeking the salvation of others before passing to one’s own reward as a Buddha.”

It can be said that this universal tendency reached its culmination in Zhu Xi’s *Treatise on Humanity* (*renshuo*), in which the central notion of *Humanity* (*ren*), the most important of the five Confucian virtues, takes on an unprecedented universal meaning. In this work Zhu Xi claims that the nature of the mind of Heaven and earth is to incessantly produce things. Heaven and Earth impart this mind to all creatures, and in humans the mind is expressed in the form of Humanity. This is how Zhu Xi manages to associate the classical notion of Humanity with cosmic creativity. Chen Chun notes that “Humanity is the totality of the mind’s principle of production. It is always producing and reproducing without cease… therefore humanity is the root of love.”

Humanity becomes associated with the mind of man, and when this mind is fully realized it is expressed in the form of an all-encompassing love and commiseration. Humanity therefore becomes the essence of the mind and the final destination of self-realization. Cheng Yi claimed that “Humanity is universal impartiality; it is the foundation of goodness.” In another instance he sound suspiciously Buddhist when he associates Humanity with the elimination of desires: “humanity is simply the absence of even an iota of selfish desire. As soon as there is any selfish desire, there will

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904 William de Bary “Common Tendencies” in *Confucianism in Action*, pp. 33-34.
906 *I Chuan* 2:34a, Commentary of the hexagram 24 *fu* “return” (復).
no longer be humanity." In other words, selfishness is contrary to the interconnectedness of all things and therefore the opposite of universal love. This interpretation of Humanity is a dramatic departure from classical Confucianism’s stress on love with gradation and Mencius’ attacks against Mozi’s universal love. Here again, we see how Neo-Confucians skillfully reinterpreted their traditional vocabulary in order to respond to the attractive ethical universalism of Buddhism. The notion of Humanity was “cosmolozized” and transformed to denote a cosmic unity motivated and realized through love and commiseration.908

As these examples suggest, Neo-Confucians shifted towards a dramatically new understanding of the relationship between man and the cosmos and an increasingly universal and normative picture of reality. The cross-cultural applicability of their new metaphysics and the normative nature of central concepts such as Principle, the Mind of the Way, and Humanity represented a shift towards a more inclusive worldview. Their moral philosophy was transformed such that it became relevant to all social strata and ethnic groups regardless of status and background. Zhu Xi stated that “from the son of Heaven on down to the commoners, all without exception should regard self-cultivation

907 Cheng Yi quoted by Zhu Xi in his Commentary to Analects (論語集注) 6.5 -6.7: 子曰: 回也，其心三月不違仁，其餘則日月至焉而已矣. Cheng Yi: 程子曰: 三月，天道小變之節，言其久也，過此則聖人矣. 不違仁，只是無纖毫私欲. 少有私欲，便是不仁.
908 Zhu creates a correlation between Heaven’s mind, which consists of origination, flourishing, advantage, and firmness (元，亨，利，貞). With the four Confucian virtues: humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. According to Zhu the four virtues “in their emanation and function, constitute the feeling of love, respect, being right, and discrimination between right and wrong—and the feeling of commiseration pervades them all.” Chan, Source Book, p. 594. Humanity represents the perfect manifestation of the Mind and is also seen as the Principle of love. This theory is based on Mencius’ Four Beginning.
as the root.”\textsuperscript{909} As opposed to the strict designation of roles and responsibilities according to the classical Confucian hierarchy, Neo-Confucians believed that the procedure for moral perfection presented in \textit{The Great Learning} was a “universal standard for learning based on what is common to all people.”\textsuperscript{910} Their absorption of new ideas about universal love, compassion towards living things, the common moral nature of all humans, active philanthropy, and the universal duty of self-cultivation all bear the clear signs of a Buddhist impact which “gave Confucianism a new, decidedly humane face.”\textsuperscript{911}

4.7.8 \textit{Neo-Confucian Particularism}

In order to understand the dilemmas and concerns that Neo-Confucians faced in their appropriation of an increasingly universalistic worldview, it is important to understand the complex historical realities of their time. The first and most important fact to bear in mind is that the Song period represents a historical shift in the power relations between the Han Chinese and northern non-Han groups. For the first time in Chinese history we see the emergence of extremely powerful and well-organized dynasties that posed a real threat to Chinese hegemony. During the early Song period it was initially the Khitan Liao dynasty (遼, 907–1125), then the Tangut Xi Xia dynasty (西夏, 1038-1227), later the Jurchen Jin dynasty (金, 1115–1234) that forced the Song to the south, and finally the Mongols Yuan Dynasty (元, 1271–1368) which brought to the final demise of the Song and its replacement by the first foreign dynasty in history to gain full control of

\textsuperscript{909} Bol, \textit{Neo-Confucianism in History}, p. 116.

\textsuperscript{910} Ibid., p. 136.

\textsuperscript{911} Kuhn, \textit{The Age of Confucian Rule}, p. 112.
the entire central plain. In fact, in 319 years of Song rule there was no real “China” at all. Territories were divided among different nations and states with no one showing clear supremacy; a situation that is best defined as regionalism rather than the rule of a single dynasty. It goes without saying that this was a huge humiliation in the eyes of Chinese conservatives who refused to come to terms with the idea of China as equal among, or even inferior to others. For instance, the Shanyuan treaty (1005 C.E.) between the Song and Liao was an unprecedented Chinese acceptance of equality among powers. This went against the idea of a centralized and unified Middle Kingdom and prevented the Song from achieving the same kind of glory that was associated with the great Han, and especially the powerful Tang dynasty. Indeed, mutualism frequently felt more like subordination which included appeasing the Liao as well Xi Xia and Jin with tributes and indemnities, thereby recognizing their rulers and imperial courts as legitimate political entities. The constant military humiliations the Song suffered led to a rise in xenophobic sentiments among Confucians and a strong urge to revive their classical tradition. It is especially relevant that Neo-Confucians clearly represented the hawkish wing of Song politics, which refused to accept these new realities and constantly pushed for military action against the barbarians. Fortunately the emperor was surrounded by a

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913 Kuhn, op. cit., p. 46.
914 The Shanyuan treaty included an annual indemnity payment of 200,000 bolts of silk, and 100,000 ounces of silver. In 1042 this treaty was re-negotiated and the indemnity was increased to 300,000 bolts of silk and 200,000 ounces of silver. This payment was a substantial burden on the Song economy. Other tributes were payed to the Xi Xia dynasty in 1044 and especially to the Jin dynasty in the twelfth century in the peace treaty of 1141. See Kuhn ibid., pp. 45-46.
915 Gardner, Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects, p. 19.
camp that preferred pacifying the foreigners and thereby saved the militarily weak Song from further embarrassment.

After the humiliating arrest of emperor Song Huizong (1126) and the subsequent relocation of the Song court to the south, the expanding Jin dynasty presented itself as the true holders of the Mandate of Heaven. Even worse, in 1142 Emperor Gaozong signed an official document accepting the status of the Song dynasty as a vassal state of the Jin. The superiority of a barbarian state over China became an official fact, one that was hard to stomach for many critics of the pacifying diplomacy of the Song court. Zhu Xi, for instance, “could no longer beat the thought that China and her civilization were dislodged from the heartland.” In a memorial to Chen Liang he wrote:

your obedient servant ventures to suggest that only China—the standard energy of Heaven and Earth—is that which the heavenly mandate to rule endows, where the hearts of the people gather, where the ritual of civilization cluster, and that which kings and emperors have inherited for a hundred generations. Is it at all conceivable that such a country could be violated by the perverse energy of the barbarians?

It seems that at least on this issue Zhu Xi and his ideological opponent, the utilitarian Chen Liang agreed. Chen warned that “just as the sages of antiquity did not share the central plain with the barbarians. China should share neither culture not rituals with the

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917 Kuhn, The Age of Confucian Rule, pp. 78-79.

In common to these assertions is that both Zhu Xi and Chen Liang were unhappy with the barbarian’s adoption of Chinese norms and rituals, and both of them agreed that only the Chinese empire could control the center of the world and unit Heaven and Earth. Indeed, one of the most alarming things about the ascendancy of foreign powers during the Song, was that they adopted the Chinese model for rulership including the characteristically Confucian imperial rituals.

Once the Northern Song provinces were captured by the Jin dynasty, the minority Jurchens became the de jure rulers of a ninety-percent Han majority. Including thousands of Confucians that served in the Jurchen imperial court. The Jin dynasty began to organize itself according to the traditional Confucian model, they “adopted the Chinese calendar in 1137, reinstituted the civil service examination in 1138, imposed rules of imperial audience, including Chinese robes for the emperor and officials and Song music at court in 1139, honored Confucius in 1140, and built imperial ancestral temples.” During the reign of Wanyan Liang (b. 1149) who pushed for an intense program of sinicization, it became clear that the Jurchens were eager to establish themselves as a legitimate Chinese dynasty. Liang’s successors went a step further; not only did they claim that the Jin possessed the Mandate of Heaven but they argued that “the Jin was a...
natural link in the historic chain of Chinese dynasties [正統].  

The growing similarities between the Jin and Song courts, together with the fact that the Jurchens were militarily superior, must have been extremely alarming for those who were eager to stress the traditional boundaries between China and barbarian groups. In his analysis of the non-Han northern dynasties Rolf Trauzettel argues:

> these non-Chinese people rapidly learned how to establish functional government and how to employ administrative and ethical principles over which the Chinese claimed a cultural monopoly. This barbarian astuteness and its political consequences could not help but shake the self-assurance of the scholar-officials of the Sung.  

With the Song paying tribute to the Jin, some very troubling questions must have haunted conservative Confucians: In whose hands was the Mandate of Heaven? Who was the true representative of the timeless dao? And most importantly for our discussion, could the Han Chinese afford to subscribe to a radically universalist worldview detached from their cultural heritage? Wouldn’t that potentially entail the replacement of Han culture by foreign powers who simply emulated Chinese models of rulership?

It is a grave mistake to assume that the Chinese perception of “Chinese-ness” was confined to a cultural particularism. It is important to remember that “Culture” was mainly associated with the intellectual and spiritual legacy of the Han ethnicity. Dieter Kuhn contends that the “Song emperors and their officials feared their neighbors as a formidable threat to their dynastic dominance and ethnic superiority.”  

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924 Kuhn, The Age of Confucian Rule, p. 83 [My brackets].
926 Kuhn, The Age of Confucian Rule, p. 5.
the “Chinese speak of their various ethnic groups as “non-Han but Chinese” and so pay lip service to the modern idea of a multiethnic state, this was not the perspective of the Song…” During the Song being Chinese meant being Han Chinese. It is in this light that we need to consider Song conservatism and the Neo-Confucian phenomenon: on one hand, the spiritual conquest of Buddhism a barbarian religion form the west (India), on the other hand, the military and political conquest of the barbarians form the north. As James T.C. Liu observes the real danger non-Chinese groups posed to the Han legacy led to a more particularistic worldview among Neo-Confucians:

to many an intellectual who still regarded the peace relations a great humiliation, a soul-searching question remained inescapable: What had gone wrong? what should be done to make the Sung supreme? On these questions, the transcendental moralists [Neo-Confucians] emerged as particularly vigorous in their advocacy of strict adherence to classical Confucian principles according to their new elucidations and interpretations.928

This restorationist approach on behalf of Neo-Confucians reached a climax during the Southern Song; the third phase in the three-phase periodization I proposed. This third phase represents a mature reaction of conservative Neo-Confucian forces to Buddhism, barbarian military encroachment, and the progressive policies of the Wang Anshi faction. Just as the more universalist faction of Wang Anshi advocated an accommodating approach towards Buddhism, so was this camp behind the pacifying policies towards barbarian dynasties, and according to Neo-Confucians, responsible for the collapse of the Northern Song. Therefore, Neo-Confucianism during the Southern Song period can be

927 Ibid., p. 8. See more on Han Consciousness in Trauzettel “Song Patriotism,” in Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China, pp. 199-213
928 T. C. Liu, China Turning Inward. p. 133.
seen as a reaction to progressive forces both in politics and in religion. Accommodation towards barbarian powers and barbarian religion was seen as a real danger to the distinctiveness, indeed to the survivability, of Chinese culture. Southern Song intellectuals were scarred by humiliation, by their retreat to the South, by the capturing of their Emperor and his family, by the forcing of Jurchen customs on the Han majority in the north, and by the fact that Han Confucians served in the Jurchen imperial court. The first Southern Song emperor Gaozong’s pleading to a Jin general can give us an idea of the disgrace that conservative Han Chinese intellectual had to endure. Emperor Gaozong wrote:

At present, there is a lack of manpower for our defense… just as there is no place for us to run to… It is hoped that Your Excellency will pity us… As indicated previously in several communications from us, we are willing to eliminate our old title [of emperor]. This means that all places between heaven and earth would become parts of the Great Chin [i.e. Jurchen Empire].

It is clear that this type of submission to the uncultivated barbarians had an impact on Chinese mentality. As a consequence the Southern Song—the same period that Neo-Confucianism reached full maturity—is well known for China’s “turn inwards,” and the beginning of a neo-traditionalist ideology. Therefore, in spite of their construction of a more universalistic metaphysics and axiology, the increasingly conservative Neo-Confucians made sure to anchor their thought in a particularistic paradigm that stressed the uniqueness of Han-dominated Chinese culture. It has been observed that one of the

929 Quote from ibid., p. 59.
930 As in James T.C. Liu’s excellent book China’s Turning Inward. As opposed to the optimism and outward looking of the Northern Song, the Southern Song was characterized by a more pessimistic worldview. Liu, Turning Inwards, pp. 9-11.
most salient aspects of the Neo-Confucian legacy in China was an ethnocentrism that rejected certain ideas as inherently evil just because they were foreign.\footnote{William de Bary, “A Reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism,” In \textit{Studies in Chinese Thought}, Arthur Wright ed., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 84.} In the following pages I will try to give a few examples of how a particularistic worldview was integrated with many of the universalistic elements that were adopted by Neo-Confucians.

I have already noted the way the philosophy of \textit{li} provided Confucianism with a more universalistic thrust, but it is important to remember that the School of Principle continuously stressed the indispensability of the Chinese Classics in the process of investigating Principles. In other words, one was not likely to penetrate the essence of Principle by secluded contemplation and certainly not by studying the outrageous behavior of the uncultivated Khitans, Jurchens, or Mongols; \textit{li} was to be found in the actions of the Chinese sages as they transpired in the pages of the Classics. Moreover, the xenophobia and ethnic particularism that characterized many Neo-Confucians led to a revival in historical studies. Indeed, the “Sung exceeded all previous ages in producing historical writings,” and some of these major works were authored by prominent Neo-Confucians.\footnote{Ouyang Xiu wrote his influential \textit{History of the Five Dynasties} privately but it was nevertheless recognized as an official compilation. See Ibid., p. 31.} Theodore de Bary notes that there was a “noticeable stimulation of historical writing on the grand scale in the Sung, Ou-yang Hsiu, Ssu-ma Kuang, Chu Hsi, Cheng Ch’iao, Ma Tuan-lin (thirteenth century), and Wang Ying-lin, among others, leading the effort to recapitulate and reassess the whole course of Chinese history… always they kept in mind that history was a guide to moral and political action…”\footnote{William de Bary “Common Tendencies,” in \textit{Confucianism in Action}, pp. 42-43.}
History was therefore presented as yet another channel for the investigation of Principle, and it also fostered in the Chinese a more conscious appreciation of their unique past and cultural roots. It was in the Classics and in works of history that students were supposed to find the essence of reality. Therefore not only was Principle believed to be found in the world of human affairs, but more specifically, it became most clearly manifest in the particular affairs of the Han Chinese. Zhu Xi’s important *Reflections on Things at Hand*, concludes with an important chapter “On the Dispositions of Sages and Worthies” (觀聖賢) which was dedicated to a close analysis of the behavior of admired historical figures. This tendency stood in stark contrast to the Buddhist practitioner’s search for Buddhahood by following an abstract and mental procedure rather than searching for answers in human behavior. In his chapter on “Heterodoxical Doctrines” Zhu Xi attacks Buddhists for attempting to ”understand the great Way without study. Thus, before understanding the mind of the Sage, they have already concluded that the manifestation of his mind in historical facts need not be investigated, and, before understanding the purpose of the superior man, they have already concluded that it is not necessary to devote oneself to the concrete expression of that mind.” The Neo-Confucian insistence on the centrality of the Confucian Classics, native historical studies, and the emulation of paradigmatic Confucian sages, meant that the Chinese worldview remained the indisputable model for moral behavior.

The importance of the Classics also meant that Neo-Confucianism, in spite of its attempt to relate to a broader population, remained a relatively elitist philosophy. The

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934 Ibid., pp. 41-43.
School of Principle’s scholasticism was therefore an obstacle for attracting a more diverse population from different social classes let alone other cultures. Indeed, Neo-Confucianism lacked the accessibility characteristic of proselytizing and universal religion. One example of this lack of accessibility can be seen in their approach towards the investigation of things and self-transformation. As opposed to the Neo-Confucian School of Heart that followed the sudden enlightenment model (dunwu, 頓悟) of the Southern Chan School, the School of Principle conformed more closely to the Northern School’s gradual enlightenment model. This meant that instead of the Chan’s easy road to enlightenment and reliance on sudden intuition, the Lixue School submitted to a rigorous procedure of personal development. Here again, we see a philosophy that could only be practiced by fairly privileged people who could afford to immerse themselves in classical culture. All these characteristics reflect different impediments on a tradition’s attempt to become truly universal. Although the message of Neo-Confucianism was universalistic enough to cross to neighboring countries, it was nevertheless too particularistic to influence countries that were outside of the traditional Chinese sphere of influence.

4.8 POLITICS AND CULTURAL REFORMATION (教化)

According to Neo-Confucians, the leaders of the empire had the moral duty to educate and instruct the populace. This was related to a greater Neo-Confucian interest in “cultural transformation” or “transformation through instruction” (jiaohua, 教化) which
was a sort of Neo-Confucian equivalent to Buddhist proselytization. Neo-Confucians were trying to promote their creed in the exact places where Buddhist were engaged in missionary work or otherwise in uncivilized areas where the people have not yet been exposed to high-culture. Their efforts were clearly intended to counter the expansion of Buddhism and to provide the populace with a new and native lifestyle. In fact, many academies were constructed right next to Buddhist and Daoist temples in order to target the same populations as well as convert Buddhists and Daoists to Confucianism. One concerned official reporting from the distant borders complained that Buddhist and Daoist temples are “spread out here and there, like figures on a chessboard, lined up like innumerable stars.” As Linda Walton notes, “such claims were frequently used to justify the need for academies in order to transform and Confucianize (jiao-hua) people who were susceptible to the influences of Buddhism and Taoism.” In many areas the efforts of jiaohua bore fruit and managed to win the heart of those who were formerly “seduced by Buddhism.” Therefore, many Confucian academies were clearly built as missionary outposts aimed at transforming the people and introducing civilization to peripheral areas of the empire. In one county the magistrate built an “academy to encourage the “Confucianization” of the area, reputed to be disorderly and uncivilized…” upon the completion of the building and the performance of the Confucian rites the people were stuck with awe and the town was renamed Ruxue (儒學, Confucian

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937 From an inscription on the Weng Islet Academy by Ying Kueiweng in Chih-cheng Ssu-ming 8.6a. Quote from ibid., p. 350.
938 Ibid., p. 350.
939 Ibid.
Learning). Such missionary efforts were associated with the *Great Learning*'s famous opening passage: “The way of the Great Learning is to make the luminous virtue shine forth, and renew (transform) the people…” Although Neo-Confucianism bore the signs of an elitist paradigm its new popular orientation stood in stark contrast to the extreme elitism of classical Confucianism. But instead of the more universalist Buddhist message, Neo-Confucians were promoting a more local paradigm that made a typically anti-universalist distinction between natives and barbarians. Transformation meant the acceptance of a Confucian order and a cultural legacy that was particular to a specific group of people: the Han Chinese. Non-Han minorities were more than welcome to join the Chinese worldview but it entailed a type of submission that was not required in one’s conversion to Buddhism. The dedicated efforts to transform the populace reflect both the Neo-Confucian attempt to become more universal and open to people of different backgrounds, while simultaneously disclosing a qualified universalism that was based on the superiority of a specific cultural paradigm.

One of the features that most clearly tempered the universalist tendencies in Confucianism was the intimate relationship between politics, cosmology and ethics. While universalist traditions certainly create a correlation between the ethical and cosmological, their worldviews do not involve a specific political system. Jesus, the Buddha, and Muhammad were not legitimized or supported by any particular political order; on the contrary, their message is exactly that their divine source of legitimation

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940 Ibid.

transcends the sphere of politics. Here again Neo-Confucianism introduces a type of ambivalence that stems from their synthesis of analytic and synthetic characteristics. On the one hand they undermined the imperial claim to moral authority. According to one perspective, the emperor was not automatically endowed with the Mandate of Heaven, instead, such a privilege depended on his conduct, sincerity, and learning rather than on his noble status. According to Hu Anguo’s influential commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals “it was not simply that dynastic claims to “heaven’s mandate” were false, but that heaven’s mandate had in fact shifted away from rulers to those who practiced true learning…Confucius had the right to take on the authority of a king, because he, not the Zhou king, had become the locus of moral guidance”942 This more universalistic and moralistic understanding of political legitimacy notwithstanding, Neo-Confucianism disclosed a clear particularism regarding the relationship between the Chinese dynastic institution and the world at large. Although Neo-Confucians reinterpreted the classical conception of rulership, what remained in common with the classical period was that the Chinese Son of Heaven had a unique and cardinal function in reality. One obvious example was that self-cultivation on behalf of the emperor, supported by his ministers, was absolutely crucial for the transformation of society and the attainment of social harmony. Zhu Xi himself wrote an essay called Learning for emperors and Kings (帝王之學) in which he argued that “all affairs in the world have their basis in one man, and the person of that one man has its master in one mind. Thus, once the mind of the ruler of men is correct, then all affairs in the world will be correct; but once the mind of the ruler

942 Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, pp. 130-131.
is deviant, then all affairs in the world will be deviant." Therefore, the traditional connection between Heaven and dynastic power, which persevered in Neo-Confucianism, was qualitatively different from the de-politicized worldview of Buddhism.

While tribal people could adopt Buddhism without feeling that they were surrendering to the values of a foreign culture, practicing Confucianism among non-Chinese people was frequently accompanied by cultural tensions. In a sense the Chinese were expecting foreigners to accept the superiority of the ancient Chinese sages and the imperial order. For some the cost of sinicization was too high; when the Jin emperor Shizong (金世宗) introduced the jinshi degree and translated the Chinese Classics to the Jurchens language in 1173, Jin dynasty conservatives complained that they were studying Chinese virtues. This was the same period that Jin hardliners launched a conservative attack against Wanyan Liang’s efforts towards sinicization. Whereas universal traditions constantly appeals to what is common to humans in terms of consciousness, cognition, the mind, the intellect, or rational soul, Neo-Confucians promoted what was seen by foreigners as a conventional cultural model. Although it is clear that the Neo-Confucian paradigm introduced a new appeal to our inherent universal capacity for self-transformation, we are nevertheless constantly reminded that the unique behavior, ritual patterns, and social and political structure of the Chinese empire represents the ideal model for harmony between man, Heaven, and Earth. As one scholar notes, the slogans Neo-Confucians used such as “restore the old order” (復古), were not merely an attempt

943 Ibid., p. 133. Zhu Xi (diwang zhi xue) Ji ii.439, from 1162. (see p. 297 n. 58).
944 Kuhn, The Age of Confucian Rule, p. 82.
to revive classical Confucian axiology but also an attempt to revive the culturally specific formal institutions and the rituals that accommodated them.945

The unique character of the Chinese Classics is another point to consider; as in the case of the Talmud, the contents of the Classics were far less accessible than religious texts intended for universal dissemination. Understanding the Classics requires a deep familiarity with the minutiae of Chinese culture. Sometimes it seems like the reader is intentionally challenged, as if the text is expecting a certain degree of cultural sophistication. In contrast, Buddhist sutras, although certainly complex and profound, were less concerned with cultural knowledge per-se; the stories they tell are less culturally specific, being oriented towards the alleviation of ignorance and the gaining knowledge about the nature of reality. In regards to the inaccessibility of Confucianism, Daniel Bell raises another important point that pertains to language:

[It is] true that Confucianism has spread beyond China to such countries as South Korea and Japan, and that several philosophers of Western descent have also embraced Confucian values. But Confucianism is closely tied to the Chinese language. The fact is that most of the texts in the Confucian tradition have been written in Chinese, and consequently most adherents of Confucianism have the ability to read Chinese. The early Confucian classics have been translated, but even the best translators such as Roger Ames recognize that deeper engagement with the tradition requires reading knowledge of Chinese.946

946 Daniel Bell, China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 161. This may be related to the fact that non-Indo-European languages have a tendency to conflate single terms with a broad range of meaning, which deems the Chinese Classics (as well as the Talmud) much harder to translate. Their non-linear and open-ended structure is another reason for their inaccessibility.
As Bell suggest, there is a certain impenetrability to the Chinese language. Such linguistic opaqueness together with the insistence on the indispensability of the Classics reflects the difficulties involved in introducing Confucianism to foreign cultures, especially those outside China’s East-Asian sphere of influence.

Neo-Confucians found themselves in quite a conundrum; on the one hand they were led by an “unshakable Chinese belief in the universality of their civilization,” while on the other hand the conviction that there was a one-to-one correlation between Chinese culture and the civilized world could no longer be maintained during the Song. The Liao and Jin dynasties disclosed an undeniable cultural sophistication and ingenuity that undermined the universalist pretense of many Chinese intellectuals. The outcome of these social and political conditions was what Trauzettel refers to the first signs of Chinese nationalism and forms of patriotism that were based on ethnic and political parameters rather than simply cultural lines. It is no wonder that “during the Song dynasty, a new self-consciousness and self-esteem took shape among the people who identified themselves as descendants of the Han Chinese.”

The dynamic of appropriation and subordination could not be clearer; on the one hand the Lixue School introduced into Confucianism an unprecedented level of universalism, the all-inclusive accessibility of sagehood, the philosophy of Principle as a “response to Buddhism’s universalizing pronouncements based on Dharma,” the shift towards concepts of universal compassion and the interconnectedness of all sentient beings, and the missionary efforts to “transform” the people and level the plane field between elites and commoners, are all

948 Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson, Lives of Confucius, p. 125.
examples of important historical changes towards a more embracing and universal worldview. On the other hand, Neo-Confucians were to a great extent the clearest reflection of the Song dynasty’s turn inwards and away from the cosmopolitanism of the great Tang dynasty. They stressed their native classical resources, traditional Confucian virtues, Confucian ritualism, and the Chinese imperial structure as normative models for individual, social and cosmic transformation. As in Kabbalah they devised a metaphysical architectonic with a cross-cultural transportability that was nevertheless contextualized in an unprecedentedly conservative and particularistic framework that limited its cross-cultural transportability. This turn inwards entailed newly imposed restrictions on marriage with non-Han minorities, the strengthening of clan ties, the revival and systematization of local rituals, the construction of ancestral temples and academies, the revival of historical studies, and the composition of genealogies; all of which were seen as measures designed to distinguish the Han Chinese from other groups.  

Neo-Confucian philosophy was characterized by a conservative and particularistic element that sought to protect the superiority and distinctiveness of Chinese culture. It represented what scholars saw as forms of “fundamentalism,” “restorationism,” or “neo-traditionalism” that were an antithesis to the standards of universal traditions. This certainly explains why Neo-Confucianism, in spite of its profound impact on the traditions of Japan, Vietnam, and especially Korea, never

949 Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 147.  
950 William de Bary *op. cit.*, p. 34.  
951 T.C Liu, *China’s Turning Inward*, pp. 9-11 and 43-51 *passim.*
managed, or perhaps never really tried, to become a universal tradition in the same way that Buddhism and Christianity have.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUDING REMARKS
5. METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

In the following chapter I will revisit some of the methodological topics I raised in the first chapter. I will attempt to better understand the underlying characteristics of cultural systems and their shift from periods of homeostasis to morphogenesis and back to homeostasis. I will also further explore the qualities of the synthetic and analytic modalities; their constituting features, inner dynamics, general boundaries, and capacity to react adaptively to external pressures. I will conclude by listing the parallels this study has detected between the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah, specify the central contributions of this dissertation, and offer suggestions for future applications of genetic morphology to the study of religion and culture.

5.1 CULTURES IN MORPHOGENESIS

Traditional societies had to constantly adjust to changes in their environments; plagues, wars, occupations, exiles, natural disasters, and interactions with foreign systems of thought were all potentially destabilizing. As I argued in the first chapter, although change is certainly unavoidable, not all change results in what I refer to as morphogenesis. As opposed to alterations that a tradition can sustain without major social disruptions, morphogenesis refers to a unique and rare type of change, one that necessitates a thorough restructuring of a tradition. Before we proceed to explore this topic, I would like to ask a more fundamental question: what happened in the Jewish and Chinese environments that triggered the succession of events that eventually led to the emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism? I have argued earlier that the central
destabilizing factor to which the Jewish and Chinese traditions were responding was the ascendency of analytic paradigms in their respective environments. A question that comes to mind is why did these paradigms become such a threat precisely during these periods in history? As I have attempted to demonstrate in my analysis of the historical background of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah, changing social conditions were a major factor in the destabilization of both the Jewish and Chinese traditions. The cultural circumstances that nourished the ascendency of analytic paradigms were strikingly similar. In the two contexts, a more confident and prosperous economic and social environment led to the emergence of an educated and relatively wealthy middle class. It stands to reason that cultural tensions intensified at this time because the emergence of new elites necessitated the formation of an ideology and institutions that reflected and accommodated their rising power. But the question still remains; what enables such social changes to occur in the first place? I believe that this has to do with rise of powerful empires and their ability to project power.

5.1.1 Analytic Cultures and Power

I have already mentioned that the adoption of an increasingly analytic mindset was conducive to the expansionist interests of powerful empires. Supported by extensive data, studies in cross-cultural and social psychology have recently shown that there exists a connection between the accumulation of power and analytic thinking. These studies suggest that power fosters a greater tendency towards abstract thinking and individualism, both of which are prerequisites to a more universalistic and analytic
worldview. Experiments conducted by Yuri Miyamoto and Ji Lijun have supported Basil Bernstein’s insights in the sociology of language, showing that an increase in power leads to a more inclusive and de-contextualized linguistic code, while the lack of power leads people to think more holistically and place events in context (synthetic). Building on earlier studies, Miyamoto and Ji demonstrate that power:

facilitates the use of adjectives [de-contextual] and discourages the use of verbs [contextual] to describe others…[it] also promoted taxonomic [de-contextualized], instead of thematic [contextual] categorization… [in addition] high SES [Socio-Economic Status] individuals made more taxonomic categorization than did low SES individuals, and a sense of agency partially mediated the SES differences in categorization.952

These findings suggest that well-educated and wealthy populations that emerge as a result of an increase in power promote social autonomy, a change in one’s use of language, and a more abstract way of thinking. This data clearly supports Bernstein’s argument that sociality, education, and language are intimately linked. On a broader cultural level, this rationale correlates with the socio-political realities that transpired in China and the Muslim world between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. In other words, the prosperous Tang-Song and Geonic-Andalusian periods led to the emergence of a more educated middle class, economic affluence, a more intense sense of individualism among new

952 Yuri Miyamoto and Ji Li-Jin, “Power Fosters Context-Independent, Analytic Cognition.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 11 (2011): 1449-58 [my brackets]. Miyamoto and Ji define power in terms of the capacity to influence others. The increased use of verbs means that people will stress what others do in a specific situation and therefore in context, while the use of adjectives will stress people’s abstract, and therefore universally shared traits. For more on power and the emergence of abstract thinking see Smith, P.K., Trope, Y. “You Focus on the Forest When You’re in Charge of the Trees: Power Priming and Abstract Information Processing,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 4 (2006): 578-96.
elites, and the emergence of a cosmopolitan temperament that facilitated a more universalistic worldview. The rise in power and the ability to project it externally was therefore a prerequisite for the rise in cultural confidence, prosperity, and individualism, which created the necessary social conditions for a broader acceptance of analytic formats of thought.

The shift from a phase of homeostasis to morphogenesis, so I believe, was first and foremost spurred by the ascendency of strong empires that sought to project power over neighboring groups. These more inclusive, imperialistic tendencies were nevertheless undermining the foundations of conservative paradigms such as the Rabbinic and Confucian traditions. In my discussion of Kabbalah I have pointed to the relationship between assimilation and philosophy’s universalistic worldview. Greek formats threatened to strip the Jewish tradition from its normative status, making it more likely for progressive elites to cross cultural boundaries. A potential decline in the population of Jewish communities as a result of conversion presented a real existential threat to the vulnerable and relatively small Jewish tradition. The danger of Buddhism in China was just as serious. Zhu Xi deplored the “great number of Confucian students and scholars in his times [that] had been one by one drawn into Ch’an Buddhism.” Historian Chen Mu went as far as claiming that China was on the verge of becoming a

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953 Here I am specifically referring to the cosmopolitan Tang. It is during this period that the old elites and their supporting institutions collapsed as a result of changing social and political realities.
955 Charles Wei-Hsun Fu, “Chu Hsi and Buddhism” (quoting Qian Mu) in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism*, p. 378.
“Chan Nation.”956 This was happening at the same time that barbarian powers were continuously defeating the Song Dynasty, leading to unprecedented national humiliation. As these examples suggest, in both the Jewish and Chinese cases, the crises that took place represented a considerable and palpable threat.

The relationship between power, the emergence of a new middle class, and the rise of analytic thought was also related to the substantially different intellectual discourses of analytic and synthetic cultures. The new middle class that came to the fore during this age demanded a theology that would suit its needs. Although both analytic and synthetic discourses entailed arduous training, the cognitive skills that were honed in each case were substantially different. The Talmudic and Chinese reliance on history and narrative demanded an extraordinary familiarity with a wealth of information that necessitated life-long dedication. The synthetic insistence on preserving earlier layers of the tradition and the constant reference to precedent meant that the more information and content retained by scholars, the more effective they were in advancing and supporting their positions. Such a demanding procedure imposed a substantial burden on one’s mnemonic devices and may have led to a certain ideological conservatism and the barring of broad participation. In contrast, the analytic elimination of narrative and context meant that arguments were much less reliant on extensive memorization; instead, intellectual discourse was oriented towards logical coherence. This is reflected in the Greek and Buddhist tendency towards refining arguments by replacing interchangeable units of information in a constant linear progression of ideas. Beyond the fact that analytic

formats were more accessible in terms of methodology, the contents of analytic discourses were far more in tune with the mindset of the emerging middle class. The philosophical and Buddhist stress on cognitive individualism, self-realization, and universalism had the qualities to attract a new middle class that was excluded from the demanding and increasingly outdated discourses of synthetic traditions.

The most immediate implication of this new cultural ambience was the decline in the explanatory power of traditional canon and the weakening of central control. This enabled new elites to assert themselves culturally; their growing wealth and education helped them improve their social position. This new loosening of institutional restrictions, together with the urgency to equip the Chinese and Jewish traditions with an updated paradigm, led to unprecedented social fragmentation and the formation of contending ideologies and schools of thought.

5.1.2 Morphogenesis and the Proliferation of Ideologies

Periods of morphogenesis are characterized by the emergence of acute social tensions and the rise of contending ideologies. It is worth noting that such competitive intellectual environments were very rare and atypical in synthetic traditions, which generally stressed communal consensus and compromise over factionalism and confrontation. As far as I am aware, periods of morphogenesis only occurred once prior to the rise of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah. In Judaism it occurred between the second century BCE and the formation of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE. This period gave rise to severe tensions between Sadducees,
Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, and the nascent Christian movement. In China a process of morphogenesis took place during the famous period of the “hundred schools of thought,” (百家争鸣), which preceded the unification of the empire under the Qin and more conclusively under the Han dynasty. As the name suggests, this period was characterized by an exceptional proliferation of different schools, the most dominant of which were the Yin-Yang School, the logicians, Mohists, Daoists, legalists, and Confucians. Similarly, the proliferation of ideologies prior to the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah was striking. In the Jewish case we initially witness the emergence Karaites, Kalam philosophers, and later different strands of a more rational philosophy, which was roughly divided among Aristotelians, Neoplatonists, and various combinations of the two. Within the general stream of Kabbalah we see the Iyyun Circle, ecstatic Kabbalah, theurgic Kabbalah, and within the latter school we see theurgists with Neoplatonic tendencies and others with Gnostic tendencies. During the same period German pietists also divided into various mystical schools, while French Tosafists and traditional Talmudists represented old orthodoxies. In China there were various forms of Buddhism, Daoism, and the unprecedented factionalism between reformers led by Wang Anshi, conservatives led Sima Guang, promoters of cultural studies headed by Su Shi, and the Neo-Confucians which were led by Cheng Yi and later Zhu Xi. Within Neo-

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957 Both the Jewish and Chinese traditions go through another major transformation during the modern period. This third phase was different in that Confucianism and Rabbinism no longer sought to replace the enlightenment-based worldview that came to dominate the modern world.
958 Karaites could be Kalam philosophers but not all Jewish Kalamists were Karaites.
959 The French Tosafists were very much within this conservative camp but they also disclosed their own unique focus on critical elaborations and corrections to Rashi’s commentary.
Confucianism we have several strands including the School of Principle, the School of Heart, the utilitarian school of Chen Liang, and the Hunan School of Hu Hong.

Morphogenesis is therefore a rare occurrence, a unique situation in which a tradition’s worldview is increasingly irrelevant in face of profound pressures. During these periods, the conditions emerge for greater experimentation that is usually condoned or simply beyond the control of a declining central authority. Such social realities encourage intellectuals to tap into every possible resource of the tradition, including previously marginalized resources, in an attempt to find possible native solutions to an impinging problem. To some extent, as in the animal kingdom, cultures tend to deploy their available defensive strategies when confronted with acute danger. Indeed, diversity stands at the foundation of adaptive changes in organisms; it creates a situation in which the probability for the selection of the most superior adaptive response to boundary environmental conditions is highest. In this regard, Carl Folke claims that “diversity can contribute to persistence by providing a means of innovation and exploration in new or changing environments, as well as buffering against destabilizing perturbations.”

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proliferation of schools during periods of morphogenesis is highly reminiscent of Thomas Kuhn’s notion of “periods of crisis,” in which old scientific paradigms decline thereby leading to a dynamic competition between contending school that propose new research programs for the future. As in the case of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah, such periods of crisis and intellectual diversity are followed by a return to a fairly unified discourse, in which contradicting tendencies are diminished.

The proliferation of ideologies during periods of morphogenesis can therefore be seen as a cultural strategy for better exploiting the various possibilities that are at a traditions’ disposal. The interaction between competing ideologies is not only effective in exploring possibilities for reform and change, but it is also a way to foster a more intense dissemination of ideas between schools as well as an efficient tool for the rapid refinement of ideas on a broad communal level. Therefore, environmental pressures lead cultural systems to explore their potential in ways that are unnecessary in times of social stability.

5.1.3 Cultural Systems and Information

I have pointed out that acute crises entail the decline of a tradition’s central locus of information. Periods of morphogenesis are so extreme that the intensification of commentarial activity as a means for adaptation is deemed insufficient, thereby leading to more dramatic alterations in a tradition’s central canon. In the shift from second Temple Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism, we see the emergence of the Mishnah and the Talmud as supplements to the Bible, while the shift from classical Judaism to the post-Kabbalistic
period led to the emergence of the Zohar. In China, the shift from the warring state period to the rise of the Han was accommodated by the emergence of the Five Classics, while the shift from classical Confucianism to Neo-Confucianism led to the rise of the Four Books. In all these examples, periods of crisis and morphogenesis entailed changes in the informational locus of a culture. This is only one obvious example of how radical restructuration of cultural systems is intimately related to information. My objective is to understand the relationship between cultural systems and information and especially the role of information during periods of crisis and morphogenesis. In terms of information theory, focusing on pre-modern traditions has its advantages. The relative simplicity of communication forms between the tenth and thirteenth centuries makes it easier for us to understand how information was stored, transmitted, and processed. This relative simplicity stands in stark contrast to our advanced age of radios, TVs, cell-phones, satellites, and the internet, in which it is almost impossible to adequately trace what happens to information circulating in such a complex matrix of technologies. Moreover, the fact that traditional societies were far more centralized eliminates the confusion of trying to understand how information is processed among varying centers of power (e.g. secular government, religious institutions, the financial sector, the media). Essentially, the central channel for storing information among classical axial traditions was in written form. Therefore, the first advantage of mature axial traditions was their ability to educate portions of the population such that literacy secured the storing of information and its reliable transmission across generations. Literacy also meant that such traditions could
accumulate layers of information that would otherwise be impossible to store through oral transmission.

The multi-layered nature of complex traditions is relevant to our discussion of periods of morphogenesis. Not all traditions have the inner resources to deal with extreme states of pressure. As anthropologist Wade Davis has demonstrated, not only have thousands of cultures gone extinct throughout history, but they continue to disappear at an alarming rate at present. In order for a culture to sustain itself over time it must develop the capacity to react and adapt to change; this is also related to its ability to generate what systems theorists refer to as “noise” or redundancy. The notion of noise means that robust cultural systems will include certain features that seem redundant or unnecessary at first glance. It is precisely these seemingly superfluous elements that might prove to be absolutely crucial during periods of crisis. Therefore unused resources provide a system with a certain resilience and ability to react to unexpected perturbations.

In contrast, a scarcity of resources might deem a tradition too rigid and therefore incapable of adaptation. The Jewish and Chinese traditions are typical examples of robust cultural systems that contain the necessary internal complexity to undergo an extreme process of morphogenesis. As an example, Sefer Yetzirah, a fairly unimportant cosmological treatise prior to the tenth century became one of the cornerstones of

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962 In systems theory we call this a “critical state.” Imagine an economy in which all the industries and technologies rely on a single source of energy. This means that a minor disruption, such as the sudden lack of access to energy can lead the system to collapse. It is in cases like this that systems need variation (noise) or “modularity” which will provide it additional channels to sustain itself during critical period until a solution is found.
Judaism’s reaction to rational philosophy. Neo-Confucians shifted their attention to *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, both of which were formerly marginal chapters of the Book of Rites (The Classic of Ritual). Both Neo-Confucians and Jewish mystics began to explore earlier layers of their tradition such that relatively dormant resources were tapped into, amplified, re-purposed, and manipulated in favor of dramatic reform.

### 5.1.4 Internalizing, Processing, and Externalizing Information

Another crucial mechanism for adaptation is the ability of cultural systems to extract information from their external environment and react to that information adaptively. In both the Kabbalistic and Neo-Confucian stories a proficient group of translators who were able to transmit information from one linguistic medium to another were absolutely crucial. I have commented on the long and complex process of translating Buddhist scripture into Chinese. It is important to note that when these translations reached maturity with Xuan Zang (602 – 664 CE), Buddhism began to exert its strongest impact upon Chinese culture. These translations also symbolized Buddhism’s most analytic phase, which was absorbed but also subdued by more sinicized schools of Buddhism. In other words, the short lived and analytic form of Buddhism that Xuan Zang introduced to China was immediately reacted against, representing a turning point towards the development of more synthetic forms of Buddhism.\(^{963}\) In the Jewish milieu, the famous Tibbon family played a crucial role in the cultural dialogue that

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\(^{963}\) This was the Consciousness Only School known as *weishi zong* 唯識宗 or *faxiang zong* 法相宗.
emerged among Talmudists, philosophers, and mystics; the Tibbonite translations were responsible for transmitting advanced knowledge from the Muslim milieu to Jewish communities that had no command of Arabic. The Tibbonites were likewise known for their rationalistic tendencies, which even outstripped Maimonides’ philosophical rationalism. Therefore, the role of translators in the Rabbinic confrontation with Greek philosophy and the Confucian encounter with Buddhism was absolutely crucial and represents a critical moment of escalating analytic tendencies and subsequent native counter-attacks.

From a systems perspective, one of the central functions of traditional authority was to process information. Since power resides in the hands of leaders, central authority is the most obvious body in charge of processing information in the name of the community. While translators were responsible for accurately transmitting information from their traditions’ external environment internally, centers of authority were the main receivers of this information as well as those responsible for responding to its possible destabilizing effects. Although the diversity of ideologies led to a decline of traditional authority, the cultural prestige and communal responsibilities of these authorities meant that they remained an important and influential force. It is therefore not surprising that most of the translations of philosophical and Buddhist writings were commissioned by centers of authority such as the influential rabbis of Provence and the Tang imperial court. Through these translations, foreign information reached centers of authority thereby giving them the opportunity to promptly and effectively respond to new social pressures. It therefore makes perfect sense that the most acute phase of the Maimonidean
controversies took place in Provençe between 1200-1235, immediately after
Maimonides’ philosophical works became available in Hebrew at the same location.\footnote{964}

Similarly, Buddhist translations prompted the indigenization of Chinese Buddhism as a
reaction to analytic Indian schools, which indirectly led to the anti-Buddhist sentiments
harbored by Confucians of different factions during the Song.

Finally, cultural systems have official and unofficial channels to communicate
their response to their external environments. This was mainly accomplished through
public debates and the emergence of a literature of polemics and apologetics. In China,
the famous Six Dynasties and early Tang debates are a good example of the Chinese
reaction to the Buddhist religion.\footnote{965} During the Tang-Song transition Confucianism went
on an offensive that was reflected by countless polemical attacks by many conservative
Confucian factions. Almost all Neo-Confucians were steeped in Buddhist thought and
most of them dedicated substantial portions of their work to anti-Buddhist polemics. In
Judaism, we see several polemical and apologetic works, including the participation in
public court debates. Public disputations were very frequent during the period leading to
the appearance of the Zohar. In many cases communities sent official figures to represent
Judaism in face of Christian and Muslim attacks. It is worth noting that in all these cases,
 conservative Jews and Neo-Confucians were well acquainted with the paradigms they

\footnote{964} This second climax of the controversies involved extreme rationalists such David Kimhi and
more conservative figures such as Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier, Nahmanides, and Jonah
Gerondi.

\footnote{965} Friederike Assandri, “Inter-religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang: An Introduction to
Daoxuan’s Ji gujin Fo Dao lunheng,” Friederike Assandri and Dora Martins eds., \textit{From Early
Tang Court Debates to China’s Peaceful Rise} (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009),
pp. 15-32.
confronted. Such an acquaintance was crucial for effectively representing Judaism and Confucianism; it was also a prerequisite for devising the new ideologies of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah. In both the Chinese and Jewish contexts we see a relatively swift reaction to the analytic challenge, which represents these cultures’ ability to respond to information effectively. Therefore, complex adaptive cultural systems have the mechanisms to store, extract, process, and adaptively react to information in their environments.

Although all traditions have the basic ability to interact with their surroundings, not all traditions have the capacity and resources to withstand extreme periods of crisis and change. As an example, an important feature of robust traditions is their capacity to sustain a certain unified cultural objective across generations and geographical locations. Thomas Kuhn pointed out that radical shifts that necessitate a re-appreciation of a large body of former data are never the work of a specific person or even a specific group of people at a given time.966 As the Chinese and Jewish experiences suggest, Kuhn’s observation applies to the sphere of culture as well; periods of morphogenesis require an ongoing communal effort and a long experimental phase in which new options are examined and old assumptions reevaluated. This gradual refinement of a tradition’s response to new information requires large networks of interactions that take place within and across generations. This topic has been widely explored by Randall Collins in his masterful Sociology of Philosophies, in which he traces revolutionary ideas, frequently attributed to a specific individual or a confined group of individuals, to complex inter-

966 Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, p. 7.
generational networks.\textsuperscript{967} This is clearly the case in Zhu Xi’s monumental project of synthesis, which represents the completion of a cultural project that can be traced all the way back to the mid-ninth century. The Zohar, traditionally attributed to R. Moshe de Leon is in fact an outcome of the cumulative efforts of Jewish thinkers that stretch back centuries prior to its publication. Like any multifaceted system, religious traditions have an extremely sophisticated causal architecture that stores and processes information across time and space. Robust cultural systems contain the necessary complexity to react to external forces in a collaborative fashion in which different groups perform different tasks in the process of adaptation. In both the Chinese and Jewish traditions we see the way the native reaction to the analytic worldview was gradually refined through a process of public debate in which information was efficiently communicated to different communities living in distant geographic locations and periods of time.

5.1.5 From Appropriation to Subordination

Throughout this study I have mentioned that the schools of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah were distinct in their ability to initially appropriate features from analytic paradigms and later subordinate those borrowings to synthetic sensibilities. In the following section I would like to investigate what this means in terms of information. In both cases the response to the analytic worldview began with a phase of emulation, which was followed by a period of creative reaction. In other words, Jewish mystics and Neo-Confucians initially formulated their ideas in close conformity to philosophy and

Buddhism, and only later managed to temper their exaggerated dependency on analytic ideas with a more sophisticated formulation of their newly devised synthetic positions. In the Jewish case we see that the first mystical commentaries to Sefer Yetzirah followed the lead of philosophers who detected the instrumentality of this work.\textsuperscript{968} During this early phase, Kabbalists followed philosophers in tapping into the available resources the Jewish tradition had to offer for the construction of an updated metaphysics. The next generation of Kabbalah in Gerona, especially R. Azriel, R. Ezra, and Ya’acov Ben-Sheshet, showed more obvious philosophical proclivities. As scholars have noted, much of R. Azriel’s terminology was taken from the philosophical works of the Tibbon Family, which was in turn indebted to Maimonidean thought.\textsuperscript{969} This strategy of emulation began to change during the next prolific phase of Castile, in which Kabbalistic works moved towards a more dense symbolism and an increasingly non-analytic stance.\textsuperscript{970} This can also be reflected in a shift from a Neo-platonic strand of Kabbalah to an increasingly gnostic strand. In China we see a very similar dynamic; the first phase of reaction during the Northern Song period was far more reminiscent of Buddhism than Zhu Xi’s final synthesis. Zhou Dunyi and Zhang Zai showed a conspicuously non-Confucian interest in the unmanifest or hidden aspects of reality.\textsuperscript{971} Later Neo-Confucians also marginalize

\textsuperscript{968} The first mystical commentary to Sefer Yetzirah by Isaac the Blind was authored at the same place, and not too long after, Judah Barzillai composed his influential philosophical commentary to the same book.

\textsuperscript{969} Dan, Toldot Torat ha-Sod, Vol. 8, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{970} One of the watershed moments of the transition from a period of emulation to creative reaction in Kabbalah was Ya’acov ben Sheshet’s Meshiv Devarim Nechokhim which can be seen as the first explicit theurgic attack against rationalism, especially the philosophy of Samuel ibn Tibbon.

\textsuperscript{971} See Julia Ching, The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi, pp. 239-241; 311. Zhu Xi was uncomfortable with Zhou’s opening statement of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate “from
Zhou’s focus on the idea of tranquility (jing, 靜) by shifting to the more pro-active and world-affirming notion of reverent attentiveness (jing, 敬). Due to the non-Confucian aspects of his philosophy Shao Yong was excluded from Zhu Xi’s anthology of the Northern Song philosophers. Similarly, Zhu Xi reacted against the radical transcendence of the Cheng Yi’s understanding of li by defining it in terms that were more world-affirming and typically Confucian. He also opposed the strong stress some Neo-Confucians laid on the Chan-like subjective and intuitive penetration of the mind. Instead, he shifted to stress the typically Confucian concrete investigation of Principles in things and affairs.

In both the Jewish and Chinese cases the initial phase of grappling with the analytic paradigm was characterized by a relative scarcity of resources, which forced early thinkers to resort to a more conspicuous strategy of emulation. However, imitation was also an extremely efficient strategy for the appropriation of foreign ideas. It was

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**wuji** (limitless) emerges **taiji**” (自无极而为太极). Zhu therefore modified the sentence to the more world-affirming “**wuji** and **taiji**” (无极而太极). In Zhu Xi’s new version the two notions are equated; **taiji**, or being, no longer emerges from the more primal and unmanifest **wuji**; instead, they are presented as two sides of the same coin. This small alteration had far-reaching consequences since the conceptual prioritization of **wuji** was completely eliminated. Zhu Xi himself admitted the fact that he changed the original wording but he insisted that he did so because of a mistake in the rendering of Zhou’s version. Robin Wang claims that many commentators disagreed with Zhu Xi “mistake explanation” and insisted that the original diagram used “zi wuji er wei eaiji.”

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973 Koichi Shinohara, “Ta-Hui’s Instructions to Tseng K’ai: Buddhist “Freedom” in the Neo-Confucian Context” in Meeting of Minds, pp. 186-188. Other examples of the moderation of foreign elements was the way Shao Yong, for instance, was not included in Zhu Xi and Lu Zuqian’s anthology of Neo-Confucian thought. In spite of Shao’s clear contributions to Neo-Confucian thought, he was perceived as distastefully Daoist. In what sounds like a Buddhist position, the early Neo-Confucian Li Ao claimed that the essence of human nature is tranquility and that evil comes from the stirring of emotions.
therefore both an inevitable result of a lack of native tools and an effective way to create an initial correlation between foreign ideas and native concepts. In terms of information, this early phase can be seen as a fairly straightforward replication of information. In both the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic cases, this was an important step before a more mature and creative reaction could unfold. Once the basic frameworks of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah were established through imitation, a second phase of a bold and creative dissemination of ideas led to the emergence of a more mature and well-articulated native response. This two-phase dynamic can be seen as the way cultural systems initially replicate foreign ideas through emulation, and later reinterpret those borrowing in a fashion that conforms to a native mindset. I would add that these two phases were followed by a final stage in which information was integrated or synthesized into the new textual corpus that emerges. This stage represents the final integration of foreign ideas into a tradition’s official locus of information.

The appropriation of analytic ideas and their subordination to native tendencies is a fascinating feature of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah; one which makes them both more analytic and more synthetic than the classical traditions that preceded them. This seemingly contradictory character made these schools powerful alternatives to Buddhism and Greek philosophy. The fact that Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah became more analytic is fairly obvious; as I have argued in the third and fourth chapters, appropriating many features from the Buddhist and Greek traditions equipped these schools with an analytic undercurrent. But what does it mean to become more synthetic than a tradition that was synthetic in the first place? I would argue that once medieval mystics and Neo-
Confucians integrated analytic elements into their ideologies, their return to a synthetic mode of operation had to account for their new analytic leanings. Therefore, the type of synthetic sensibilities to which Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism returned was a corrective to their new analytic characteristics. An example can help us understand this process; under analytic influences, Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists shifted to the domain of metaphysics, which also led these schools to “ontologize” their traditional synthetic worldviews. Therefore, analytic borrowings directly impinged on the native reaction that ensued. Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism shifted from classical narratives that were based on sheer faith, or will, to systematic paradigms that were supported by the normative metaphysical pretenses and logical coherence of the analytic mode. This new level of normativity cemented synthetic features such as ritualism, particularism (esp. in Kabbalah), this-worldliness (esp. in Neo-Confucianism), and social embeddedness in what was presented as an indisputable ontology. The point I wish to stress is that the prioritization of native characteristics over analytic borrowings led Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah towards an ultra-conservative worldview, one which was ironically more synthetic than the classical traditions that preceded them by virtue of being anchored in a normative analytic cosmology.

The appropriation of foreign ideas can be seen in the way Neo-Confucians and kabbalists worked diligently to anchor their new perceptions of reality in an ancient past, thereby painting a fluid and seamless continuity with the traditions that preceded them. Both schools sought to attribute their new literatures to prominent early figures in their traditions. Neo-Confucians claimed that *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the*
Mean were authored by the student and the grandson of Confucius, while the Zohar was attributed to the Tannaic hero Shimon Bar-Yohai. Similarly these schools constructed imagined lineages of transmission; Neo-Confucians introduced their famous daotong, which stretched all the way to first sages of the tradition. Many Kabbalists claimed their mystical lore originated with a series of mysterious visions experienced by the prestigious rabbis of Provenç. According to this view the prophet Elijah revealed the celestial mysteries of the Kabbalah to this important circle of Rabbis. This was an efficient way to legitimize and give credibility to an ideology that clearly broke away from past tradition. Another shared characteristic of Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists was their appropriation of foreign ideas using native terms. In discussing Zhou Dunyi’s philosophy, John Berthrong notes that "if one expects some kind of novel invention of new language, one will be disappointed. But if we can learn to see the uncommon ways someone like Chou [Zhou] manipulates his inherited vocabulary in order to give old terms new meanings, then we can begin to catch a glimmer of why this new philosophy was so powerful." Neo-Confucians skillfully excavated their native repositories of meaning; they detected old terms, sentences, and passages that could facilitate their goals of reinterpreting ancient terms in a radically new light. Like Confucians, Kabbalists used native symbols, many of which came from aggadic literature, the Talmud, and early

974 Gershom Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah. (Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 35, and more on pp. 35-39; 238-243. The famous sage that experienced the Giluy Eliyahu (the revelation of Elijah) were Abraham ben Isaac (d. 1179), Abraham ben David (the Rabad d.1198), Jacob ha-Nazir (the nazarite), and Isaac the Blind (d.approx. 1232), see ibid., p. 37.

975 John Berthrong, Transformation of The Confucian Way, p. 102
Heikhalot mysticism to construct their ideology. Both schools therefore continuously stressed the authenticity of their ideas, refusing to acknowledge their foreign origins.

5.2 SELF-ORGANIZATION OF COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS

This brings us to the way traditions gradually shifted from a destabilized state of morphogenesis back to homeostasis. The first question that comes to mind is the following: if periods of crisis represent the decline of central authority, who is in charge of the complex process of restructuring a tradition following periods of acute crisis? Here again, it is important to emphasis that central power is by no means absent during phases of morphogenesis. Instead, there is a weakening of institutions such that decisions are less exclusively in the hands of traditional authorities. In China, for instance, the Song dynasty was clearly in control of the empire but different factions were coming in and out of power influencing emperors towards opposing policies, which led to a crippling political deadlock. In Judaism the whole Rabbinic world was torn between rational and anti-rational factions that led to unprecedented social tensions. This decline in power notwithstanding, traditional authorities remained important and highly respected by all contending factions in both the Jewish and Chinese experiences. In other words, there always remained some form of regulatory mechanism to which contending factions constantly referred.976

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976 One of the reasons that old authorities remained important was their association with a tradition’s canon. As I have argued, this venerated body of literature can be seen as the essence of a tradition’s cultural memory, identity, and ultimate concerns. The readers are reminded that even when the Talmud and the Five Classics were being harshly criticized, most factions were adamant in recognizing their authority. The only exception is perhaps the Karaites in the Judaism.
Since the creative forces behind the Kabbalistic and Neo-Confucian revolutions were middle class elites that were competing to consolidate their power, it was crucial for various factions to win popular support and especially the support of traditional authorities. As social psychologists have observed, “innovations are accepted by a given population if they have been previously accepted by opinion leaders, but they are rejected by the population if more conservative opinion leaders do not accept them. This is known as prestige biased transmission and had proved to be an extremely powerful social determinant even when the ideas advocated by conservative authorities are clearly detrimental to the populace. Interestingly, social psychologists have noted that the next crucial factor in the ascendancy of ideas is the early adoption of these traditionally sanctioned ideas by people with a progressive and prosperous background. In his discussion of these “secondary elites,” J. Heinrich notes that “transmission is enhanced by their greater social networks and higher social status, more money, more cosmopolitan contacts, and greater exposure to mass media outlets…”

It seems that the process of gaining support from conservative authorities followed by dissemination of ideas by progressive elites took place in both the Jewish and Chinese contexts. In Judaism, one of the main advantages of mystics over philosophers was their ability to gain the favor of respected Talmudists who were engaged in communal leadership and legal rulings. In China the decision of imperial authority to support factions was absolutely crucial; it was

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978 Heinrich, ibid.
the imperial court that brought the reform faction to power and it was the same court under new emperors that later reacted against the New Policies and slowly shifted support towards the conservative Neo-Confucians. In both cases traditional sanctioning of new ideologies were carried and enthusiastically transmitted by and educated and cosmopolitan elites of the time.

Although central authority remained important in regulating communal affairs, it lacked well-articulated solutions for dealing with the growing pressures that the Chinese and Jewish worlds were facing. This new reality in which power was more broadly diffused between traditional authorities and different factions meant that final decisions were made in a more de-centralized manner. The contending factions were therefore dependent on a combination of support from old authorities and support from commoners, especially the emerging middle class. The Jewish and Chinese stories suggest that once popular support crossed a certain watershed line, the pressure exerted on others to follow was virtually impossible to oppose. I tend to associate this sudden tendency towards supporting a certain ideology with what systems theorists refer to as an “attractor state;” a point in time where a certain inclination or a “bias” begins to cascade throughout the system thereby sparking a process of self-organization in which conflicting forces begin to align themselves in conformity with a dominant cultural temperament. In China and Judaism this watershed moment took place once Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists managed to construct a mature and viable reaction to analytic paradigms. The merits of their new worldviews attracted the growing support among
traditional authorities and later commoners, which eventually led to a process of re-organization according to their new ideology.\textsuperscript{979}

If the recipe for success in these highly competitive cultural environments was the seemingly random support of commoners and old elites, why did the culturally conservative schools of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah emerge as victorious in these struggles? Is this just a coincidence or is there a deeper reason for the success of conservative schools? I think that Roy Rappaport’s use of ‘Romer’s Rule’ of adaptation can add an interesting dimension to our understanding of the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic success. Paleontologist Alfred S. Romer (1894–1973) argued that “the initial survival value of a favorable innovation is conservative, in that it renders possible the maintenance of a traditional way of life in the face of changed circumstance.”\textsuperscript{980} Romer used the example of the evolution of bones in the limbs of certain fish, which enabled

\textsuperscript{979} The sudden alignment with a certain cultural trend can be explained with the concept of culturregen introduced by Lumsden and Wilson in their gene-culture coevolution model. According to them a culturregen is a “relatively homogeneous set of artifacts, behaviors or mentifacts [cultural mental representations],” Lumsden, Charles J., and Edward O. Wilson, \textit{Genes, Mind, and Culture: The Coevolutionary Process} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 27 [my brackets]. Their idea of the “exponential trend watcher” is such that “as more people adopt one culturregen, the probability of others switching to it increases exponentially. If people are strongly inclined to follow what others around them are doing, then small initial differences in switching propensity can be dramatically magnified at the level of the group.” See more in Ute Schonpeflug, \textit{Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects} (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 9-30.

\textsuperscript{980} See Roy Rappaport, \textit{The Sacred in Human Evolution}. More on Rappaport’s cybernetic approach see \textit{Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity} (1999), and “Ritual, Sanctity, and Cybernetics,” \textit{American Anthropologist} 73, no. 1 (1971): 59-76. Alfred Sherwood Romer, \textit{Man and the Vertebrates}, 1:43 ff. Penguin, 1954 (first published 1933). Romer’s rule is also related to the \textit{Red Queen Effect}, an evolutionary principle, first proposed in 1973 by L. Van Valen, that much of the evolution of a lineage consists simply of keeping up with environmental changes rather than occupying or adapting to new environments. The red queen in Lewis Carroll's novella \textit{Through the Looking-Glass}, had to run as fast as she could only to remain in the same place.
them to crawl over land and find new ponds at times of drought. In other words, the
development of bones among these fish was the most conservative and energy efficient
way to preserve their aquatic (traditional) way of life. Applied to our story, cultures
will undertake the minimum possible alterations (conservatism) in order to maintain their
traditional modes of life rather than adapt to new ones. In the case of Judaism and
Confucianism I believe this “traditional way of life” is represented by the unique
structural characteristics of the synthetic modality. Therefore, the ability of conservative
Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists to both invigorate their traditions and articulate a
worldview that conformed to the morphology of their traditional paradigms meant it was
less energy consuming for these schools to reach a compatibility with their classical
tradition. It is in this sense that I believe that the notion of an “attractor state” applied to
culture can be associated with the emergence of a unique synergy between a declining
central authority and a new ideology that reinvigorates a tradition’s old paradigm. Such
internal synergies are a well-known quality of complex adaptive systems; their role in the
emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism was crucial.

5.3 ATTRACTOR STATES AND SYNERGIES BETWEEN SYSTEMS AND SUB-SYSTEMS

In the methodological chapters, I argued that morphology can be applied to
different scales of analysis, both whole traditions and sub-traditions. Throughout this
study I have shown that in spite of the fact that Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah were

981 Rappaport, ibid.
certainly an integral part of the orthodox Chinese and Jewish traditions, they were nevertheless distinct groups with distinguishable characteristics and boundaries.

Kabbalists had their own peculiar practices, their distinct times of congregating, their own methods of prayer, a unique set of texts, and a substantially different theology than followers of the traditional Rabbinic worldview. Similarly, Neo-Confucians were a unique group with clear idiosyncrasies and exclusive habits. In fact, they were so distinct that court officials attacked them as more than just a faction, but something like a religious sect reminiscent of Buddhists and Daoists. They were also criticized for the presumptuousness of their pedantic mannerisms; their clothing (white silk shirts and black hats), long fingernails (symbol of refinement), obsessive ritualism, their cautious and slow walk, and many other distinct habits. The daily lives of Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists were dominated by interactions with like-minded people; this conforms to the way systems theory defines sub-systems as components that are distinct by virtue of their dense intra-connectivity in relation to their interconnectivity to other components. This is also known by the term “modularity,” namely, that systems contain internal agents that are both distinct as well as part of the whole. Here again, I will try to interpret the relationship between traditions and sub-traditions in terms of information.

982 Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, pp. 139-140.
983 James T. C. Liu China Turning Inward, p. 142. Liu notes that Neo-Confucians “sought to create for themselves a strong identity of their own… this was manifest chiefly in two areas: rites and manners… Many scholars of this persuasion insisted upon rites in a solemn atmosphere, almost like a religious service. Discarding the conventional rites as below standard, they advocated the revival of archaic forms.” Ibid. For more on Neo-Confucian exclusivism see Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, pp. 229-230.
Systems are enclosed and defined according to various parameters. Rain forests are distinct by virtue of climatic boundaries, cells are set apart by their membranes, while human groups are mainly defined by shared loci of information that impact their modes of behavior, activities, and institutions. Indeed, the radical ideologies that Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists followed, strongly informed their identity, modes of worship, their activities, and their psychological temperaments. John Holland claims that “adaptive agents are defined by an enclosing boundary that accepts some signals and ignores others…”

Boundaries are both mechanisms for self-enclosure as well as semi-permeable borders “permitting easy passage for some resources and difficult passage for other.” Choosing what information to engage with is therefore an extremely important determinant of boundaries between sub-systems and systems. Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists are typical examples of groups that carefully monitored, and were clearly distinguished by the type of information with which they engage.

Just as the Bible, Talmud and the Five Classics defined the limits and borders of the Rabbinic and Confucian traditions respectively, so did the specific textual resources that informed Kabbalists and Neo-Confucians shape the boundaries of their ideologies on a smaller scale.

986 Ibid., p. 16.
987 Neo-Confucian works such as the various treatises composed by the Northern Song philosophers and the Four Books with Zhu Xi’s commentaries, informed the lifestyle and beliefs of members. It was the acceptance of those texts as the true interpretation of the Classics, which made a “normal” Confucian become a Neo-Confucian. This was equally the case with the new and revolutionary Kabbalistic theology that emerged during the thirteenth century. This new mystical worldview was carried in a large number of treatises which culminated with the publication of the Zohar, and created a distinct informational locus that deemed theurgic kabbalists very different form traditional Talmudists, philosophers, and other groups of medieval mystics.
scale. In terms of information, the central prerequisite for traditions and sub-traditions to establish a synergetic relationship is whether their textual traditions are complementary. As I have demonstrated in chapters 3 and 4, Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists skillfully established a continuity between their new literature and the traditional Confucian and Jewish canon such that these two loci of information could co-exist and even support each other.

The approach I am proposing can help us understand why the School of Principle and theurgic Kabbalah managed to outstrip other alternatives in their respective intellectual environments. The unstable state of ideological conflicts during periods of morphogenesis cannot be sustained for too long; cultural systems show a propensity to resolve tensions and gravitate towards a communally sanctioned solution. This process of self-organization is such that no particular element in the system is exclusively in charge. Instead, order emerges spontaneously as a result of a structural commensurability between various components. As I have noted earlier, the conformity of conservative sub-traditions to the synthetic mode of operation meant it was much easier for them to establish a synergetic relationship with orthodoxy. Although progressive schools claimed continuity with tradition, they nevertheless sought to transform the old order and promote paradigms that undermined many of the basic features of the classical Chinese and Jewish worldview. This included their stress on individual realization in detachment from the community, their conventionalization of ritual, and their promotion of an increasingly inclusive and universalistic worldview. Buddhism clearly undermined the Confucian worldview, but even the progressive camp of Wang Anshi sought to eliminate two of the
Five Classics, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the *Yijing*, both of which were absolutely central to the Neo-Confucian project. In Judaism, the school of ecstatic Kabbalah promoted a hermeneutic that completely undermined the literal meaning of the biblical texts, which theurgic Kabbalists sought to preserve. Therefore, the adoption of ideologies with analytic and progressive tendencies by synthetic traditions would necessitate a much more radical and energy consuming process of restructuration that would probably entail the undermining of traditional authority. Such radical change would possibly lead to a system’s collapse, or at the very least to its transformation beyond recognition. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Valera have convincingly argued that once a system loses its original structure and organization, it is no longer the same system. In other words, there are limits to the structural changes a system can tolerate without loosing its identity.

The fact that the Chinese and Jewish traditions were originally structured according to a synthetic organization meant that there was a general bias towards change that preserved their synthetic traits. Such biases favored sub-systems that were inclined towards conservative change. The prioritization of synthetic sensibilities over analytic borrowings among Kabbalists and Neo-Confucians was therefore not only a strategy for

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988 The examples of the school of ecstatic Kabbalah as well as different strands of philosophy reflect an attempt to integrate analytic features into Judaism without a sufficient reformulation of those borrowings in synthetic terms. This represented a direct challenge to traditional authorities since the adoption of these new analytic trends would entail a radical change and the undermining of traditional power.

concealing the adoption of foreign ideas, but rather a way to remain within the legitimate boundaries of tradition. Crossing those boundaries could be perceived as rebelling against a tradition’s most foundational sensibilities and a violation of the basic principles that perpetuate a traditions underlying logic. Therefore, the shift from the instability and fragmentation of periods of morphogenesis back to a state of homeostasis is instigated by a synergy between a new theology promoted by sub-systems (Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism) and declining traditional centers of authority. This synergetic relationship both reinvigorates the tradition as a whole, as well as mitigates the distinctiveness of sub-traditions such that they are gradually integrated into the greater system and even come to represent a new orthodoxy.  

The equation for the establishment of such synergies was a delicate balancing act between adaptation and conservatism. In this complex process, leaning too strongly towards reformation and change led to allegations of heresy and anti-traditionalism, while leaning to heavily towards conservatism failed to provide an effective response to the crisis at hand. The Kabbalistic and Neo-Confucian adoption of analytic elements and “return” to a synthetic ethos was crucial for their ability to lead their respective traditions.

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990 The escalating symbiosis between an emerging theology and the old paradigm creates a “feedback loops;” another central feature of complex systems. The concept of feedback loops is usually associated with a sub category of systems theory known as cybernetics. Generally speaking, feedback loops represent a recursive circulation of information or behaviors. Positive feedback is an action that produces more of the same (e.g. global warming leads to the melting arctic sea ice, which in turn leads to the further warming of the oceans and increase in global temperature). Negative feedback produces less of the same action (e.g. real-estate prices go up leading to a decrease in demand for housing, which in turn leads to the price of real-estate to go down). Positive feedbacks are usually destabilizing since they represent a certain tendency that cascades through the system (e.g. loss of confidence in the banking system leading to an economic meltdown. in contrast, negative feedback is a form of self-regulation that promotes stability in a system. Stable complex systems will usually have negative feedback loops to temper positive feedback.
from a destabilized process of morphogenesis back to a stable state of homeostasis. Complex cultural systems are therefore perturbed by external pressures to which they react adaptively. They generate solutions through an internal process of fragmentation and experimentation. Stages of crisis and destabilization slowly shift towards a process of self-organization and a renewed state of equilibrium instigated by the establishment of synergies between the system’s various components. In our case the main compatibility that is established is between a new a cultural ideology devised by a dominant sub-tradition and the classical paradigm that preceded it represented by the greater tradition. 

5.3.1 The Symbiotic Nature of Cultural Systems

In the above pages I have examined periods of morphogenesis and the unique synergy that can be established between sub-traditions and whole traditions. In the following section I will explore the nature of synergies between the different components of the analytic and synthetic modalities. In the methodological chapter I introduced what I believed to be the irreducible components of these modes of operation; I proposed three morphological levels—the cognitive, social, and cultural — arguing that each of these levels is composed of a set of self-enforcing morphological features. While the three morphological levels of the two modalities are identical, the morphological features that compose each level consist of a set of binaries that set the synthetic and analytic modes of operation apart. Now that we have become more familiar with the Chinese and Jewish

\[991\] As opposed to Kuhnian paradigm shifts, cultural systems favor an accumulative approach in which old layers are not jettisoned but rather supported by new layers. Therefore, in both the case of the Zohar and and Four Books we see a new scriptural layer that functions as an extension to the canonic literature that preceded it.
traditions and the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah, I will attempt to propose how the symbiotic dynamic of cultural systems operates. Note the table from the methodology chapter illustrating the general structure and constituents of the analytic and synthetic modalities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Level</th>
<th>Analytic Modality</th>
<th>Synthetic Modality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Atomization of data</td>
<td>Integration of data (holism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>De-contextualization</td>
<td>Contextualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-enclosed, linear systems</td>
<td>Open-ended, non-linear systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Level</td>
<td>Social autonomy (personal)</td>
<td>Social embeddedness (positional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Level</td>
<td>Other-worldly</td>
<td>This-worldly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Universalism</td>
<td>Particularism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indo-European</td>
<td>Non-Indo-European</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4 CULTURES IN HOMEOSTASIS

All synergies or relationships are in some form or another a result of communication, which in turn is the opposite of “separability” — a state of no communication. When something is radically autonomous or separate it means that whatever happens to it does not impinge on anything else. This is precisely the opposite of communication in which changes in component $x$ will have immediate implications on any other component to which $x$ is related. Therefore, when different components of a complex system are organized in relation to each other, there exists some type of communication between them - even if it is in this very general sense. Such relationships create certain constraints on reality such that a peculiar type of organization will necessarily eliminate other possibilities. For example, while components $x$ and $y$ are theoretically unconstrained when they are in a state of autonomy, once they establish a relationship certain restrictions emerge on both of them. Although this relationship can certainly entail new possibilities it also creates restrictions that are absent when $x$ and $y$ are not in a state of mutual dependency. When applied to the symbiotic relationship between the various components of the synthetic and analytic modalities, communication between two or more morphological features entails a certain logical resonance. In other words, cultures tend to gravitate towards a constellation of self-enforcing sensibilities that preclude other possibilities.

Consider the following interrelationship between the constituting features of the analytic mode of operation: The adherence to [a] social autonomy (cognitive individualism) resonates with a type of [b] universalism that is predicated upon a pan-human cognitive apparatus. Such universalism will tend to downplay the particularistic stress on local ritual in favor of [c] contemplative techniques oriented towards the mental facets of reality. This contemplative and abstract approach sees the body (ritual) as problematic and therefore tends to prioritize [d] other-worldly spheres of existence that transcend the blemished world of matter. Such sublime spheres of existence are beyond the contingencies of historical events and therefore highly [e] decontextualized. This logical organization can similarly begin with the cognitive tendency towards [f] atomizing data which manifests itself in the domain of cosmology in the form of [g] substance metaphysics, in which autonomous substances interact causally and form a unified and [h] self-enclosed system. The atomization of data in terms of society leads to social autonomy in which individuals are seen as distinct agents. Such individualism goes hand in hand with an [i] elaborate linguistic code that stresses one’s independence and uniqueness and in turn leads to a more [j] universal dialogue in which people are encouraged to express their opinions explicitly in detachment from the restricted symbols and ritualism of particularistic societies. Again, this is only one possible angle of looking at the symbiotic logic that leads different cultural, social, and cognitive traits to cluster into robust homeostatic cultural systems.

However, there is a clear disadvantage to the presentation of such reinforcing relationships in a linear fashion. The robustness of a homeostatic system stems from the
fact that each constituent part reinforces and in turn is reinforced by several other components. Therefore, one of the main traits of complex cultural systems is their non-linear nature. This symbiotic dynamic is such that the various components of a system will operate according to a multi-faceted, interlocking, and self-enforcing organization. It therefore makes more sense to understand such systems as an interconnected web of relationships.

Diagram 3: Symbiosis in the Analytic Modality
A similar logic applies to the synthetic mode of operation: the Chinese and Jewish adherence to [a] social embeddedness is such that individualism will be marginalized. Such family-based and communal social structures will highlight the [b] world-affirming features of reality such as procreation, inter-personal ethics, and [c] ritual behavior. These “mundane” features are seen as legitimate channels for religious expression as well as reinforcements of social bonds (embeddedness). A culture’s specific set of rituals and local social conventions will highlight a tradition’s [d] particularistic ethos vis-à-vis other groups. Similarly, particularistic traditions are characterized by intellectual discourses that are based on a culture’s unique historical biography. The importance of historical narratives leads to the stress on the [e] contextualization of information, which will also entail [f] inconclusive and open-ended discourses. The particularistic ethos of synthetic traditions will also tend to evolve towards discourses based on a [g] restricted code that is inaccessible to foreign participation. Such intellectual discourses are likely to be based on [h] commentary and communal consensus rather than polemics and the advancement of thesis. Here, too, we could have theoretically chosen several other ways of demonstrating the internal logic of synthetic cultural systems. The important point to stress is that an internal resonance of ideas makes it likely for such cultural traits to gravitate towards a self-supporting, symbiotic dynamic.
The powerful synergies that are formed between the cognitive, social, and cultural levels and between the various morphological features that constitute each level create a powerful sense of a “world” or a cultural temperament that takes over and informs our activities, dispositions, and institutions. The field of cybernetics has explored this topic in detail, demonstrating that complex systems contain feedback loops such that various components of the system inform and reinforce each other, thereby infusing the system
with a strong sense of coherence. This brings to mind Clifford Geertz’ famous definition of religion in which he states:

religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.993

Geertz hints at the powerful ability of symbols to infuse our “worlds” with a sense of the “really real,” which in turn makes our symbolic world feel authentic and profoundly significant. If fact, the world that cultural system create are so powerful that they profoundly alter who we are, our thoughts, skills, yearnings, and motivations. This has been supported by research in social psychology where it has been demonstrated that while personal choice in individualistic societies improves performances, it does not improve performance among individuals in cultures that conform to the model of social embeddedness.994 This suggests that when one is caught up in the matrix of a communally oriented culture, not only will the community discourage personal autonomy, but the

994 Sheena S. Iyengar and Mark Lepper, “Rethinking the Value of Choice: A Cultural Perspective on Intrinsic Motivation,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 76, no. 3 (1999): 349-66. Iyengar and Lepper, “When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?” Journal of personality and Social Psychology 79, no. 6 (2000): 995-1006; Sheena Iyengar, The Art of Choosig (New York, NY: Twelve, 2010); Miyamoto and Ji argue something similar when they note: “power was associated with an analytic, focused perceptual style, possibly because such an analytic perceptual style serves cultural imperatives to pursue self-defined goals independently from social contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This pattern was absent or weakly reversed in Japan, where the primary imperative—to fulfill socially prescribed roles and fit into social contexts—may require people to attend to and process contextual information even when they exert power over others.” see “Power Fosters Context-Independent, Analytic Cognition,” pp. 1456.
facts on the ground will convince individuals that personal choice is not at all conducive to success. Said differently, the type of people communal (synthetic) cultures “manufacture” are ones that are unable to translate personal autonomy into benefit in performance. This also means that individuals will be encouraged to operate within communal boundaries not out of blind conformity, but out of sheer self-interest. The system on all levels is simply not geared to certain types of behavior. Social structures, human cognition, and cultural norms are all organized in an interlocking relationship that will impose constraints on certain inclinations and modes of behavior.

Another way of understanding the symbiotic nature of cultural systems is by illustrating the incommensurability of synthetic and analytic features. In other words, a hypothetical culture composed of a combination of synthetic and analytic characteristics will fail to coalesce into a robust and long-standing system. The lack of an internal coherence will deem such a system internally vulnerable, and incapable of organizing into a self-supporting constellation. Consider a hypothetical system that conforms to the analytic mode of operation with two exceptions; instead of social autonomy it will conform to social embeddedness and instead of de-contextualization, it will adhere to the synthetic tendency towards the contextualization of information. The result will be a dynamic of opposing cultural forces that will create irresolvable contradictions and result in social instability. In other words, the ethos of social embeddedness, family cohesion, and filial piety, and the emphasis on procreation is diametrically opposed to the analytic stress on contemplative seclusion, monasticism, celibacy, and other-worldliness. Similarly, the synthetic propensity towards contextualization does not conform to the
analytic prioritization of universalistic cosmologies that highlight cross-cultural and pan-human commonalities. The combination of analytic and synthetic features will lead to a dissonance that is simply unsustainable. The organization of analytic features gives rise to constraints that will preclude the possibility of opposing synthetic tendencies.

*Diagram 5: The Incompatibility of the Analytic and Synthetic Modalities*

Cultures will not form into a combination of analytic and synthetic sensibilities because the idea of self-organization is such that systems tend to eliminate contradictory
tendencies and irregularities. All systems, both natural, and I believe cultural as well, gravitate towards effective solutions and equilibrium; Terrence Deacon refers to this as an inherent proclivity in systems to reach as state of a ‘least-discordant-remainder.’

Once a certain cultural tendency becomes dominant it begins to bias a system towards a certain logic of operation that will seek to organize in the least discordant fashion such that contradictory features will be eliminated.

I argue that the incommensurability between the analytic and synthetic modes of operation means that in order to avoid instability, cultural systems will tend to gravitate towards one temperament or the other. This further illustrates why analytic traditions posed such a threat to the Confucian and Jewish traditions. The adoption of analytic elements is impossible without a radical restructuring of a tradition, which ultimately entails its transformation beyond recognition. As I have shown, even radical periods of morphogenesis and change do not shift a system away from its native physiognomy. Traditions will vigorously resist over-stepping the limits of their tolerance for change such that alterations in important features will be accepted for the sake of defending more

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995 This is a tricky concept that forces us to look not at what is present but at what transpires once contradictions are eliminated. According to Deacon “it’s not so much what was determined to happen that is most relevant for future states of the system, but rather what was not cancelled or eliminated. It is the negative aspect that becomes most prominent. This is the most general sense of constitutive absence: something that is produced by virtue of determinate processes that eliminate most or all of the alternative forms.” As in all complex systems, cultures tend to coalesce into what is left once contradictions are eliminated. See Terrence Deacon, “Emergence: The Hole At the Wheel’s Hub,” in *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis From Science to Religion*, edited by Philip Clayton and Paul Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 143-144. In his seminal article on self-organization, Ross Ashby claimed: “thus the presence of “organization” between variables is equivalent to the existence of a constraint in the product-space of the possibilities… whence comes this product space? Its chief peculiarity is that it contains more than actually exists in the real physical world, for it is the latter that gives us the actual, constrained subset.” Ross Ashby, “Principles of the Self-Organizing System,” p. 257.
basic ones. Rappaport claimed that the fundamental question to ask about any evolutionary change is “what does this change maintain unchanged?” He goes on to argue that “modifications or transformations in the descriptions of substructures may preserve unchanged the truth value of more fundamental propositions concerning the system as a whole in the face of changes in conditions threatening to falsify them.” My argument here is that those “more fundamental truths,” which reflect the limits of a system’s tolerance for change are represented by the morphological organization of a tradition, be it synthetic or analytic.

5.5 THE PERVASIVENESS AND COMPLEX NATURE OF BINARIES

My goal in this final chapter is to challenge the idea that binaries are in anyway simplistic. As trivial as it may sound, the only way we understand things is by conceptualizing them in contrast to their opposition; we cannot understand of even begin to explain what the term complexity means without somehow referring to simplicity, and in order to define the idea of darkness we would inevitably have to explain it in terms of the lack of light. Binaries represent the boundaries of human conceptualization; they are inevitable and absolutely crucial for framing the limits of our discourses, perceptions, and desires. The importance of binaries has not escaped the attention of philosophers and

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997 Laozi has beautifully captured the idea of binaries as the outcome of the limits of human conceptualization: “all in the world know the beauty of the beautiful, and in doing this they have (the idea of) what ugliness is. So it is that existence and non-existence give birth the one to (the idea of) the other; that difficulty and ease produce the one (the idea of) the other; that length and shortness fashion out the one the figure of the other; that (the ideas of) height and lowness arise
scientists. From the Yijing to Hegel, from Leibniz to Structuralists, all the way to modern binary code, and neurology, binaries have never ceased to intrigue thinkers throughout the ages. In the cultural arena, binaries are not only apparent between what I called analytic and synthetic cultures but are also existent within the confines of these modes of operation. I have already mentioned that within the synthetic ethos of the Chinese tradition, analytic strands of thought were relatively marginal but nevertheless discernible. Similarly, the mainstream of analytic thought in post-enlightenment Europe was frequently challenged by a romantic and more synthetic position. Binaries are therefore multi-layered; they exist within each other leading to striking complexity both in nature and culture. Binary tensions become exceptionally clear in politics, where parties tend to converge into left/right, democratic/republican or progressive and conservative camps. The United States is a good representation of such a binary system in which policies advocated by smaller parties are usually adopted or integrated by the two major parties that dominate the political landscape. Although bi-partisanship is seen as an ideal, left/right affiliations remain important and real. Political systems that are based on multiple parties similarly tend to split into fairly clear right and left distinctions. Moreover, single party systems are no exception; the Chinese communist party has always disclosed a very distinct and at times extremely violent factionalism between

from the contrast of the one with the other; that the musical notes and tones become harmonious through the relation of one with another; and that being before and behind give the idea of one following another.” Laozi Ch.2: 天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已。皆知善之為善，斯不善已。故有無相生，難易相成，長短相較，高下相傾，音聲相和，前後相隨。是以聖人處無為之事，行不言之教；萬物作焉而不辭，生而不有。為而不恃，功成而弗居。夫唯弗居，是以不去。998 American political culture also discloses a typical internal tension within each camp such as in the case of hardline conservatives (Tea Party?) and more moderate conservatives.
radicals and moderates. In fact, the Chinese case is telling, since it shows that traditions that try to present a unified facade inevitably fragment into contending ideological poles.

Binaries form in intellectual discourses between Platonists and Aristotelians, between rationalists and empiricists, idealists and materialists, realists and nominalists, and perennialists and postmodernists. In spite of substantial differences between various social, intellectual, and political environments, common to all of them is the frequency of binary tensions. That there exists a variety of possibilities between oppositions should not divert us from the fact that most systems show a proclivity towards forming two central positions that dominate their environments.\textsuperscript{999} Scholars of culture have long been aware of confronting cultural dispositions that are apparent between Eastern and Western traditions. As I have noted in the methodological chapter, various thinkers have referred to these distinctions using different terms such as analytic, paradigmatic, and rational on the one hand, and narrative, holistic or synthetic on the other. Moreover, research in social psychology and cross-cultural psychology has confirmed these dichotomies, showing that modes of cognition in various Asian and Western cultures disclose a clear conformance to what many have termed analytic and holistic thought. In spite of this pervasiveness, binaries have been constantly attacked—most lately by postmodernism—

\textsuperscript{999} The tendency towards the formation of polarities in cultures may be related to the limited capacity of cultural systems to sustain a large number of ideologies. An exaggerated number of positions leads to potential social instability. The tendency of cultures to gravitate towards a relatively stable equilibrium can therefore be seen as a mechanism for the elimination of the destabilizing effects of exaggerated diversity. For more on this topic see Randall Collins, \textit{The Sociology of Philosophies}, (1998).
as simplistic and totalizing. Indeed, when used irresponsibly binaries can lead to very problematic generalizations, but this should not stop us from probing into their nature.

Why then do traditional cultures tend to organize according to the synthetic or analytic modes of operation? Why such a limited set of options? I will offer an example from nature, one that has been used by Terrance Deacon to explain how order emerges out of disorder. Although Deacon’s solution was devised for systems in nature, it might help us understand something about culture as well. Picture a large stone in the center of a river. The water flowing down the river and on both sides of the stone will collide and form eddies, or little whirlpools, right behind the stone. “Before” the eddies are formed, the currents from both sides of the stone collide, creating random contradictions of opposing or undermining forces. What leads order to emerge out of this chaotic interplay of forces is nature’s inherent tendency towards economy and regularity. In our case, such economy is reflected by the way nature resolves the irregularities of different currents of water by self-organizing into a dynamic pattern - a whirlpool. This is nature’s way of efficiently dissipating an otherwise chaotic interaction of contradictory forces thereby reaching a more energy effective pattern of regularity. What happens is that opposing forces of water currents will at some point show a slight bias towards one direction or another. This is what I referred to as an attractor state, which will lead various oppositional forces to slowly align themselves with that initial bias. Once enough force has gravitated towards the direction of the initial bias the system will enter into a whirlpool motion. To the question, why a whirlpool? Deacon’s answer is that “the

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dynamical geometry of the whirlpool affords one of the few ways that the constant instabilities can most consistently compensate for one another.” In other words, the whirlpool is first and foremost an outcome of what is not there, it is the ‘least discordant remainder’ of otherwise energy consuming irregularities and contradictory forces. Therefore, the order that emerged is the result of the elimination of disorder and the canceling out of contradictions.

Pertinent to our discussion is that Deacon shows that while irregularities and chaos can manifest themselves in an almost endless range of possibilities, regularities take the shape of a restricted number of possibilities and are actually fairly rare. Regularities are rare because somewhat counter-intuitively, nature offers a very restricted number of “architectures that are not self-undermining.” Indeed, if we take the example of spiral shapes or whirlpools, we will realize that they tend to reappear all over; we see them in our bathroom sinks when we drain the water, in various forms of vegetation, in shells, in endless different types of animal horns, in weather systems, and in the shapes of galaxies. This is because the unique shape of a spiral is an efficient structural solution for the emergence of order out of disorder, a solution for the elimination of undermining irregular forces. Other examples can be seen in the relatively restricted number of geometrical shapes that reappear in snowflakes, stones, beehives, and salt crystals. Similarly, organic patterns with an identical ratio of bifurcation reoccur in plant roots, lightning formations, river networks, and lung structures. Although all these shapes manifest themselves in different materials and substantially different scales

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1001 Terrence Deacon, “Emergence: The Hole At the Wheel’s Hub,” pp. 120-121.
1002 Ibid., pp. 120.
they nevertheless share a similar, almost identical recursive pattern. The awesome diversity of nature, in other words, can be reduced to a fairly limited number of regular structures that disclose an efficiency in bringing undermining irregularities to a state of order. It is not surprising that as the perceptive Goethe was immersed in nature he became gradually convinced that he found the prototype plant structure that stood at the foundation of all plants. Indeed, morphology can be seen as the field that attempts to make sense of these recurring patterns.

These analogies from nature bring us a step closer to understanding why cultures tend to confine themselves to a fairly limited number of structural possibilities. Like recurring patterns in nature, cultures have a limited number of options to form into robust and stable states of homeostasis. The synthetic and analytic modalities are efficient ways of “doing culture,” such that humans, ideas, social structures, and institutions operate coherently without undermining each other. This might be confusing in light of our constant fascination with the mind-boggling diversity of cultures. One of the reasons the field of anthropology was the main force behind the anti-comparative attack was because anthropologists became all too aware of cultural variation. In their detailed fieldwork, they developed a keen sensitivity to how unique different traditions and societies were. This new appreciation of uniqueness clashed with the simplistic Western categorization of thousands of sub-traditions as “African” or “Oriental.” Ethnographers began to highlight the substantial distinctions between various societies, even neighboring tribes. The postmodern contribution to intellectual discourse has been a sobering and humanizing development. It has enabled us to problematize sweeping categories and
appreciate the nuance of being, but it also diverted our attention from general patterns. One of the central arguments of this study is that behind the awesome diversity of the human “ethno-sphere” there exists a limited number of structural possibilities for doing culture. I believe that the methodology I am offering can provide a more convincing response to those who have vehemently attacked cross-cultural patterns as totalizing and impressionistic.

I will refrain from determining whether the analytic and synthetic modalities are the only ways to construct culture, but I would venture to argue that they are certainly the two most pervasive possibilities. As argued, this binary approach does not undermine the existence of diversity. It is important to remember that there is a vast number of cultural variations that can take place within each modality. The fact that traditions as different as Rabbinic Judaism and Confucianism conform to the same synthetic mode of operation highlights the great range of possibilities that the category “synthetic” can encompass.

The diversity of possibilities within each morphological modality is an outcome of a complex interaction of a large host of cultural, social, cognitive, environmental, and even genetic variables. These differences together with the almost endless configuration in which they manifest themselves, lead to an exponential growth in diversity, which in turns leads to the development of cultures that seem drastically dissimilar in spite of their common morphological foundations.

Diversity within a common morphological modality brings us back to the analogy I drew between cultural systems and the notion of gene expression in epigenetics. Just as identical genes have the ability to express themselves differently as result of varying
environmental conditions, so do cultures express their morphological physiognomy differently depending on context. Among the synthetic morphological features of the Confucian tradition, we find that the tension between world-affirming and world-negating tendencies became much more central than it was in Judaism. This is related to the unique cultural and intellectual circumstances in which Confucians and Buddhists operated. Kabbalists, on the other hand, were concerned with a different set of dilemmas; their response to philosophy was particularly focused on the normative and ontological status of the commandments, and by extension, the need to highlight the particularistic features of Judaism vis-à-vis Greek thought or other traditions. Therefore, in the confrontation between the synthetic and analytic modalities, Kabbalists and Neo-Confucians expressed their synthetic morphology differently. Expressing the same synthetic physiognomy in divergent ways can also take place within the same morphological attribute. As I have showed, although the Confucian and Rabbinic traditions certainly conformed to the model of social embeddedness, each tradition expressed this structural trait differently. While Confucianism constructed a highly hierarchical social structure, the Rabbinic tradition was far more egalitarian. This is an example of how traditions that belong to the same morphological category, in this case synthetic, disclose different variations or “expressions” of common structural characteristics. The detection of variation within the same comparative category is essential to the comparative project as an ongoing process of refinement. Here I am

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1003 Yao Xinzhong seems to agree when he claims that Jews are all one under god (egalitarianism) while in China what is equal to everyone is the fact that each needs to follow his role (hierarchal). The hierarchal structure in Judaism may exist to a certain degree but social distinctions are nevertheless mild in contrast to the highly stratified Chinese model. Yao, op. cit., pp. 148-9.
following Robert Neville’s comparative methodology in which relatively broad and intentionally “vulnerable” comparative categories are gradually refined through a process of escalating specificity.\textsuperscript{1004} J.Z. Smith offers a similar methodological corrective to comparative categories when he suggests “four moments in the comparative enterprise: description, comparison, redescription, and rectification.”\textsuperscript{1005} In our case the highly generalized and vague category of “social embeddedness,” to which both the Chinese and Jewish traditions conform, is refined so that a higher level of specificity is reached, namely, egalitarian embeddedness and hierarchical embeddedness.

Although binaries entail a certain form of reductionism, they should not be seen as simplistic. The binary morphology this study proposes seeks to point our attention to pervasive structural patterns that stand at the foundation of cultural variation. The morphological dichotomies between the synthetic and analytic modes of operation are not rigid but rather flexible and continuous. Distinctions such as analytic vs. synthetic forms of cognition, social autonomy vs. social embeddedness, universalism vs. particularism, and all the other dyads that set the two modalities apart should be conceived as a continuum stretching between two extremes that can be expressed to various degrees. This is also true in respect to the modalities as a whole; cultures can disclose extreme forms of an analytic or synthetic morphology and they can also disclose more moderate expressions of these morphologies. The binary distinction is nevertheless important because as long as a culture is synthetic or analytic it will disclose a self-supporting

\textsuperscript{1005} J.Z. Smith, “The “End” of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification,” in \textit{A Magic Still Dwells}, p. 239.
dynamic of the morphological features that belong to that specific mode of operation.

That fact that cultures resist a combination of synthetic and analytic features shows that binaries are important for understanding two fundamentally distinct cultural temperaments.

5.6 CONCLUSION

5.6.1 Further Methodological Applications

The binary morphology I have introduced in this study can have a host of applications in the study of religion and culture. It would be interesting to explore the first phase of morphogenesis in the Jewish and Chinese traditions; namely, the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the second Temple, and the establishment of Confucianism as state orthodoxy during the Han dynasty. I think that exploring these periods will enable us to probe deeper into the nature of the axial age, its relationship with literacy, the rise of new elites, and the decline of old ones. Other fascinating examples to explore will be the bifurcation of Second Temple Judaism and Christianity, and the similar division of the Hindu traditions and Buddhism. Applying genetic morphology to these periods can enhance our understanding of the way sub-systems (the Christian movement and the early Buddhist Sangha) overstepped the capacity of their original traditions to tolerate change, thereby embarking on a new path that led to the birth of the first universal religions.\textsuperscript{1006} Such an analysis can perhaps shed light on how cultural systems divide into independent entities. Another interesting case to explore is

\textsuperscript{1006} The universalism of Christianity and Buddhism originated in universal currents that were native to Judaism and Hinduism respectively.
the emergence of rational thought in Greece, a development that has been associated with
the reaction of new philosophically inclined elites against the old aristocracy that was
more closely associated with Homeric thought. This historical period may give us more
information about the reasons and processes that led to the emergence of the first full-
fledged analytic tradition. Finally, it will also be interesting to explore Islam, a religion
that has stubbornly eluded traditional typologies of religion. Of special interest would
be to follow the shift from Islam’s highly analytic worldview during the Muslim golden
age and its slow retreat back to its native geographical origins together with its
subsequent shift towards a more synthetic worldview. Interestingly, in spite of Islam’s
synthetic characteristics, it retained many central traits of the analytic modality, most
notably its commitment to universal dissemination. This ambivalence may be one of the
reasons that Islam has resisted so many different classifications. Genetic morphology can
help us better understand some of these idiosyncrasies.

A more general application of morphology could further explore the relationship
between power and the emergence of analytic paradigms. This naturally leads one to ask
what types of traditions tend to remain within a synthetic mode of operation. As I
tentatively argued, I believe that each mode of operation is efficient at achieving different
cultural goal; while analytic traditions have the capacity to efficiently impose cultural
agendas on foreign populations, synthetic traditions are structured in a fashion that is
conducive to the preservation of data, the perpetuation of traditional narratives, and a

For a good discussion on the ambiguity of categorizing Islam see Tomoko Masuzawa, The
Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language
more defensive position with respect to foreign elements. The synthetic worldview spends most of its energy on reality-maintenance; this does not preclude great creativity, but innovations will tend to respond to practical needs rather than satisfy theoretical and intellectual curiosity. This can be linked in interesting ways to questions about the expenditure and conservation of energy and their relation to the accomplishment of divergent cultural tasks.

It is important to note that the specific way I have presented the synthetic and analytic modalities is mostly relevant to pre-modern societies. In order for these distinctions to remain instrumental in the contemporary world, we need to re-articulate them in modern, secular terms. In other words, the synthetic/analytic distinction I proposed for the analysis of medieval societies was expressed in theological terms that were relevant to a pre-secular worldview. Although distinctions I made on the cognitive and social levels remain fairly unchanged, distinctions on the cultural level are no longer relevant or central to a modern context. For example, a dichotomy such as this-worldliness vs. other-worldliness is far less important today than it was in the past. The synthetic/analytic contrast, if applied to the present can be an efficient tool for understanding quintessential differences between traditionalist and religious communities which will usually conform to a synthetic worldview, and secular progressive communities and scientific materialists who will tend to be more analytic. Our pluralistic modern age also gave rise to interesting combination of synthetic and analytic dispositions that were not possible, or at least very rare, in the pre-modern world. One such example are libertarians; applying morphology to explore the unique physiognomy
of such ideologies can shed light on new structural possibilities that were made possible by modernism.

The morphological method can also help us become aware of the qualitative differences between characteristics that are known to be ubiquitous to all religious traditions. For example, ritual is known to be a common structural component or institution in all religions. A central misconception morphology can underscore is that Confucian and Rabbinic ritualism are not merely quantitatively distinct from conceptions of ritual in other major tradition. In other words, since many scholars have shown that ritual is a pervasive and universal phenomenon, they are led to believe that traditions such as Confucianism or Judaism simply do more of it. What morphology can help us demonstrate is that the function of ritual in synthetic cultures is both quantitatively as well as qualitatively different than its function in analytic traditions. Scholars frequently resort to the Confucian and Jewish traditions as quintessential examples of highly ritualized systems, but they seldom explain why they share a proclivity towards ritualization. Analyzing ritual using morphology can give us a clearer idea of how ritualism and embodied knowledge are developed and function within an interrelated web of isomorphic morphological features, and how their function is qualitatively different from those in analytical traditions where ritual was relatively marginalized in favor of different strategies of meaning. As a preview, ritual in synthetic traditions is far more concerned with the establishment of differences and the reinforcement of internal cohesion, whereas ritual in analytic traditions is more frequently a vessel of theological meaning and a channel for the communication of ideas. Ritual can take on different forms
in both the synthetic and analytic traditions, but the stress these traditions laid on one form or another is nevertheless significant. When we appreciate ideas and modes of behavior within the larger context of symbiotic relationships, we can begin to see how universal traits common to all religious traditions manifests function in completely different ways.

Finally, there are several places in which morphology as a methodology for cultural analysis can be improved. I am certain that additional categories can be proposed to my differentiation between the analytic and synthetic modes of operation, and there are certainly ways to further refine the categories I have already introduced.

5.7 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

This dissertation aimed to achieve several objectives. I conclude by listing what I believe to be the main contributions of this study.

5.7.1 A Systematic Distinction between Synthetic and Analytic Modes of Operation

This study established a more methodical and multi-layered understanding of what it means to operate according to the synthetic and analytic modes of operation. Although similar distinctions have been made by scholars in the past, most of these contrasts lack a clear methodology and tend to focus of the domain of cognition. In contrast, I have provided a more systematic interpretation of the way the synthetic and analytic worldviews apply to entire cultural complexes, including cognition, social structures, cultural temperaments, linguistic orientation, and the relation of these
characteristics to the peculiar historical environments in which they operated. I based my distinctions between the analytic and synthetic worldviews on insights provided by scholars from a broad range of disciplines. I believe that the data strongly supports my position that structural patterns should be an important consideration in our analysis of cultures and religions.

5.7.2 Challenging Traditional Taxonomies in the Study of Religion

The categorization of the Jewish and Chinese traditions as synthetic, and the Greek and Indian traditions as analytic, challenges traditional classification in the study of religion and culture. The very common distinction between Eastern and Western traditions has the obvious disadvantage of pigeonholing traditions as dissimilar as Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism into the same family of religions. Similarly, the idea of Western religions ignores the fact that monotheistic traditions can operate according to diverse cultural sensibilities. In contrast, the classification of traditions according to the synthetic/analytic distinction sheds light on a whole new set of cultural qualities that are otherwise much harder to recognize. It reorients our understanding of East and West and helps us see the nuance that exists within these traditional classifications. A few examples should suffice to highlight the instrumentality of a morphological typology. The analytic/synthetic distinction emphasizes the radical transformation that took place in monotheism as Christianity began to operate in a Greek intellectual environment. The shift from Judaism to Christianity reflects a unique moment in which monotheism shifts from a synthetic physiognomy to an analytic one. Exploring
the way synthetic and analytic cultures interpret a common religious tradition can offer us a fresh perspective for understanding Judaism and Christianity.

In the Chinese case, scholars have often drawn parallels between Neo-Confucianism and Greek thought, especially Platonism. Although such parallels are not misplaced, they fail to point out that these ‘strange’ resemblances were not a matter of coincidence and certainly not anything enigmatic, but rather a result of the impact of Buddhism, which shares similar analytic features with the philosophical Greek tradition. Claiming that Neo-Confucianism discloses similarities with Greek rational thought ignores the real origins of this resemblance. The fact that Chinese schools of Buddhism have undergone an intense process of sinicization has obscured the impact of analytic Indian thought on late medieval Chinese philosophy. The “Platonic” features of Neo-Confucianism are therefore mainly a result of a restricted number of conceptual possibilities to which analytically inclined theologies tend to gravitate. Therefore, the Indian worldview has led Neo-Confucianism to develop along lines that are extremely reminiscent of Greek thought. Although scholars have duly recognized the common Indo-European roots of the Greek and Indian traditions, they have tended to ignore the great potential that an in-depth exploration of these commonalities can offer our analysis of Hinduism, Greek thought, Christianity, and especially the transformations that Buddhism has experienced as it was implanted in different cultural environments.

Finally, the connection the synthetic classification establishes between Judaism and China can help scholars make sense of a host of similarities, some of which were formerly detected, but never set in a more systematic methodology. I believe that the
Rabbinic and Confucian traditions are the best examples we have of synthetic axial age traditions that have persevered to the present. A more in-depth comparative analysis of these traditions can help us further explore the nature of synthetic traditions, their central cultural tasks, their unique approaches to authority, and their ongoing resistance to the onslaught of analytic paradigms. The fact that the Jewish and Chinese traditions operated in such dramatically divergent contexts is actually an advantage since commonalities are more likely to be a result of their similar morphology than an outcome of sheer coincidences. In the course of my research, the comparative analysis of the Jewish and Chinese traditions has frequently helped me notice aspects that would have otherwise seem trivial and unimportant. The traditional tendency to contrast China and the West can therefore benefit from information originating in the Jewish tradition, just as understanding Judaism can be enriched by data from the Chinese tradition. Placing Judaism and the Chinese tradition in the same synthetic category, and the Greco-Christian and indo-Buddhist traditions in a similar analytic category, completely problematizes traditional East-West distinctions and offers a new typology for the analysis of religion and culture.

5.7.3 Systems Theory in the Humanities

Due to the complex nature of cultures, the application of systems theory to concrete traditions and real historical circumstances has been extremely rare. Although there have been attempts at applying systems theory to religion, most notably Roy Rappaport’s important *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* and several works
by Niklas Luhmann, as far as I am aware no one has attempted a detailed systems
analysis of a religious tradition over an extended period of time, let alone a comparative
systems analysis. Instead, most applications of systems theory have been based on
abstract generalizations, computational models, or the use of piecemeal observations
from different historical instances and unrelated situations. This highly theoretical
approach makes it extremely difficult to understand how hypotheses transpire in reality.
The absence of historical grounding also leaves theorists with a lack of data for correcting
and fine-tuning their initial assumptions. It is for these reasons that focusing on a
continuous, diachronic analysis of two specific traditions at a critical moment in their
respective histories becomes so helpful. This study has explored cultural systems in real
life as they developed and evolved throughout time. It has provided a relatively thick
description of the social, political, and economic conditions that informed Neo-
Confucians and Kabbalists in their confrontation with Buddhism and Greek thought
respectively.

There are two central advantages to the historical approach to systems theory. The
first has already been mentioned; the fact that pre-modern societies were both less
complex and far more centralized than their modern counterparts provides us with a rare

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1008 Notable applications of systems theory to religion include, Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of
(Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Idem., “Ritual Sanctity and
Emergent Theory of Religious Communities,” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2011); Francisca
Cho and Richard King Squier, “Religion as a Complex and Dynamic System.”
glimpse into cultural systems that operated on a relatively intelligible level of complexity. The historical material provides us with a fairly reliable picture of the socio-economic conditions of the time, the channels through which information reached centers of control, and the way traditions stored, processed, and reacted to this information. We have data about contending factions and ideologies, their members and positions, and their anxieties regarding the paradigms with which they were grappling. In other words, centralization as well as relatively simple modes of communication during the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah provides us with the type of accessibility that is highly informative for grounding a systems approach in concrete historical data. The second advantage of focusing on this specific historical period is that we are able to explore a unique phase of transformation. Such dramatic structural shifts in traditions bring the salient features of cultural systems into sharper relief. Said differently, periods of morphogenesis provide us with the ability to contrast unprecedented historical changes with periods of relative stability. Exploring this rare historical moment in which a tradition restructures itself is invaluable for understanding the dynamics of complex cultural systems as they adapt to changing conditions.

The comparative nature of this study is yet another advantage since it enhances our ability to identify generalizations in the expected behavior of systems. In other words, the concordance between Chinese and Jewish modes of operation with the predicted patterns characteristic of complex adaptive systems functions as a strong indication that we are dealing with more than just coincidences. The triangulation of data between two distinct traditions together with an understanding of the way complex systems behave
provides us with additional points of reference for the verification of data as well as a better idea of where to look for significant details. One of my main objectives is to demonstrate that the combination of comparative religion with a diachronic, binary morphological approach to systems theory can provide us with a powerful framework for the analysis of culture.

5.7.4 The Integration of Diachronic and Synchronic Approaches to the Study of Religion

One of the major tensions in the study of religion has been between historians and phenomenologists. This study tries to offer a way to integrate these frequently opposing approaches; it does so by arguing the existence of cross-cultural patterns, but simultaneously claiming that such patterns undergo subtle alterations in respect to changing environmental conditions. Such an approach enables us to use historical analysis as a potent tool for penetrating the nature of robust cultural structures as they adjust and adapt to shifting contexts. Instead of arguing for static categories using a synchronic methodology, genetic morphology stresses the dynamic nature of pervasive cultural patterns, thereby dissolving the traditional tension between historical narratives and structuralism. While synchronic approaches tended to emphasize singular patterns, genetic morphology creates a binary distinction that highlights differences both between synthetic and analytic traditions as well as differences between traditions that subscribe to the same modality. Such an approach created a complementary relationship between history and structuralism or phenomenology. The term genetic-morphology, genetic
being diachronic and morphology being synchronic, tries to capture this synthesis of approaches towards the analysis of culture.

5.7.5 A New Understanding of the Rise of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah

In this study I have provided a fairly detailed investigation of the emergence of the schools of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism. The comparative nature of this analysis forced me to go into considerable length in order to provide non-specialist readers with a clear picture of traditions with which they may not be familiar. In what follows I will provide a brief summary of the parallels this study has identified between the Chinese and Jewish traditions and the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah:

1) The classical Jewish and Chinese traditions conform to the synthetic mode of operation as demonstrated in the second chapter. Judaism entered a state of homeostasis during the first and second centuries with the establishment of the Rabbinic tradition and the emergence of the Mishnah and Talmud as its representative literature. The Chinese tradition entered a period of homeostasis during the early Han dynasty in the second century BCE with the establishment of Confucianism and the Five Classics as state orthodoxy.

2) Orthodox Confucianism and Judaism persevered as homeostatic synthetic paradigms until approximately the tenth century, after which both traditions were destabilized by the growing popularity of foreign systems of thought.
3) The Buddhist and Greek traditions by which Confucianism and Judaism were destabilized respectively, share an Indo-European ancestry and conform to the analytic mode of operation as demonstrated in the second chapter.

4) Buddhism and Greek philosophy flourished in environments that were dominated by powerful cosmopolitan empires, economic prosperity, technological advancement, and unprecedented cultural confidence.

5) As a result of prosperity, both the Jewish and Chinese traditions experienced the emergence of a new middle class of prosperous and educated people that were attracted by the foreign analytic paradigms that began to dominate their respective environments. The main carriers of these increasingly popular analytic paradigms were members of new elites that were excluded from traditional communal leadership.

6) Due to acute cultural pressures the Jewish and Chinese traditions were forced to undergo extreme adjustments. The periods of cultural crisis that ensued represent a shift from a state of homeostasis to a state of morphogenesis.

7) The immediate consequences of these crises were the proliferation of contending ideologies and the weakening of traditional authority.

8) One of the most apparent signs of the decline in central authority was unprecedented criticism against the classical corpus of both traditions; the Five Classics and the Talmud.

9) The process of morphogenesis begins with a strong push for change by progressive factions. In China this was represented by the New Policies in the political sphere, and the growing institutionalization of Buddhism and its increasing influence.
upon commoners, elites, court literati, and emperors. In Judaism, a progressive agenda was promoted by rational philosophers of various schools.

10) Once the influence of analytic tendencies reached a climax, a counter-reaction of conservative schools gained momentum. In both cases the beginning of the conservative reactions was contemporaneous with critical moments of crisis such as the collapse of the Northern Song in China and the Maimonidean controversies in the Jewish world.

11) The initial phase of the conservative reaction was characterized by a fairly direct emulation of analytic ideas followed by a more creative reinterpretation of these ideas in terms drawn from a synthetic mindset.

12) The victorious schools in both traditions were conservative factions—the Neo-Confucian schools of Principle and theurgic Kabbalah—which slowly gained the support of traditional authorities and commoners.

13) Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists were successful in creating an impression of a seamless continuity with the traditions of the past.

14) Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah managed to successfully integrate analytic elements into the classical Confucian and Rabbinic traditions respectively, and subordinate those borrowings to a more radical and updated synthetic worldview.

15) This dynamic of appropriation of analytic elements and their subordination to synthetic characteristics enabled Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah to establish a long standing compatibility with their greater traditions.
16) Both groups disclosed strong anti-foreign sentiments, and in spite of their conservative streaks, promoted radically innovative forms of exegesis and a revolutionary worldview.

17) The Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic paradigms were encapsulated in a new locus of information; the Four Books and the Zohar. These new literatures were gradually acknowledged as part of their traditions’ official canon.

18) Among the main characteristics of the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic projects were a) the construction of more systematic worldviews b) the shift towards the construction of a new metaphysics c) the anchoring of Confucian and Rabbinic ethics in these new metaphysical conceptions d) The re-articulation of traditional ritual according to new modes of thought e) the construction of a more accessible theology, and e) the creation of new procedures for individual self-realization.

19) The establishment of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah as orthodoxies represents the gradual decline of Buddhism and philosophy in the Chinese and Jewish traditions respectively.

20) The eventual emergence of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism as orthodox schools together with the institutionalization of the Zohar and the Four Books as extensions to traditional canon, represented the gradual return of the Jewish and Chinese traditions to a state of homeostasis and stability.

21) On a more general sociological note, the emergence of new elites as a result of a prosperous, tolerant, and cosmopolitan environment required the Jewish and Chinese traditions to devise a form of theology that could serve these new populations. At their
very foundation, Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism can be seen as systems of thought that sought to furnish a new middle class with a more challenging cultural paradigm, one that could offer a native alternative to analytic systems.

5.7.6 The Significance of Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism

An important objective of this study has been to understand the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah from a new perspective. The methodology I have proposed has analyzed these schools in relation to their greater traditions as well as their hostile external environments. This methodology sought to explore the structural foundations of these cultural systems, their constituent parts, the dynamic interaction of those parts, the function of information in terms of textuality, the function of information in framing the boundaries of traditions, the ability of cultural systems to change and adapt according to discernible pattern, and the relationship of all these factors to the historical environments of the Jewish and Chinese traditions between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. I have also tried to clarify the relationship between the projection of power and tensions between synthetic and analytic paradigms. This more methodic perspective can help us understand the Neo-Confucian and Kabbalistic phenomena in the broad context of the formation and evolution of culture. Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism should therefore be seen as defense theologies or adaptive mechanism that complex cultures are capable of launching at times of acute environmental pressures. The two schools are fascinating examples of the ability of cultural systems to withstand radical change. Framed in terms of Rappaport’s question “What does this change maintain unchanged?”
Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah enabled the Chinese and Jewish traditions to preserve their respective traditional ways of life. I see two interrelated features that these defense theologies sought to defend: the first was the earlier textual layers of the Rabbinic and Confucian traditions. The Talmud and the Five Classics were provided with an extension that satisfied certain populations that would have otherwise been antagonistic to the orthodox tradition that excluded their participation. The fact that the Zohar and the Four Books provided new elites with a suitable paradigm meant that former pressures and criticisms against the traditional canon were to a great extent removed. The new textual layers provided both traditions with a greater division of labor, in which different texts were oriented towards different types of religious discourses. Most importantly, those discourses could take place in a complementary fashion without undermining each other.

The second factor is related to the first; conserving and enriching a culture’s informational resources enabled the Jewish and Confucian traditions to preserve their native synthetic morphology. Therefore, the extreme and unsettling changes introduced by Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists enabled their respective traditions to preserve their traditional characteristics and thereby resist the dangers of mass conversion in the Jewish case, and the Buddhist conquest of China in the case of Confucianism.

I have spoken extensively about the new analytic features that Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah appropriated from Buddhism and Greek philosophy respectively. Due to these borrowings, the two schools injected the Confucian and Rabbinic traditions with a heightened sense of spirituality that was far less discernible prior to their emergence. Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah devised religious discourse that transcended the
pragmatic domain of legalism, administration, and rulership. Both schools introduced a
spiritual layer that functioned as an extension to the more pragmatic, socio-political
concerns of the classical Confucian and Rabbinic traditions. This idealism was reflected
in two central domains; the methodical treatment of the personal and cognitive facets of
human experience, which were prior, so to speak, to the traditional socio-political sphere,
and the construction of a revolutionary cosmology that transcended the socio-political
sphere. This enabled Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah to create a link between the
cognitive, socio-political, and metaphysical levels of reality that was crucial for the
typical medieval search for unity. This came at a time in which synthetic traditions
became aware of their lack of coherence in face of analytic traditions. Neo-Confucianism
and Kabbalah represent monumental projects of synthesis in which a wealth of traditional
information was integrated into a coherent framework. It is in this sense that these
schools became the most systematic and representative statements of Judaism and
Confucianism. As opposed to the open-ended nature of traditional Confucian and
rabbinitic discourses, Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah introduced a complete picture of
reality, describing its origin and evolution to its present state and the function of humans
in preserving and perfecting it.

Together with the introduction of a heightened sense of spirituality, Neo-
Confucianism and Kabbalah introduced a teleological element into the Chinese and
Jewish traditions, a worldview that offered a much more pro-active understanding of the
human project. We can see this as a shift from a paradigm concerned with reality-
maintenance to one that actively seeks reality-construction, or reality completion. Indeed,
the new teleological streak that Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah introduced led to forms of idealism unknown in the classical Confucians and Rabbinic periods. In Kabbalah we witness the emergence of mystically inspired messianic movements such as Lurianic Kabbalah and later the more radical, and at times antinomian, Sabbateans. Yet later, Kabbalah was expressed in the more internalized mysticism of the Hasidic movement. Each of these strands of Kabbalah was infused with a strong sense of spiritual aspiration that was very different from the legalistic rabbinic paradigm. It can be argued that the analytic, other-worldly and individualistic elements that were integrated into Kabbalah added a subversive feature to the Jewish tradition that remained in constant tension with Talmudic orthodoxy. It has been observed that in the Chinese tradition, the long-term legacy of Neo-Confucianism was at once both traditionalist and nonconformist. It is therefore a mischaracterization to assume that Neo-Confucianism was confined to serving the interests of the ruling elites. The new lixue paradigm contained a highly individualistic strand of thought that could be extremely critical of the imperial order, the abuse of power, and the decline into shallow materialism. The Neo-Confucian worldview infused many of its members with a stoic sense of social responsibility and discipline that transcended quotidian life and political concerns.

The fusion of analytic and synthetic qualities in Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah gave these traditions a very peculiar and somewhat ambivalent position in the Jewish and Chinese traditions. Both movements came to represent orthodoxy but were also

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1009 William de Bary, “A Reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism,” p. 87
1010 For more on Neo-Confucian “purism” see Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, pp. 218-219; 222-223.
continuously criticized for their idiosyncratic way of life and radical interpretations of canon. The idealist streak inherited from the analytic worldview lifted Judaism and the Confucian traditions from the sphere of worldly affairs and carved a space for forms of religiosity that were detached from practical earthly concerns. Although communal responsibility remained central to both schools, it was interpreted in ways that were potentially subversive to traditional authorities and normal order. Therefore, the complementary relationship that Kabbalah and Neo-Confucianism established with their respective traditional orthodoxies was never quite guaranteed; there always remained an ambivalence about these schools that could oscillate between extreme conservatism to forms of radicalism that verged on heresy.¹⁰¹¹

Finally, on a more general note, Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah represent urgent reactions of axial traditions to a hostile environment. The emergence of these schools was a result of a typical process that is characteristic of complex adaptive systems. A state of homeostasis takes place when various cognitive, social, cultural, and environmental variables coalesce into a self-enforcing and interlocking constellation. The analytic and synthetic modalities are the two most common possibilities for such robust cultural structures to emerge. During states of morphogenesis, cultural systems experience a decline in central authority and the fragmentation into contending ideological factions. Eventually, a victorious ideology will offer a new paradigm that successfully responds to environmental pressures. This will be accompanied by the

¹⁰¹¹ Zhu Xi’s funeral was referred to as a “gathering of heretics from all over the empire to follow the arch-heretic to the grave,” See Bruce, J. Percy. *Chu Hsi and His Masters: An Introduction to Chu Hsi and the Sung School of Chinese Philosophy* (London: Probsthain, 1923), pp. 85-88; 91.
emergence of a new informational locus and the establishment of a new compatibility with earlier layers of the tradition. The new symbiotic relationship established between sub-traditions and whole traditions sparks a process of self-organization such that an updated ideology is integrated into the greater tradition. This represents a successful adaptation to destabilizing perturbations, the dismantling of external pressures, and the gradual return to a state of homeostasis.
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