

The silhouette of Lancelot Nul



as cut by Kennedy B.
(Winter 2014)

A modern Western story
unpacking
early Chinese philosophy

Prologue one

制曰：古之聖人，以道蒞天下，處無爲之事，行不言之教，用之不窮而物自化。

朕昧是道，君臨萬方，夙興夜寐，欲推而行之，神而明之，然物或行或隨，或噓或吹，或強或羸，或載或墮，相生相成，相形相傾。莫之能一，此道之所以難行；奸軌亂常，所以難化。

如之何而解其紛，合其異乎？昔之言道者曰：天法道。又曰：道之大原出于天。道非陰陽。又曰：一陰一陽之謂道。道無爲，而曰生之長之，成之養之。道無名，而曰可名以大，可名以小。道一而已，其言之不同，何也？

堯舜三代以是而帝，以是而王。由漢以來，時君世主莫或知此。朕方近述于千載之後，齊萬殊之見，明同異之論，以解蔽蒙之習，未知其方。

子大夫無流于浮偽，為朕詳言之。

By imperial proclamation

When the sages of antiquity used the Dao to oversee all under heaven, they managed their affairs by *not* acting upon other things, and they instructed others *without* using words. Unceasingly employing the Dao, they let the entities of this world transform themselves.

But I'm blind to this Dao. As a ruler attending to his myriad duties, I get up every morning and go to bed every night wanting to apply and carry out this Dao, wanting to revere it as spiritual and enlightened. Yet when it comes to this world's entities, "sometimes they lead while other times they lag, sometimes they inhale while other times they exhale, sometimes they're strong while other times they're weak, sometimes they can bear the load while other times they collapse." They "generate one another and complete one another"; they "shape one another and lean upon one another." It's impossible to see this Dao as just a single thing, and so it's hard to apply. Any regularity gets opposed, any constancy corrupted, and so it's hard for people to embrace.

How can anyone sort out such disorder and bring together such diversity?

- Long ago those who talked about the Dao said, "Heaven finds its model *in the Dao*," but then they also said, "The Dao's great wellspring ushers forth *from heaven*."
- They said there's no yin or yang in the Dao, but then they also said, "The alternation between yin and yang is called ... *the Dao*."
- The Dao doesn't act upon other things, but elsewhere the Dao is said "to begin, to mature, to complete and to nourish" all things.
- The Dao can't be named, but elsewhere it's named the "Greater" Dao or the "Lesser" Dao.

So if there's only *one* Dao, then how can we speak of it in these different ways?

The sages Yao and Shun and the founders of the three ancient dynasties used this Dao to rule as emperors and govern as kings. Yet ever since the Han Dynasty, no ruler of any age or leader of any generation has understood it. A thousand years on, I now wish to survey the Dao, sorting out a myriad of different views as well as clarifying all the points of contention, in order to unravel the brambles and vines. But I don't know how.

Without drifting into vagary and artifice, I want you, my young ministers, to discuss this in detail for me.

Emperor Huizong 徽宗 of the Song Dynasty.

Essay topic for the triennial civil service palace examination during the spring of the "Harmony in governance" era's fifth year [1115 CE] at the Hall of the Gathered Heroes.

Chief examiner: Wang Fu 王黼.

Number of ranked examinees: 692.

First in the presented rankings: He Li 何栗.

Prologue two

THE COLLEGES OF CAMFORD UNIVERSITY

FINAL PUBLIC EXAMINATION

for the Bachelor of Pondering (BPo) in the discipline of Chinese thought.

Trinity term 1983

Chair of Examiners: Prof. Herbert Stradlington

Subject: **Chinese autology**

Candidates should answer all three questions.

(You have three hours.)

1. Confucianism: Who am “I”?

子曰：「克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。...非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。」

Confucius said, “I overcome my self and abide by ritual to carry out benevolence. If I overcome my self and abide by ritual for just a single day, the world will then extend its benevolence back to me.... Hence I do not *look* if it’s not in accord with ritual; I do not *listen* if it’s not in accord with ritual; I do not *speak* if it’s not in accord with ritual; I do not *move* if it’s not in accord with ritual.”

– *The Analects* 論語 (c. 5th-3rd cen. BCE)

2. Buddhism: Who am “I”?

善男子！云何我相？謂諸眾生心所證者。善男子！譬如有人百骸調適忽忘我身；四支絃緩，攝養乖方，微加鍼艾，則知有我。是故證取方現我體。

Good sons! What are the characteristics of the “I”? Within the minds of sentient beings, it refers to what one experiences.

Good sons! It’s like whenever my whole body is hale and hearty, I’m oblivious to my selfhood. But when the pulse in my limbs is thready and I’m not properly attending to my health, the moment I must apply the least amount of acupuncture or moxibustion, I then realize I have an “I.” That’s because my mind’s experience – my mind’s grasping – duly manifests a substantiated “I” at that point.

– *The sutra of full awakening* 圓覺經 (c. 7th-8th cen. CE)

3. Daoism: Who am “I”?

日與物化，故常無我，常無我，故常不化也。

If I daily change with the things around me, I never have an “I,” and if I never have an “I,” I’m never changing!

夫死生變化，吾皆吾之，既皆是吾，吾何失哉。

If I read “I” into life and death and every transformation, then how am “I” ever lost when *everything* is “I”?

靡所不吾也，故玄同外內，彌貫古今，與化日新，豈知吾之所在也。

If everything is “I” – if inner and outer subtly merge, if past and present get tightly strung together, and if I merge with the transformations in daily renewal – then how could I know where my “I” is?

– Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312 CE)

Prologue three

United States Postal Service Box Rentals and Forwarding Service Domestic Billing Summary and Invoice (Acct #2400959D) December 4, 2012	
Box rental (July 1 – December 31, 2012) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For PO Box 47, Fezent, South Dakota 57817• Total postage from Box 47• Forwarding charges to: Vanishing Point Care Facility, Skyline Drive, Townvilleton City 97433	\$32.45 \$48.12 \$17.56
Registered package (October 13, 2012) (Label 139: 9 lbs, 6 oz) to: Vanishing Point Care Facility, Skyline Drive, Townvilleton City 97433 (tracking provided by West Coast Regional Delivery)	<u>\$97.10</u>
	Total: \$195.23 PAID (Thank you.)
Box rental (January 1 – June 30, 2013) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• PO Box 47, Fezent, South Dakota 57817	Payment due: \$32.45 (Payment options on reverse)
Thank you for your service.	
Doc code 29F (Title 37 compliant)	

Part one
Camford University
(Fall 1998 – Summer 2004)

東面望者不見西牆，南鄉視者不睹北方，意有所在也。

Someone gazing eastward will not see the western wall, and someone looking off toward the south will not notice the north. Ideas depend on their location.

– *The Lü shi chungiu* 呂氏春秋 or
Spring and autumn annals of Mr. Lü
(239 BCE)

Chapter one: Mid-slide

St. Polycarp's Hall
15 March 2011

Dear Mrs. Nul,

Although he rarely spoke of home, I do remember Lancy mentioning you once, something about you explaining the earth's rotation to him when he was five or six and how excited he got. He told us that, as his bedroom had faced the back garden, he got up in the middle of the night, opened his curtains and looked out, fully expecting to see the front garden there instead. With a boy's unencumbered logic, he'd of course assumed the earth rotated around *himself*. Never mind. Perhaps it's only natural. But do you by chance remember how he took that night's disappointment? I suppose it's a mental earthquake we all must experience at some point when we realize we aren't the static center of our universe but are, along with everything else, just a mote cycling around something else, in turn cycling around something else, ad infinitum. Better just make the best of it.

At the very least, I indeed remember that Lancy knew how to make us laugh at ourselves with his ongoing story about figuring out exactly where he stood in the world.

But you're not interested in his childhood and of course know those stories better than we do. Instead your uneasy letter asked me to relate to you the *last* time I saw Lancy, and I was no doubt one of the last people to see him in Camford. And even though it was now many years ago, I can be oddly precise – 10 August 2004 on "the Feast of Laurence" in the Anglican calendar. As it happens, Laurence is my personal hero not only because, when he was being roasted alive, he told his Roman torturers to please turn him over as he was done on one side, but also because Laurence was no flashy priest or charismatic prophet ... just a humble administrator who merely oversaw church property. And that happens to be my own job: I am the chapel verger at St. Polycarp's Hall of Camford University.

"And what's a verger?" you'll rightly ask as I don't think you have them in the States. In the Church of England, I'm the layperson who attends to all the chapel chores. At my most resplendent, I'm that puffed-up little usher in fancy gowns who leads congregants to their seats with my rod or "virge," but the rest of the week I also do all the behind-the-scenes maintenance, from making sure the roof doesn't leak to keeping the cemetery free of weeds. As you can imagine, being a jazzy janitor at one of the university's thirty-plus colleges doesn't pay well, and lest I end up on the dole, I also pull pints most nights in The Frog and Well, a free house near St. Polly's just at the bottom of the road. I have to do what I have to do, and so I mustn't grumble. (I'll come back to The Frog in a moment.)

On that unusually bright autumnal afternoon, it was in my capacity of attempting to martyr the ever-resurrecting dandelions among our gravestones when I last ran into your Lancy. By that time, he'd already sat finals in Oriental Studies two years earlier and was essentially and emotionally finished with Camford, having for a while joined that depressing residue of no-place-to-go former students who amount to a dingy bathtub ring on the surrounding river valley within which our university sits. I'm not sure why he didn't just go home like most graduates, foreign or domestic. But no longer satisfied with being a walking anachronism in a university town where he'd always been rather out-of-place, he was finally about to move on, or so he told me that day when I chanced to see Lancy slide into the cemetery.

"Slide?" you might again pause in confusion, and again I should explain. Like most Camford colleges, St. Polly's resembles a walled fortress – a dogged holdover from medieval town-and-gown tensions – and whereas most colleges are fronted with massive timbered doors set within imposing stone gates manned by ever-attentive porters and bulldogs, St. Polly's does one better as we still have a working drawbridge that lowers directly onto the street. The tourists love it, but the odd Morris Minor occasionally becomes ... well ... *more* minor ... should it have been badly parked when the drawbridge drops in the morning. At night when it's up but our Carpies are still out on the town, they're left to their own devices as to getting back to their rooms. In other colleges, students call it "climbing in" – secretively scaling college walls in the dark after curfew, no doubt in preparation for future careers as spies and assassins – and while that was once the tradition here as well, the wannabe infiltrators were endlessly flattening the phlox and crushing the chrysanthemums as they climbed over our cemetery wall. Hardly surprising. Hence the ever-innovative dons of St. Polly's in a collective shrug of their shoulders had the Slide installed. If in their drunken state they can still manage to mount the back wall, our Carpies' efforts are rewarded with a gentle descent, courtesy of an inclined metal plane that deposits them onto the garden path below without a single dianthus destroyed. Hence St. Polly's tradition of jubilantly "sliding in."

Lancy slid in. On that particular afternoon there was little apparent playfulness in his descent, and it looked more like a sober succumbing to gravity, as if he'd become a slave to all the forces beyond his control. He landed with a sigh, pausing several seconds while seated on the gravel path as the dust settled around him, and when he finally looked around and noticed he wasn't alone in the chapel cemetery, he nodded my way. I offered, "Alright, Lancy? Nice day for it!"; he replied, "Mhm." Without another word or glance my way, he got up, clapped eyes on his destination and shuffled off, a claw hammer in hand, heading for one particular grave marker on the south end of the cemetery just behind the chapel. The only other thing I remember about his appearance that day was his round, black and very battered badge that simply depicted a downward-pointing arrow with "You are here" written on it. He always wore that.

Letting Lancy attend to his own agenda – the previous day he'd already sent me a note about his intended task – I returned to digging up dandelions, leaving a wake of uprooted weeds scattered across row upon row of deceased dons and forgotten fellows. But while embroiled in the persecution of one particularly heterodox thistle that was defiantly fighting back, I overheard him talking to himself – which, by the way, was a constant habit of his – as he struggled to detach a small wooden board from near the top of the aforementioned marker:

"If we could gather up the bones ... from just one person's rotations through life and death ... during a single kalpa of time ... and if that pile of bones never decayed ... then ... then it would be as big as ... as Mt. Vipula" 一人一劫中，積聚其身骨，常積不腐壞，如毘富羅山。 He kept pulling at the board.

"Rotations through life and death'," I interrupted from behind the nearby headstones. "But didn't D.Fu famously hate Buddhism?" Lancy seemed unsurprised by my interruption, as if I'd just sidled over to join a conversation already in progress at a drinks party.

"True, but he would've appreciated the allusion," he replied, pausing in his exertions. "Although it's from a Pali sermon, it became popular among the medieval Chinese gentry lamenting their own endless reincarnations:

生而還復死，盡變作灰塵。積骨如毗富，別淚成海津...

They live only to go back to death,
Totally transforming into ash and dust.
Their accumulated bones would rival Vipula;
Their farewell tears would fill an ocean....”

He then continued trying to free the board; I continued trying to free the weed.

“Farewell tears would fill an ocean,” I said. “That’s a bit Eeyorish.”

“Another Pali sermon.... And the Chinese poem ends bleakly, too:

唯有空名在，豈免生死輪。

All that’s left behind is their empty names.

How will they ever forsake these rotations through life and death?

That’s Hanshan in the eighth or ninth century.” At last he had the board free and dropped it, from his pocket then producing a similar one to replace it.

“Hanshan ... have I heard of him?”

“Probably. He got famous with the American Beat Generation – Snyder and his crew.” He started hammering the new board into place. “These days I translate a lot of poetry. Or I try to.”

“But aren’t you right now updating nothing more than an ‘empty name’?” I finally triumphed over the thistle and turned my full attention to Lancy. “D.Fu’s marker gets full marks for originality, but his inscription isn’t much more than his name, unlike all these other epitaphs that at least try to preserve something good about their dedicatees.”

At first, Lancy said nothing as he finished hammering the new board into place, but once done, he dropped his hands and inspected his work, muttering “True.”

Once again I must pause in my account for a note of explanation – and I sincerely apologize, Mrs. Nul, because I surely sound like the starter on a car engine that just cranks and cranks but the engine refuses to turn over and just get going. There’s always *something* that needs explaining. Yet this next piece of information, about the grave marker of Lancy’s former tutor, is rather important because it was indeed very different from the rows of stelaes around it.

First, notice how I’ve been calling the object commemorating the late D.Fu – that’s how he was generally known at St. Polly’s – a grave “marker” and not a grave “stone” because, as you’ve probably deduced from Lancy’s hammering, it was made of wood. Erected two years ago over the spot where they’d buried his ashes, it was an oak pole, the lower half of which only bore his name, “Dalton A. Fu,” carved in blocky, sans-serif letters reading from top to bottom, ending with an arrow pointing down. Second, it wasn’t so much a pole as it was a crossroads signpost. That is, the upper half was covered by a series of small boards nailed to it, each with a sharpened point on one end, boards that gestured outward in various directions. There was...

- An arrow pointing southwestward: “Prof. James Goylemacher, 3200 feet.”
- An arrow pointing southward and sharply downward: “Hieronymus A. & Sarah Fu, 10 feet.”
- An arrow pointing southeastward: “Linden Angerbell, 6164 miles.”
- An arrow pointing eastward: “Wu Youren, 5512 miles (and 900 years).”
- An arrow pointing northward: “Peeve, half a mile.”
- An arrow – which Lancy had just attached – pointing westward: “J.Artus Fu, 4910 miles.”

And so forth. Nor did they all indicate individuals living or dead. There was...

- An arrow pointing northwestward: “Camford University Library, 3800 feet.”
- An arrow pointing southeastward: “The Main, 800 feet.”

“The Main” is St. Polly’s own formal dining hall where D.Fu nightly enjoyed the privileges of high table. And a third fact about this grave marker worthy of mention is how every one of these smaller signs was painted a different, bright, “Look-at-me!” color and how the whole signpost was topped by a cluster of sequined pennants and silk streamers, now a bit tattered after a couple years of Camford rain. In response, the troop of traditional grey stones around it kept their heads down and formed themselves into tight ranks, and those that leaned with age without exception leaned *away* from D.Fu’s signpost in embarrassed silence.

Lying at the foot of the marker, a now-discarded board read: “J.Artus Fu, 3250 miles.” If I rightly remember, it had been pointing southeastward.

“For all its whistles and bells” – and I wouldn’t have been surprised if there weren’t a few of those hanging from the signpost as well – “didn’t D.Fu himself just leave behind his name, his ‘empty’ name? At least ... well ... here I’m sitting on a grave, now expertly freed of weed, of a certain eighteenth-century college bursar who was apparently ‘an honorable man’ as well as ‘a hardworking officer’ and ‘an upright father.’ And next to him is his misses ... ‘a good wife, beautiful and strong.’” Lancy finally looked over my way as I paused to get up. “The sentiment might be a bit dated, but they’ve each got reference points or visions of the good that oriented the self as they saw it – personal qualities of honor ... hard work ... devotion ... beauty ... strength.... But not so for your D.Fu there.” Dropping his hammer by the discarded board, Lancy left the signpost to come over and look for himself. “Or here’s ‘Sir Lambert Harrington IV, B.A., A.M., Ph.D., ESQ., ETC.’, a professor who ‘embodied pure reason and exemplified genuine rationality’.” I hmphed. “Typical.... But if we’re to believe his epitaph, he individually personified his vision of the good which was, for him at least, dispassionate logic.”

We thus began to mingle among the inscribed souls now living in the chapel cemetery at St. Polycarp’s Hall, reading their final crystallizations of selfhood preserved in a few chosen words. Perhaps not surprising in a college cemetery, we found paeans to intelligence and wit as well as poems to human vigilance and divine aspiration. We walked by stones romantically praising this poet as a “free spirit” and that artist as “a creative inspiration to all.” Then there were the two war memorials, every morning doomed to the shade of our recently rebuilt chapel tower but this afternoon enjoying a rare moment of the sun’s full attention. They vaunted the warrior ethic of lost Carpies, their courage and bravery, their valor and gallantry: “They gave their tomorrow for our today.” Each stone preserved a compass point of the good that had given the dedicatee a sense of direction.

And if personal identity is utterly dependent upon memory – as the Greats from Homer to Hume tell us – the tombstones did their best to *keep* those compass needles perfectly aligned, never again letting them oscillate from side to side. That is, they each framed their goodness with an “In memory of,” a “Sacred to the memory of,” a “Forever in our hearts” or, in its bluntest form, a simple “Remember.” The stone of one nineteenth-century St. Polly’s teacher had appended that last command with the smaller inscription: “There *will* be a test.”

“More than names, perhaps, but still just ... meaningless tropes ... dead stereotypes,” Lancy concluded, distracted by an equally unimpressed rabbit nibbling away at the clematis by our chapel door. “Doesn’t do anything for me.”

I clapped my hands to shoo away the intruder. “Doesn’t do anything for *us*, perhaps, but maybe we moderns don’t really have a strong, unified sense of identity anymore. I don’t think we see a single cohesive story from birth to death; I think we’re now more likely to break up life’s narrative into separate chapters and discrete actions. And as it happens, modern tombstones aren’t nearly so sentimental. Or that’s what they teach us in verger school.” After a moment, I added, “But if you’ve got a moment, follow me: I want to show you my favorite.”

Obediently trundling after me as we weaved through the rows, he summarized en route, “So they embodied intelligence, courage or devotion all their lives and now that label’s forever fixed at their head. How quaintly Victorian and charmingly simple....”

“Not merely ‘Victorian,’ although the stone I want to show you is. If you hang around enough of these cemeteries, you’ll see how assigning some kind of core value to give meaning to life goes back to

the beginnings of Protestantism in general ... alongside privileging personal experience with direct access to God.”

“Right. I remember you once telling me something about post-Reformation’s religious inwardness and the rise of individualism. Stuff that went along with reading the Bible for yourself.”

“And so these epitaphs assign them their individual intelligence, courage, devotion as well as ... *Tada!* ... piety and benevolence.” Just at that moment, I stopped Lancy and, getting behind him, physically turned him to look at the best stone in St. Polly’s cemetery, that of my own ancestor, my fourth great grandfather. Lancy read it out:

Dudlington Ward
1799-1840
Verger

For piety to God and benevolence to man;
For running this chapel to His Divine Plan.
But he went to heaven a penniless debtor:
So why the hell didn’t we pay him better?

Lancy just awkwardly stood there for a while, as if trying to figure out a proper reaction: prayerful silence or playful snicker?

“Poor ol’ Granddaddy Duddy!” I clucked. “His bairns are all following in his footsteps a bit too closely. We can’t even afford to get ourselves buried in here anymore.” I looked out across the cemetery. “Never mind. Mustn’t grumble.”

“No disrespect intended, but piety, benevolence ... just more bland labels to cover a lifetime?”

“Well, you’re not entirely wrong. You’ll find ‘benevolence of heart’ on lots of old tombstones for bishops and knights, for high judges and charity founders. Even Jane Austen’s epitaph praises the ‘benevolence of her heart’ along with her sweet temper and extraordinary mind.”

“That just makes it worse. It becomes *generic*.”

“Sorry, Lancy, but I don’t think you’re seeing it. ‘Benevolence’ might be ... might be a shared finish line here, but each life’s narrative is a singular struggle toward that line. None of these visions of the good are just general statements of personal identity; each really hints at a particular story about how that person came to be known that way. And each implies that it wasn’t guaranteed, that they had to run a hard race to achieve it, clearing all the hurdles – maybe self-doubt or resistance from others, maybe temptations or transient passions, or maybe just life’s ragtag, jumbled actions and decisions that *aren’t* guided by the enduring, rational norms like ... like ‘benevolence.’ And I think all those hurdles make each race a *unique* story about getting there, even if they can’t record the whole story here.” I paused to lean down and pluck out a blade of goosegrass. “So a soldier’s courage, a wife’s devotion, a don’s intelligence, a verger’s benevolence – they aren’t just qualities but implied individuated *narratives* about having achieved them.”

“Different tracks; same finish line,” Lancy said, glumly looking down at my ancestor’s grave.

“Although according to family lore, Duddy wasn’t always the nicest of gents, try as he might. But he really tried, so he gets points for that.”

Still looking down, Lancy raised his right hand to count on his fingers. “So let me get this straight. There’s – one – the original warts-and-all Granddaddy Duddy, there’s – two – the Granddaddy Duddy who rose above himself, looked down at that self and said ‘I better change that me,’ and finally there’s – three – the perfectly benevolent Granddaddy Duddy we get labeled here....” He dropped his hands. “Pretty crowded down there.”

I chuckled again. “A reflexively judgy ‘I,’ rising rise above *this* existing ‘I,’ to aim for *that* ideal ‘I’ ... the epitaph devoted to the last. I suppose you’re right: I hope Victorian coffins were roomy.” When your son put it that way, Mrs. Nul, it sounds like we get haunted by self-manufactured ghosts whenever we step back from ourselves, reflect on ourselves and aspire to become a self we aren’t already. But now

that I think about it, your son did look a bit ... haunted ... although maybe that was just because of our setting.

Glancing up from Dudlington Ward's grave, Lancy again noticed D.Fu's own marker standing taller than the rest in the distance, and he started redirecting his steps to it. This time it was my turn to follow. As we wandered past the slate forget-me-nots that late afternoon, he seemed to be increasingly confused, and by the time we were standing beneath it, he just stared at it, the wooden signpost looking more temporary than all its stony neighbors, its streamers quivering in the early autumn breeze. He shook his head. "D.Fu ended up an empty name with no essential self, then?" He knelt to pluck a bit of moss off the downward-pointing arrow. "Is it missing something? Am *I* missing something?" he asked. "I don't get it."



Please forgive me, Mrs. Nul, for an abrupt change of scene now, but perhaps you'll understand why by the end of my letter when we return to that cemetery on the Feast of Laurence. In terms of time, I want to retreat to a December night more than five years earlier, and in terms of space, I want to move down the street from St. Polly's to The Frog.

The pub was heaving that Friday night, and by the time Lancy – then just a fresher – had fought his way in, it was already after 10.30 pm. Publicans don't actually need to keep a close eye on the clock because they subconsciously know the time through a complicated formula of 1.) the amount of table stickiness due to spillage plus 2.) the volume of sour, yeasty, butterscotchy aroma in the air plus 3.) the temperature generated by collective body heat, the sum of which is divided by 4.) the number of patrons. By the time Lancy had arrived at The Frog, it was sticky, smelly and hot in its crowded rooms. Never mind. It pays the bills. And given the conditions, I judged the landlord – my boss – would be ringing the bell for last call in about a quarter of an hour.

Around a tiny table wedged next to the rear bar where I and two others were working, a handful of Lancy's mates were uncomfortably packed together in the manner of grapes that, when too tightly clustered on the vine, lose their individual natural symmetries as each misshapes its neighbors. Dorian (Renaissance studies, St. Polycarp's) had to sit side-saddle on the bench, only managing to get one arm on the table to defend the remnants of his pint, whereas Meris (Oriental studies, Perpetua-Blandina) was pinned between the table and wall, seemingly preoccupied with a beer ring left behind by her glass. And although she didn't look relaxed about it, Willie – short for Willard (Engineering, Lady Billencoo Lodge) – had to make do with the lap of J.Artus (Psychology, Bishops) who was at that moment proudly showing the rest his anonymous classified ad in the local paper offering to sell off the whole of St. Apocrypha's College, chief rival to his Bishops, as outdated academic surplus: "Needs work so going cheap; inquiries to the college master." Taking the paper from J.Artus, an unimpressed and bleary-eyed Maisie (Literature, St. Kung's) rolled it up to give him a swat, but there was no space for her to swing her arm.

Pub etiquette demands that someone buys the next round when most of the glasses are about three-quarters empty, but they'd already passed that point, these young scholars perhaps hampered by their respective bank overdrafts. Yet even though they were thusly packed in, the international principle of public houses everywhere says that there's always room for one more if the newcomer offers to ensure the taps keep flowing for them. Yet when they saw it was Lancy weaving his way toward the table, their faces collectively registered a look that indicated how this might be somewhat problematic.

Oblivious to the dispersed queue of other patrons standing around the bar who had already caught my eye with beseeching looks on their faces and empty glasses in their hands, Lancy called out, "Keller, a pint of IPA please." I smiled and raised a finger that said "If you'll be so kind as to wait your turn, thanking you." He got the message and looked around. "Ah, sorry. Really."

Only after attending to the rest with due diligence, I was able to turn back to him with a quick smile and a nod. "And what's yours tonight?" As he repeated his order, I simultaneously directed another quick smile and a nod to the table behind him (and also with a raised eyebrow), cuing the next line from his mates.

“He meant a *round*, Keller,” J.Artus predictably inserted. “I’m translating Americanese on his behalf. With that big fancy scholarship of his, he of course meant it’s his turn to shout for the table.”

Confused, Lancy leaned across the bar. “Sorry, Keller. Too noisy tonight, I guess.... ONE PINT OF IPA, PLEASE.” Sometimes a silent shrug is a publican’s best diplomatic tactic. He paid; I poured.

When Lancy turned to the group with his single pint in hand, it was too crowded for him to lay claim over any table territory, and so he just sat behind Maisie and cradled his IPA, surrendering to the sidelines. He was three or four years older than the rest – that “fancy scholarship” of his only awarded to people who’d already earned a degree back in the States and now sought another – although like Camford students generally, his mates showed no deference to his being older or smarter and instead maintained a façade of unimpressed casualness and effortless superiority. But to credit his diligence, Lancy would eventually topple that façade – or at least knock out the topmost bricks of it – over the next three or four years.

“American individualism at its worst,” J.Artus persisted. “Lancy, you’ve got to do what the Romans do, or at least what the Britons do after we sent the Romans packing. It’s part of your cultural education, mate ... to *be* a mate. One person pours from the teapot for the rest; one person buys the round for the rest.”

“But if you all take it in turns, it comes out the same anyway. So what’s the difference?”

“A fair point,” Dorian joined in, “but really I guess what happens is, the pourer or buyer becomes host for the moment while the rest become their grateful guests. And so maybe there’s a kind of ... of negotiated politeness going on....”

“A network being affirmed...,” Meris suggested.

“Right, and not just a bunch of individual drunks chugging their individual pints.”

“Not to mention it’s easier on the barkeep at the till,” I added, eavesdropping from my station where I’d started gathering up the mats and towels on the counter. “A trifling matter, and fussy of me, but we all have our little ways’.”

“And as your scholarship is twice what our derisory stipends pay,” J.Artus interjected, taking his newspaper back from Maisie, “the colonialists should begin making reparations for abandoning the poor motherland.” He pointed the rolled-up paper at Lancy. “Children are always *so* ungrateful.”

“Leave it,” said Meris. “It’s not a big deal, and it’s my turn anyway. Same again all around?” Universal nods.

“No, you’re skint, particularly after what happened this morning,” Willie announced, intentionally elbowing J.Artus in the chest. “Let me get it. Back in a moment.” She got up to indicate these particular negotiations were over.

“What happened this morning?” Lancy asked.

J.Artus feigned stone-faced dispassion. “Early this morning just when the colleges were opening, Meris’s Skoda was abruptly downgraded to the status of a scraped-up and very dented wheelbarrow, and I’m surprised she’s even talking to *anyone* from St. Polly’s at the moment.”

While the middle classes may boast spotlessly shiny cars, both the upper and working classes are fine with mud-covered, past-their-prime conveyances. Held together by bumper stickers such as “Scots Socialist Pairtie” and “Scots for Scotland? Yes! Yes!”, Meris left little doubt where her sympathies lay between those two. She liked her old, battered Skoda because it “kept it real,” but that morning’s incident at St. Polly’s gate had probably been a mercy killing.

“A bit of a nuisance, that,” she summarized.

“Ah. Sorry.”

“So you should show her some benevolence by buying her a drink and, as we’re her support group tonight, by buying us drinks, too.”

“Yeah, but speaking of benevolence,” Meris intervened, steering toward the nearest off ramp from this topic, “don’t look now but here come the Bunnyvolents.”

Universities across the United Kingdom and Ireland are home to student-run “Rag” societies, charitable fundraising organizations that set up sponsored challenges, silly competitions and world record attempts. They regularly send their minions forth on “Rag Raids” in which they badger the public on the

street into buying little thirty-two or sixty-four page magazines that are a bit of a joke. (That is, your average “Rag Mag” in theory conveys hundreds upon hundreds of jokes, anecdotes and cartoons, but that’s in theory and actual “results may vary from person to person,” most finding the humor rather pedestrian. Never mind. It’s the donation that counts.) Once they’ve worn down their own city, the minions climb aboard coaches to descend upon other cities, sometimes encountering raiding tribes from other universities and entering into an intense competition for loose change in the name of charity. Camford’s own raiders are famous for dressing up head-to-toe like giant rabbits and conducting pub hops (as opposed to pub crawls) on busy nights. While they can be a bit of a nuisance, barring the Bunnyvolents would tell the public you are indeed “hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire.” Landlords just make the best of it.

“Rag raid!” a Bunnyvolent announced, shoving his blue plastic collecting bucket down onto the table, knocking Dorian’s just-emptied glass over. “Bless my whiskers – sorry!” The innards of this particular rabbit may have been a golden-haired, wide-eyed fresher, but his manky, matted-and-darned, formerly white pelt had clearly been coming into The Frog for many years, if not decades, already.

“And what’s the charity tonight?” asked J.Artus.

“Uh ... you know.... It’s a rag raid!”

“For ...?”

“For ... uh ... giving you the opportunity to express your inner nature that would naturally give to others?”

Despite an exchange of skeptical looks, hands went into pockets, eyes then scanned the contents of those hands, and various bits of change dropped into the bucket.

“Thank you! Gotta go!” Retrieving his bucket, the rabbit dropped a Rag Mag onto the table as he pretended to hop away. “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!” The rabbit left; the pong of his costume didn’t.

Wanting to join in the communal musings, Lancy pressed, “Shouldn’t he have known which charity it was for?”

“It’s a fair question,” Dorian replied. “Or is benevolence, just as he said, something more to do with an individual’s *own* nature than with the object of the giving?”

As I was done pouring their next round, Willie started ferrying pairs of pints to their new owners. “Sounds like a finals question,” she said. “‘Benevolence is natural and internal to the individual self. Discuss.’ Please take these.” And she turned back to the bar for the rest.

Reaching for the Rag Mag, J.Artus complained, “Wake me up when we start talking about eights again.” He managed to invest the audio equivalent of rolling his eyes into those ten words. A tall lad and captain of Bishop’s boat club, J.Artus was what we once called a “hearty,” his time divided between sports venues and drinking societies. “You got to admit the regatta was completely ballsed-up last week.”

“No, let’s push on with this,” Maisie countered. “I want to know why I sacrificed the bag of chips I was about to buy on my way home tonight because I just gave my money to the Velve-teenager Rabbit.”

“Really? You’re all clearly way ahead of me in drinking,” Lancy said. “I’ve noticed that when you’re here in pub-space, everyone’s talent for arguing about nothings gets magnified. Kind of pointless, if you ask me.”

Mrs. Nul, your son never quite understood the paradoxes of “pub space.” Alongside buying rounds, the alcohol-fueled arguments waged therein are intended to draw mates closer together without them getting too explicit and mushy about forging friendships. (By the way, they’re always “mates” and never “friends” in pubs and elsewhere, the latter sounding too squeamishly intimate in their ears.) As long as they’re not too earnest in defending their sides, they’re sitting there together *sharing* in an argument. So they will indeed happily bicker about anything, uniting with one another by being divisive.

Lancy continued. “I just found it weird that he didn’t even know which charity the money went to. In America, students do volunteer work all the time, even if it’s just to selfishly pad out their CVs and get ‘big fancy famous scholarships,’ as J.Artus has succinctly reminded us, but at least they usually know *who* they’re helping. Here you Camford types hardly ever do volunteer work or you just kind of do it on a lark – sort of a happenstance obligation of the elite.”

“That’s harsh, dude,” Willie responded, now back on J.Artus’s lap. “And it’s ‘*whom* they’re helping’ – we have grammar in this selfish kingdom of ours.”

“Still, he’s got a point,” Dorian said. “And cheers, by the way,” he added, raising his glass to Willie. “If you’re going to answer your own question about benevolence being internal to the individual self, then is your benevolence ultimately *self-serving* or *other-serving*?”

“I think it’s more complicated than that,” she said, pausing to drink off the top of her porter. “I think of it like this. Since the Enlightenment, it’s the sciences that gave us the best way to unpack both the self as well as what’s around that self. And so, starting with selfhood, I’d take it down to the *genes themselves* and....”

“Don’t say it,” J.Artus sighed.

“...Darwin...”

“There it is.”

“...who taught us how my big goal is to preserve my genes – my ‘me’ – into the next generation.”

“I try to preserve my genes for the next generation every night,” J.Artus interrupted with a snarky grin. “Sometimes more than once.”

While giving him an oh-grow-up glare, Willie came back with “And ‘try’ is the operative word in that sentence, Sweetie. Extinction is knocking at your species door.” Did I mention Willie and J.Artus were a couple?

Uncomfortably, Maisie intervened. “Refocus, please. If you’re talking about all that selfish-gene stuff, isn’t being ‘selfish’ the opposite of being benevolent?”

“Sure, but calling it ‘selfish’ is kind of misleading, implying something conscious or willful ... no, not that. A proper material understanding of selfhood isn’t tied to any ideas of a reflexive ‘me’ or ‘my’ – that’s just added later by culture, by what’s around that self.” She paused to drink again. “Still, here’s where ‘selfish’ versus ‘benevolent’ helps us rethink what that self actually is. Darwin says some species are most fit to survive by working in social groups, and that sociability entails benevolence, caring for the other members of that community so the community itself works smoothly. If it works, it survives, its members also passing down the benevolence that made it work in the first place. That’s natural selection. But here’s the thing about selfhood: It’s not necessarily ‘my’ genes getting directly passed down, as long as my near-genes – others in my community – survive. In the aggregate, that’s more likely to be successful than me trying to get just my own genes to carry on. So there *is* a continuity of self, but it’s not necessarily ‘my’ self, ‘my’ personal me that had resulted from just my own genes, if that makes sense. And so my benevolence preserves my near-selves.”

“Selfish genes of benevolence ... that complicates things,” Dorian said. “It complicates whether we’re being *self-serving* or *other-serving* when your self is also genetically embedded in that other. But Willie, if we’re keeping it at the level of genetics alone, making selfhood just a material construct, doesn’t that mean we’re no different than the animals, than the ... bunnies?”

“What’s the problem with that? We’re only different in degree, not in kind ... all on the same playing field. As I said, it’s human culture around the self that then adds reflection and experience to that baseline notion of selfhood and gets something closer to what we usually think of as our beloved individualism and modern morality.” She took another drink. “But here’s the thing: it was also science – specifically how it *put all of us on that same playing field* – that gave culture the tools it needed to reflexively revise its image of individualism ... like its individual dignity ... individual agency ... individual morality.”

“How so?”

Willie took a moment to consider how to phrase her response as the landlord rang last call. “Well, I just said the new sciences helped us think about modern individualism from both angles – self *and* what’s around it. Now maybe we’ve never found a material ‘self’ under the compound microscope ever since we started using it in the 17th century, and maybe we just reaffirmed what the Greeks have always told us, that we’re each just made up of little bits, of atoms. But by extension, each of us *is* a bit, an atom, an individuated unit within a bigger body, and it’s that new scientific rationality that made us realize the bigger body, see the grander picture of our environment. I mean, it made us conscious about there being a

hell of a lot more out there than my own egotistical self-centered me and my own egotistical self-centered tribe. Now there're universals out there, blanketing *all* those other me's and *all* those other tribes alongside my own. And it was only 17th-century theories about universal patterns, about *natural laws* and how all things must equally be, that then fed the idea about each me in turn having *natural rights*, like the same rights to life and liberty that I want for myself. Every one of us on the same playing field. That's progress. We often forget it wasn't always like that." Still another sip. "And then, voila! Modern individualism morally framed, the self treating the other as it wants itself to be treated. Next stop: Benevolence City ... being respectful and kind to one another..."

"Guys, don't listen to her," J.Artus fought back. "She's an engineer. She's got a sprocket for a soul."

"But you yourself are reading psychology," Maisie challenged him. "Aren't you liable to give us an equally mechanical reduction of the self's benevolence?"

"I don't know about 'mechanical,' but let's face it. People don't know genes; people know *people*. And since the 18th century, people have realized how they're *really* shaping their selves in their interactions with *other people*."

"So you're pushing a ... a *relational* understanding of selfhood rather than Willie's constitutive one," Dorian suggested. "I mean, the self defined by how it relates to other selves, rather than defined by the genes physically inside it."

"If you have to put a label on it ... sure. Whatever. But when I'm growing up, it's through my repeated recognition of others that in turn tells me how I should see myself, form myself, develop a command over myself. It's not genetics; it's my seeing the 'them' that habituates my seeing the 'me.' And so when it comes to benevolence, to my sympathy for others, it's basic to me *because* I'm already building myself off of those others in the first place, *because* I'm already placing myself in their circumstances, walking in their shoes."

"That may be a clever psych explanation for sympathy," Maisie admitted, "but then you're admitting that benevolence arises from self and other interlacing, from the 'we.' Willie's question was about benevolence being natural to just the self, to just the 'me.' So how can you locate benevolence within modern *individualism*?"

J.Artus had this ability to laugh and drink at the same time, and he was already half way through his new pint when he finally resurfaced. But before he replied to her, he held up his hand to silence further comment as he then reached beneath the table to rummage through his book bag down below. "Here's the clincher, Maisie: the person who defined us all as being innately benevolent because we're all defining ourselves against one another ... was none other than ..." Here he revealed a 600-page tome that he'd been sampling that week for his next tutorial, a tome he banged down on the table for shock effect, all the glasses also jumping in surprise as drops of beer flew everywhere. "... Adam Smith, the Father of Capitalism himself!" The *Wealth of nations* now served as the table's centerpiece. "You'd be hard-pressed to find someone more fundamental to the modern understanding of individualism than him!" Then he pushed the book toward Dorian. "Would Dorian the Historian agree?"

Reluctantly nodding, Dorian conceded, "I guess. It's hard to ignore the shift to capitalism in shaping modern individuality. Two centuries ago in Smith's day, a person's total and direct dependency on a single great lord was giving way to his spreading himself outward via new commercial relations with hundreds, even thousands of customers at home and abroad. He was no longer absolutely dependent on any one of them, now independent of visible controllers. His allegiance was now dispersed among the masses at large, most of them invisible to him." As he spoke, Dorian used his sleeve to wipe droplets of beer off Adam Smith. "And his desire not to be impinged upon by that overlord – to be left to himself – is a kind of 'freedom from' ... what we call a 'negative liberty.' So it's true that this cutting-of-ties from an overlord or landlord, brought about by the new market economy, did indeed breed a new individualism, a new feeling of being independent..."

"But bring it back to benevolence, J.Artus," Maisie insisted. "You're saying Smith, like Darwin, says it's built into the individual?"

Pulling *Wealth* back toward himself, J.Artus retreated a bit. “Well, not quite. If you’re thinking of benevolence just being ‘goodness for goodness’ sake,’ just being justified in terms of the self’s own other-love, then you’d be mistaken.” He opened it and started flipping through the first few pages, each having been decorated with his marginalia of question and exclamation marks, of profanities and the occasional picture of a sinking boat. Fortunately for future readers of this library book, these embellishments got no further than the third chapter. “Yeah. Here:

In almost every other race of animals, each individual, when it is grown up to maturity, is entirely independent, and in its natural state has occasion for the assistance of no other living creature. But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favor, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them.

So while our rag-raid rabbit might wish it were otherwise, bunnies and all animals in fact just see to themselves and aren’t naturally ... bunnyvolent.” He shut *Wealth*. “And humans, too. Even though we are constantly doing good to one another – which is the minimum dictionary definition of ‘benevolence’ – we really do so entirely out of ‘self-love,’ to our own advantage. So I’m nice to you ... because it’s ultimately being nice to *me*.” He rewarded himself with a prolonged swig and, after coming up for air, turned to Willie on his lap and proclaimed, “I win, me!”

“No. *We* win, us!” she replied with a smile, smoothing out the page J.Artus had read from. “Maisie, in answer to your question: *me is we*, and there never has been ‘just the me’. You see, later thinkers like Durkheim applied Darwin to the same end as Adam Smith here. Communal living and an economy based on increased specialization made us totally dependent on one another. That’s how we survive, thrive and expand. My healthy self becomes *inseparable* from my healthy community, that community only remaining healthy if it also looks after its weaker members. So Durkheim likewise concluded that benevolence is indeed natural but isn’t merely other-serving. It’s already self-serving from the very beginning because it’s necessary for that self’s very survival via communal and economic survival. It’s a basic condition of life.”

J.Artus seemed satisfied with that. “So whether by genetics or by habituation, benevolence ensures community, and community ensures self. Deep down, we is me and me helps we ... benevolently.”

Smiling, Willie clinked her nearly full glass with his nearly empty one. “No benevolence? No self.”

“Then long may the benevolent individual reign.” They both looked a bit smug.

“Until that benevolent individual literally reigns over others,” Dorian countered. “Historically speaking, your capitalism and community also ended up producing some of the shittiest forms of ‘benevolence’ that stank as much as that Bunnyvolent.”

The engineer’s smile was short-lived, and the rower looked like he’d snapped his blade. “Say what?” they said in unison.

“Don’t get me wrong: The development of capitalism and industrialization is definitely a milestone on the road toward modern individualism, along with the gradual rejection of an absolute monarchy in the Civil War and then the Glorious Revolution and the rise of Parliament. As people mixed their labor into their *own* land, they increased their sense of property, of ... of the ‘my’ that fertilizes a sense of ‘me.’ All definitely constructive of modern individualism.”

“So?” J.Artus petulantly asked. “Sounds great so far.”

“And it’s *indeed* great for much of it. It’s all taking culture’s center of gravity away from just the elites and shifting it downward and outward. It’s no longer ‘we elites’ versus ‘those masses who are a different species’ but a sense of *all* of us mucking in together. ‘On the same playing field,’ as Willie said. And that spreading downward fed the idea that it was morally necessary to stop the suffering of others because they *are* like us, they’re in *our* category.”

“And that’s great; that’s *benevolence*,” Willie prodded.

“Except that, as markets developed and spread *further* outward, developing *foreign* markets, you get the so-called benevolence that went with colonialism, the patronizing benevolence of the British Empire.”

“Ouch,” replied Maisie.

“Wait!” countered J.Artus.

“Yep,” answered Meris.

“Ah,” reacted Willie.

“Please drink up, lads and lasses,” responded the bartender.

Lancy said nothing.

Dorian resumed. “Maybe Britain was increasingly embracing individualism via its capitalism, but when it came to treating individuals in those foreign markets, we thought our colonialization was inherently benevolent for the colonized. We made them obey *our* vision of the good, even if it was in opposition to their own inclinations and interests. In the process, we developed a pretty convincing imperial rhetoric of benevolence, so convincing that we convinced ourselves.”

“Hold your horses, Mr. Festal,” J.Artus said looking down at Dorian and reaching toward Adam Smith as a conveniently hefty projectile. “May I remind you that *we’re* the nation who hastened the end of the slave trade?”

“Which was done for both ethical *and* economic reasons, slavery not fitting into the new economics,” Dorian replied. “But you’re right: there were *some* genuine gestures of benevolence and honest acts of philanthropy in the Empire’s reach, and yet you have to balance that with the corruptions of the East India Company, with how we treated the Aboriginals, with our handling of the Irish famine....”

I thought a bit of diplomatic digression might be in order as I passed by their table. “Glasses, please. I’d count it as an act of benevolence if you’d go spread your empire outside now....”

“Keller, you’re a man of the church,” Willie said. “What’s your take on empire and benevolence, especially as a lot of it was done in the name of Christianity?”

Diplomacy doesn’t always work. What do you expect? I stood at their table and set down my stack of dirty glasses. “Well, it’s true the architects of British imperial policy justified imperial rule by co-opting God’s benevolence and forwarding pastoral intentions. But I’m not going to take a position on how sincere that justification was.” I reached for the few glasses they were willing to relinquish. “I guess it *felt* sincere to them, in part because it was Christianity itself that bore responsibility for your new understanding of growing British individualism.”

“Christianity?” Willie stopped him. “How so?”

“Well, okay. Before you had your Durkheim, your Darwin, your Smith or your East India Company, you had Luther. As I see it, he’s the one who *really* got the individual ball of individualism rolling. He championed the limitless inner freedom of Christians, and you already know how he practiced what he preached, directly linking those Christians to God by translating the Bible into their language and so bypassing priestly intermediation. And that Protestant Reformation was all about personal experience and individual understanding – no more dependence on churchy overlords.”

“You’re still pretty churchy, though,” J.Artus countered.

“Guilty. While our Church of England embraces the Reformation, we still manage to trick it out in Catholic bling, keeping the so-called ‘scenic apparatus’.” Mrs. Nul, you should see me in my black gowns trimmed in velvet with the St. Polly’s crest embroidered on both sleeves, a jabot hanging down from my neck. And that’s just for the evensong rituals.

“But we’re talking individualism plus *benevolence* here,” Willie prodded.

“True. Aside from the obvious benevolence content that Christianity pushes down into those personal experiences – habituating people to ‘Do unto others’ and so forth – you get British clergy saying that the whole of religion is really about benevolence before all else.” I looked around at the pub’s thinning crowd. “There’s this college porter who numbers among our eccentric regulars here – unlike you lot who just come and go ... by the way, I really wish you would *go* now – and this porter is always spouting off lines from Tennyson, including ‘If any religion have not a benevolent tendency, this very circumstance is a sufficient refutation of its proceeding from God’.”

“That’s actually Tennyson’s *father* who said that,” Maisie corrected. “Not *the* Tennyson.”

“Well, okay. Still *a* Tennyson,” I backpedaled. “And if I remember rightly, wasn’t Papa Tennyson himself a rector? Regardless, you get his point. Benevolence leads; religion follows. And don’t forget your biggest names in benevolence like Kant – ‘I choose to act morally when I realize *others* ought to act this way’ – in fact grew up in devout Protestant households.”

“I guess Kant’s whole ‘categorical imperative’ is a kind of exercise in benevolence,” Willie conceded.

“‘Categorical imperative’?” J.Artus asked.

“Yeah, instead of me acting on just my own selfish whims, I’ve got my moral obligations that transcend my own circumstances, obligations that would be exactly the same for you in your circumstances, too.” Then she added, “I’ll buy you the book for your birthday so Smith won’t be so lonely on your shelf.” J.Artus well hid his excitement about that.

Wanting to bring this discussion to a close, I just agreed with Willie. “Sure. The built-in categorical imperative is when we’re *all* sympathetically walking in *everyone else’s* shoes, meaning benevolence is a part of us. I’m always unconsciously concerned about the other and so act accordingly. Kant even believed that increased rationality and awareness of the other went hand-in-hand with increased benevolence toward them. He said so. But I think all that ultimately comes from Luther, from both his promotion of personal experience and his advocacy of individual Christian benevolence.” I reclaimed my stack of glasses. “Now be benevolent and be gone! The Frog offers no lock-in tonight!”

Mrs. Nul, yet another interruptive explanation: A “lock-in” was a means of skirting the legal closing time by leaving both drinks and payment on the bar before 11 p.m., no economic exchange carried out after that. Lock-ins magically transformed public houses into private parties. But that’s what the lock-in “was” back then, licensing laws having changed in 2003 to allow later closures. Just a thing of the past now.

Ignoring my ultimatum – typical of that lot – they carried on as I retreated with the glassware. “Alright,” I muttered to myself. “‘Don’t pay much attention to me, nobody ever does’.”

“Keller just mentioned how more people are reading the Bible for themselves,” Maisie observed, looking a bit sleepy. “And I’m sorry, but I think increased literacy has more to do with encouraging our modern individualism than your genetics and sociologies, than your economics and histories and religions.”

“You mean how we’re no longer all sitting ‘round the fireplace at night telling tales but now off in our own corners reading a good book?” Willie asked. “Reading *The Good Book*?”

“I guess that’s part of it. Private and solitary reading definitely increases our sense of individualism and lets our minds circulate independently of one another, beyond our immediate time and place. But it’s also *what’s* being read.” It was her turn to reach below the table and search her own bag for a book, then unsteadily laying a small copy of *Sense and sensibility* on top of Smith. “The rise of printed fiction, from stories for children to novels by Dickens and Brontë, by Eliot and Trollope ... it’s literature that *really* lets people live inside someone else’s skin.”

“The benevolence that attends individualism keeps coming back to this idea of our mentally getting inside someone else’s circumstances,” Willie said. “And I guess it’s hard to think of a more explicit case than in literature.”

Maisie nodded with a yawn, adding, “And it’s literature that gives people exemplars to shape their lives. John Stuart Mill thought we English ... ah, sorry, Meris ... we *British* aren’t very good with emotions, seeing emotions as just necessary evils to nurture our acts of benevolence, but he regarded literature as a useful tool to shape our lives by opening ourselves up to others, kind of like what J.Artus said about self-formation by witnessing other-formation.”

“But that works two ways, Maisie,” Dorian said. “Did you know Rousseau wasn’t keen on literary exemplars precisely for that reason? He thought that’s still a kind of external dependence *impeding* our individualism. Dependence on lords, dependence on church, dependence on fictional archetypes – they all impede the independence of selfhood....”

“Well, I don’t know, but ... I think he’s wrong to call it a dependence relationship. Maybe if you read just one book, like Keller’s Bible, that might be true. But if you read ... *lots* of them, and from lots of cultures, then literature becomes ... options ... mix-and-match ... like a really advanced form of language choices you can use. Hmm...” Maisie’s uncertainty seemed to be taking root in her mind, watered by her second pint. She rarely went beyond one, even on Fridays. “I’m trying to say that, well, we use words to articulate our thoughts, even when the words don’t precisely match our thoughts, and we can likewise use characters in books to exemplify our more complex ideas about our selves ... like the characters are supersized words we can use to identify ourselves. And if we know enough words ... if we know enough characters ... we can then choose and arrange and modify them in unique ways and, I mean, the more characters with their own lives and their own circumstances that we have access to ... they help make each of us unique and new, getting us out of our ruts. Literature’s characters and settings and themes and allusions ... they all let us know about options and alternatives outside our own routinized selves, options that we wouldn’t have had access to if we were illiterate.” She addressed Dorian directly. “And the more options we have, the less we’ll be dependent on any one of them.” Slowly retrieving her bag as she got ready to go, she added: “So fuck your Rousseau.” Now I *knew* she’d drunk more than her usual limit.

“And another thing.” She wasn’t done, returning her bag to the floor. “When it comes to individuating the self, how can we forget poetry? After all, it’s the Romantics who showed us how my ‘me’ is what’s welling up *from within*, poetry crystallizing what’s inside the individual me. Even if what’s inside me is a bit of a mystery in my eyes, it’s still what makes me conscious and moral, distinctive and autonomous, not anything coming from the outside.” No one dared speak yet. “And let’s face it. They’re reading Keats, not Kant.” Still no one spoke. “Done.” She reached down and reclaimed her bag.

And she dropped it again. “Not *quite* done. Literature, poetry and art not only give us the vocabulary to articulate our emotions ... they not only give us characters who are ... who are ‘good to think with’ ... they also give us the *overt reflexivity about selfhood* you won’t get through your genes, your markets and your imperial policy. They’re explicit explorations of a hero’s self-understanding or a villain’s hidden intentions. The arts openly invite us to look inside another’s circumstances and sympathize with or at least understand their self. It’s the stock-in-trade of literature. Your genetics and your economics and your politics merely lead to individualism and selfhood as byproducts. But literature, poetry and the arts ... they directly nurture and worship and analyze selfhood. Oscar Wilde said, ‘Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known.’ He’s right.” After a prolonged silence, the rest of the bemused table watching her, she concluded, “There. *Now* I’m done.” Her bag this time made it into her lap, but she made no further effort to stand up.

“But do we all agree the giant rabbit is right?” Willi asked, bringing their arguments back to the original question. She glanced at her watch, apparently wondering if they’d all make it back to their respective colleges before the gates closed. “Like strength, beauty or intelligence, is the quality of benevolence one of my natural building blocks that then gets fully expressed in the modern West as we become more conscious of the other? Is my benevolence hardwired – or at least wired up through habituation – into my self but just now the wiring is getting exposed?”

“Such is how a lot of Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers would have concluded,” Dorian affirmed. “Lots of them thought benevolence was either a germ already present within the heart to be nurtured or, if not innate, it was something that naturally developed as part of us, just like the body naturally develops to take on a particular shape in adulthood.” He stretched, clearly a bit stiff from awkwardly sitting on his bench for so long. “Speaking of Rousseau – fucked or not – he even thought benevolence was as natural as any other desire manifested by the self, and he even described it as instinctual – wired into us at the animal level and kind of foreshadowing your own genetic altruists. So I guess he would have included rabbits. ‘Benevolence is internal to the individual self.’ QED.”

To his credit, J.Artus never liked seeing anyone sidelined in either team sports or table spats, and while he often teased your son, I think there was already a growing friendship between them even then. “Lancy, you’ve been rather quiet. No overseas overviews?”

Quiet for so long, it took him a moment to find his voice. “It’s just that...” He shook his head. “No. I’ve spent yet another Friday evening in the library working hard, and I just came in here to drink a beer and call it a night, not really looking for the complete deconstruction of world history. But what I’m hearing from you all is ... I don’t know. It’s just that: pure *deconstruction*.” He actually seemed a bit miffed. “To reach your conclusions about benevolence, you’ve just argued away my individualism, my me. I mean, you made my me a historical construct, caused and conditioned by earlier forces ... literacy, literature, religion, capitalism, new scientific ideas, etcetera, etcetera. And each of those is the product of its own earlier forces. In the end, it just sounds like so much academic gaming until ... until I’m no longer a self-made man; I’m a manmade self. My essential me is entirely artificial, just an accidental product unique to *this* time and *this* place.” I take back my earlier comment: he was indeed miffed. “No. That’s wrong. Simply wrong. My individualism, my true self that’s inside me ... it just *is*. It’s my human nature, and I can’t conceive of my me as ... as not really being me but as being something originally from outside of me.”

“No need to take it personally,” J.Artus smiled.

“But that’s what I mean. My *person* can’t take it. My me is separate from all your academic gaming. Your theories and generalizations feel like ... like a thin, tatty blanket slipping and sliding over my very real body – my very real me – on a cold, damp night. I can’t recognize any of it as useful or real. It’s all *bullshit* because it implies my me is really just a fiction, an accident of history.”

Mrs. Nul, I appreciate your son’s fervor, but I must be honest with you: wrong time, wrong place ... maybe even wrong country. In Britain, we have a natural aversion to taking things too seriously, although when I write “natural,” perhaps Lancy proves it’s more cultural than natural. “The importance of being earnest” is that we *don’t* attach much importance to being earnest. Not in Britain, and definitely not in The Frog on a Friday night. Yet I *do* appreciate what he said, perhaps because he made me wonder if his expressive earnestness went hand-in-hand with his vaunted individualism.

J.Artus threw him a bone. “But Lancy, maybe your individualism, your ‘my me,’ isn’t being caused and conditioned by all those earlier forces. Maybe those forces are all gradually helping you to finally uncover your true human nature, your real individualism. Maybe it just took time for all of us to realize what we’re made of, what we actually are inside.”

“Pah!” This time it was Meris striking back. “As if we ourselves are at the peak of evolution? As if we ourselves are at the finish line of time and we’ve won? As if we here at the end of the second millennium have finally scored the winning goal? Now *that’s* bullshit!” She not only denied the goal; she also seemed to be taking this particular match into extra time. “It’s bullshit because you’re being very narrow-minded in time whereas, if you ask me, you were all already being very narrow-minded in terms of space.”

“Meris! Yer a richt wee scunner!” J.Artus said with a mocking look of horror, stopping himself just as he was reaching out to reclaim his *Wealth of nations*. “Does our rebellious northern cousin wish to offer a minority report?”

“No. It’s *you lot* who just voiced a minority report, all talking your mince. You think you’re ultimately defining the self and making benevolence one of its building blocks, but you do it by quoting Darwin, Smith, Tennyson, Keats and Wilde, by alluding to the Glorious Revolution, imperial colonialism and the Church of England.” Meris paused for effect. “And what do they *all* have in common?”

In unison, Willie, J.Artus, Dorian and Maisie begrudgingly replied, “They’re British...” I said the same, although only quietly to myself, as I locked up the till.

“Now I’ll grant you that you also managed to cross the twenty-mile-wide channel all the way over to France with the likes of Rousseau, but even there you started to acknowledge that Rousseau thinks a bit differently,” she continued. “And that makes sense. Someone like Smith lived here in the afterglow of the Glorious Revolution, the spread of market economies and the rise of religious tolerance, but someone like Rousseau lived over there in a land of fragmented economic regions beneath a hardcore monarchy and a suffocating church. So Smith saw society as relatively free and good, both tempering the self’s passions and giving the self resources to help it develop, but Rousseau ended up seeing society as oppressive and unfair, any freedoms confined to private doings and contentments *away* from it. Different

locations ... different ideas about what constitutes the self..." She addressed your son directly. "So, sorry Lancy, but selfhood isn't innate human nature. It's the product of time and place."

"She makes a good point," Dorian admitted. "Maybe we need to water down our answer and expand our British vision to a European one?"

"Sure. Throw in your Rousseau and even your Kant and Luther, and yet you're still not venturing very far outward as all your thinkers debate their different arguments for justifying your assumed *rightness* of modern individualism." Now it was her turn to lean down and rummage around in her book bag. "But the farther you move away from London's prime meridian as being the measurable center of all time and space, the weaker your claims on rugged individualism become. So..." She extracted her own book to challenge her rivals, only half the size of *Wealth* but twice that of *Sense*. "So let's expand Maisie's novels to include nineteenth-century Russia, and let's consider the *results* of your individualism when we expose the self's hardwiring. It's ... shocking." She opened Garnett's translation of *The brothers Karamazov* to a page that had already been bookmarked and read out:

Why, the isolation that prevails everywhere, above all in our age – it has not fully developed, it has not reached its limit yet. For every one strives to keep his individuality as apart as possible, wishes to secure the greatest possible fullness of life for himself; but meantime all his efforts result not in attaining fullness of life but self-destruction, for instead of self-realization he ends by arriving at complete solitude. All mankind in our age have split up into units, they all keep apart, each in his own groove; each one holds aloof, hides himself and hides what he has, from the rest, and he ends by being repelled by others and repelling them. He heaps up riches by himself and thinks, "How strong I am now and how secure," and in his madness he does not understand that the more he heaps up, the more he sinks into self-destructive impotence. For he is accustomed to rely upon himself alone and to cut himself off from the whole; he has trained himself not to believe in the help of others, in men and in humanity, and only trembles for fear he should lose his money and the privileges that he has won for himself. Everywhere in these days men have, in their mockery, ceased to understand that the true security is to be found in social solidarity rather than in isolated individual effort. But this terrible individualism must inevitably have an end, and all will suddenly understand how unnaturally they are separated from one another. It will be the spirit of the time, and people will marvel that they have sat so long in darkness without seeing the light....

She paused, flipped several pages ahead and sighed. "Dostoevsky tends to go on a bit, but you get his point. If we keep heaping riches on ourselves and repelling others in our worship of individualism, your so-called benevolence aimed at the other will eventually disappear into that darkness along with all security and solidarity and community." She shook her head, her disgust not feigned. "And *my* point is, whenever it comes to selfhood, you have to ask yourself two questions: First, where are your ideas about selfhood coming from, geographically and historically speaking? And second, where are they going to end up, if you follow their trajectory?" She closed the book.

As was his norm, Dorian the Historian was more interested in the first question. "Where did they come from? I suppose for Dostoevsky and all the rest, they ultimately go back to the Greeks."

"The Greeks," Meris nodded, adding *Brothers* to the pile and suffocating poor Brontë between the two oversized men. "As Willie said, they atomized everything. And that discrete, bordered, individuated self-atom you've all been assuming and praising tonight does play right into their hands. The Greeks liked discrete, bordered, individuated things and explicitly privileged *stasis* and *essence* above ... above *change* and *relationships*. And did you know they even gave Keller's Christians their sense of an eternal and finite soul? It's a kind of self-atom that's immune to change, even when the body and everything else around it changes."

"Wait a minute, Meris," J.Artus rebutted. "Like what I just said to Lancy, I could read it very differently. The Greeks started us on the road to *discover* what the self really is – atomized and individuated – and later the British – alright, the 'Europeans' – fine-tuned it, recognizing the truth to it

being an individuated, bordered, discrete ... eh ... ‘unit,’ as your Dostoevsky just called it. The self is a thing ... a thing with agency and ... with control ... ah ... interlaced and competing with other things as it develops itself ... and ... eh...” He looked around the table. “Some help, people?”

“A thing with dignity and natural rights?” Willard suggested.

“Independent from the grander directing powers of any overlord?” Dorian chimed in.

“And reflexive – seeing itself as being a self?” Maisie added.

“*But you think the Greeks are the only game in town?*” asked Meris, the finalist in Oriental Studies.

That silenced the table.

She continued. “I think that, of all the stuff you’ve said tonight, Smith’s vision makes the most sense because he resorted to a relational vision of selfhood, of defining it relative to others as it developed. It’s not unlike the idea of his mate and fellow Scot, David Hume, except Hume flipped the relationship. He said we first know ourselves – our consciousness, our sentiments – and *then* project it onto others, especially onto the people closest to us in families, neighborhoods and religions. That makes benevolence an expansion of self-love as we read ‘us’ into ‘them’ by degrees.”

“Ah, you Scots: Always mindful of your clan,” J.Artus said.

“I’ll ignore that. Regardless, even though they’re into crystallizing the self through its relationships with others, those relationships are merely a means to an end for them, the assumed end still being one’s own discrete and bordered self, the individualism that so worried Dostoevsky. It’s a process that either begins in self-love with Hume or ends in self-command with Smith. For them, relationships just shape that self nugget; they don’t *constitute* the self.” She made as if to slip on her jacket but, in their crowded little corner of the now-empty pub, thought better of it. “So in the end, all your Romantics, Rousseaus and rabbits are still assuming a self that’s a discrete, bordered, independent ... thingy! Even when natural law and the industrial revolution and Christianity pushed your cultural center of gravity downward and outward, it just exponentially multiplied the number of those discrete, bordered, independent units or ... *thingies*. And when you start from that premise – that the self is an object you can easily draw a line around, even if there are different ways of drawing that line – then you naturally end up talking about ‘benevolence’ as if it were an internal building block or unit or ... or a ... a sub-thingy of that thingy.”

Behind her, Lancy mumbled, “I don’t get it.”

J.Artus also wasn’t buying it. “That’s the only premise there is, Meris. *It is* the only game in town. The self is just ... well, you know – what it is. A thing. And things, by matter of definition, are bordered, discrete, independent ... things.”

“By matter of definition, but that’s a definition of *matter*. The self isn’t matter; it’s not a separate atom or unit or little nut with a hard, thick shell. As I just said, it’s really just the accumulated relationships around it.” Now that she had the floor, Meris composed herself and then proceeded, always looking down at her jacket bunched up in her lap so that she wouldn’t be distracted. “Now maybe I’m generalizing and maybe it’s more an argument or an aspiration for the early Chinese Confucians, but one of my tutors put it this way. For them, the self was like a knot on a relationship net. He’d say that, J.Artus, your imagined ‘self’ is really no more than a conglomeration of ties to others – to your family, to Willie, to your mates Dorian, Maisie and me, to your tutors, to the members of your rowing crew, even to your new bunny buddy. You are the sum of those relationships to others, and those relationships aren’t just projections from you or models for you, as Hume and Smith had argued. The locus of interlacing *is* the you. It isn’t a bordered thing; it’s just a bundle of ties that outwardly disperses on a matrix. And if your ‘you’ is just a knot of ties to others, then when you unravel the knot, there’s nothing left.” She nodded toward her contribution to the stack of storytellers in the middle of the table. “So the Confucians would agree with Dostoevsky about ‘terrible individualism’ and how it makes us ‘*unnaturally* ... separated from one another’.”

Smiling, Dorian replied, “That’s ... that’s making me use my loaf. I hadn’t thought about it quite like that. I’m a dynamic set of relationships, not an ongoing essence,” he nodded to the rest of the table, letting himself get lost in thought for a moment. But then he woke himself up. “No. Wait a moment,

Meris. Even if we can't say the self is an essence like a nugget, aren't we each still *individuals* if each person's relationship knot is a unique tangle, a one-of-a-kind nexus? I'm defined by a small family, you a large one; I'm from down in Somerset, you from Fife, and so forth. So we're still individuated?"

"Granted, but while everyone starts out different – in different networks and circumstances – we then measure ourselves against and aspire to a common template or yardstick as we each try to align with the shared matrix. In early China, we do that by recognizing the *yi* 義 or 'proper relationships' around each self."

"You mean like, even though you and I have very different knots, we both naturally love and respect mum and dad..."

"...and obey our leaders, and defer to our elder siblings, and protect our spouses, and value our mates ... an abstract universal template of these proper relationships arranging the strands of each self knot," Meris replied. "Regardless of class, irrespective of era, it's this template of proper relationships that helps each individually circumstanced person understand the knotty self and negotiate its dynamic place within a community, within a culture. That's how we survive. 'We use proper relationships to adapt and resonate, thus understanding when to bend and when to straighten' 以義變應，知當曲直故也. At least that's how thinkers like Xunzi explained it back in the third century BCE."

Dorian still seemed bothered. "Okay. Maybe our modern Western notion of selfhood and individualism and dignity doesn't work for your Confucian thinker, for ... what was his name?"

"Xunzi, but he speaks for Confucians generally on this. And by the way, those Confucians would still maintain that this kind of self still has its own dignity, even if they didn't have a particular word for it. They said if you offered me my pint while cursing me and humiliating my family and smack-talking the Scots, I'd probably not accept it, no matter how thirsty or desirous I was. That's because we've each got a 'natural nobility' 天爵, which I guess is the same thing as dignity."

"I'll be sure to honor both your thirst and your dignity when it's my turn to buy the next round," Dorian replied, then blowing her a kiss. "But back to this Xunzi ... I'm still wondering if we're talking apples and oranges here. For the most part tonight, we've been talking *big human trends* – capitalism, parliamentary systems, Protestantism, literature and the like. And we're talking about how the average person on the Clapham omnibus then ends up thinking about their self because of them. But when your tutor is talking about the self as a knot of ties rather than an isolated, hard-shelled nut, is he talking Chinese *philosophy* – the argument and aspiration of just Xunzi and a few Confucians – or is it about how the average person on the ... on the Beijing rickshaw thinks about their self?"

"Good question, and definitely both," Meris answered. "As for the average person in early China – or in *any* traditional culture predominantly based on kin relationships where the family is the economic unit and not the individual – people are less likely to be egotistical atoms and more likely to be nodes of a network. And that gets translated into a culture's rituals, laws, politics..." She gestured toward J.Artus. "If I wrote that fellow a letter of recommendation for a really nice office at court..."

"Thanks!" J.Artus replied.

"... and he balls it up..."

"Oi!"

"... then I myself would get demoted as he drags me down with him. Because our knots extend their strands to others. Or if he's a farmer and ... I don't know ... steals a vessel of wine from the village temple..."

"It was my round."

"...then the four of us who are his neighbors would get punished for the theft, too, in a kind of mutual responsibility system."

Maisie sat up straight so she could shake her finger at J.Artus. "I'm keeping an eye on you."

"Exactly – that's what they wanted us to do. And if he were really *really* bad, like he's a traitor to the queen..."

"Oh for crying out loud!"

“...then the court might execute, not just him, but his whole family, his biological relationship net.”

“Granddad might get stropopy with me for that.” He reached for the Rag Mag and pocketed it.

“These are your ... your ‘Beijing rickshaw’ examples. In the real world, whenever a self got promoted – whenever a knot on the relationship net got pulled upward, then the surrounding knots on the net would rise up too but usually not quite so high. And vice versa – you could drag your surrounding knots down with you if you did something evil.” Meris paused. “Sorry, J.Artus,” she added diplomatically.

“So what about intelligence, strength, creativity, beauty – all those other things we might say make up the individuated self, defining it?” Willie asked.

“They simply weren’t idealized in the same way we might venerate them today, especially not by the elite or anyone we would call a Confucian. In fact, the Confucian *Analects* – memorized and habituated by millions of kids for two millennia – explicitly says the master *refused* to discuss the ‘I’ or ‘ego’ – what they called the *wo* 我. Instead it’s all about benevolence, proper relationships, filial piety, loyalty, ritual deference and so forth.”

“I guess that makes some sense,” Willie said. “Everything you just listed are all forms of goodness expressed in relationships *among* people, unlike strength or intelligence which are forms of goodness associated with isolated individuals. When it comes to benevolence, it takes two to tango.”

“That’s right, but even thinking of it as a ‘goodness’ ... that’s objectifying it. We in the West like to abstract and reify good and evil in a way that almost makes them tangible ‘things,’ just like how we think about the self as a thing. Sometimes we even externalize goodness and evil, and Verger Keller might go so far as to give them halos and heavens, or horns and hells...”

“Whoa! Not fair, you lot,” I had to intervene from behind the bar as I was putting on my jacket. Then I followed that with a sigh. “Never mind.”

Meris shrugged. “Sorry, but in terms of the relationship net, a so-called goodness like benevolence is really just a positive influence heading away from one knot and toward another, whereas evil is the opposite. Rather than saying there’re lumps of good and evil either inside the self or outside in the cosmos, you can instead imagine vector arrows dynamically running back and forth along the strands between knots. It’s not good and evil; it’s varying degrees of active selflessness and selfishness minus any notion of an eternal, nut-like ‘I’ or *wo* in the middle. It’s all a lot more dynamic and flowing and ... netty.”

Dorian let out a barely audible whistle. “So instead of focusing their microscope on the atoms to the possible detriment of seeing any relationships among them, the early Chinese focused on the relationships and missed finding any atoms.”

“Ergo, no ego. Your locating ‘benevolence’ as a sub-thing *inside* the self-thing just doesn’t make any sense to me. It only makes sense if you’re first drawing circles around things rather than seeing networks of relationships between knots.”

As she said all that, her finger had been mindlessly tracing out the wet ring where her pint had been. Then she tapped the table, adding, “But you know that we’ve been horribly generalizing about all this, both East and West. I don’t mean to ‘Orientalize’ or ... eh ... or to ‘Occidentalize.’ It’s *not* either/or; it’s just a difference in priorities. You’ve also got notions of atoms and individualisms – of *wo* – in early China just as you’ve got notions of change and interrelatedness in the modern West. Early China and the modern West just end up having different emphases as to what really ought to be proper and normative. *That’s* the real contrast.”

J.Artus extrapolated. “Case and point: Here in the West, you’ve got *both* rich, rugged individuals who buy their single pints in the States *and* kind, concerned hosts who buy rounds for their networks of loyal, loving guests in wacky olde England.”

“You do know I’m sitting right here when you say that,” Lancy retorted. “And besides, I don’t buy Meris’s logic. I’m still me when I’m all alone and won’t just disappear in a puff of smoke in my solitude.” Still miffed. “Just like how my me isn’t caused and conditioned by historical forces prior to me, my me is also *not* dependent on people outside of me ... on you and you and you and you. I don’t get it.”

Dorian took up the cudgel for Meris. “But Lancy, do a thought experiment inspired by her Dostoevsky. What if you ‘sat so long in darkness’ in complete isolation, without any family, mates or other selves of any kind? Would you even have the concept of ... of ... of your.... What the...?”

After so much talk, the ensuing silence was deafening.

“To state the obvious,” Willie eventually filled in Dorian’s ellipse, “what happened to the lights?”

And that’s all I can report, the rest of the pub having long cleared out and returned to their respective colleges for their nightly “climb in.” I left them there to enjoy their own personal lock-in but with the taps turned off; I left them there to carry on their little argument about benevolent individualism but now in the dark. Still, I figured they’d be safe and sound in there, the pub unlikely to simply fall down around their ears. There’s that, I guess. They were now welcome to show their own “selves” – nuts or knots – out of The Frog and homeward.



Fast forward five-plus years. Your son may have started off on the periphery, but over time, he managed to tie himself into that network of Camford friends and acquaintances which is a story for others to tell. But the last time I myself saw him, he had returned to the edge – his friends all having moved on – and, I dare say, he himself was just then about to cross beyond that edge.

“Keller, I still don’t get it. This temporary signpost ... is this D.Fu saying ‘Fuck you, all you Harringtons and Stradlingtons and Arlingtons and Tradish-lingtons!’ Is this pole here just his way of giving the upraised middle finger to all of Camford convention?”

“How typical of an American, Lancy.”

“Why? Because I’m resorting to the crass and the vulgar when I really ‘mustn’t grumble’? You know well enough why I’m fucking finished with this place.”

“No. It’s just that you’re not respecting the proper British ‘Fuck-you’ salute that requires *two* upraised fingers, not just one.” That provoked the slightest of emotional responses out of him – not so much a laugh but just a barely audible hmph. Even so, I had to leave Lancy there in the cemetery and head for the chapel to hunt down the prayers and scriptures dedicated to Laurence for evensong. Like that night in The Frog, he could find his own way home.

And I hope he someday finds his way home back to you.

Sincerely yours,

Keller Ward, Verger
The Chapel
St. Polycarp’s Hall of Camford University

大道廢，有仁義；智慧出，有大偽；六親不和，有孝慈；國家昏亂，有忠臣。

If the greater Dao is set aside, then there are benevolence and proper relationships.

If wisdom and intelligence emerge, then there is great artifice.

If the relationships between father and son, elder and younger brother as well as husband and wife lose their harmony, then there are filial piety and affection.

If the ruling houses fall into confusion and chaos, then there are loyal officials.

– *The Daode jing*, Chap. 18 (SPH edition).

DF: ... mind, but is it necessary?

LA: After last week's fiasco, I thought it might help. This way I can listen, pause, think, rewind.

[Low-level background noise: rain against glass, crackling fire.]

DF: Alright ... needs must. But your first essay of the year wasn't a "fiasco."

LA: You burned it in the grate.

DF: We were cold.

LA: And you burned my books.

DF: Just *The Daode jing* translations you were relying on. If I'd been a tree, I'd be embarrassed to have my wood pulp responsible for preserving such ... such *spiritual* pulp. [Slight pause.] The next time I see you glowingly write about "embracing Nature," or "living intuitively," or "just being one with all things" without further explanation, I expect to see a properly-rolled joint clipped to the front of your essay. [Slight pause.] Do you fancy a pot of tea?

LA: Please. But some of those books were scholarly translations and academic commentaries. They were contrasting Daoism with stodgy Confucianism, showing how *The Daode jing*'s author Laozi condemned unnatural Confucian benevolence and righteousness as ... well ... as being "false," "artificial," "hypocritical," "confusing," "annoying" Their words, not mine.

DF: And it took the bedder more than an hour to scrub away the soot their words left behind. Such ideas have become so deeply inscribed, they indeed leave a mark that's hard to wipe clean.

LA: But they're quoting from *The Daode jing* itself.

DF: Where?

[Book bag unzips, book bangs against table, pages turning.]

DF: One more translation to raise my temperature?

LA: Please don't. This one's from the library.

DF: The fiction section, no doubt.

LA: Like the ones you burned, this text highlights the eighteenth chapter that explicitly says how benevolence and righteousness arise *only when the Dao fell*. Benevolence and righteousness – those are the maxims of Confucianism, right?

DF: I grant you that, although instead of “righteousness” for *yi* 義, I prefer “proper relationships” which is a bit more precise. It means all the appropriate connections reaching out from your self to others around you. But do go on. What does *The Daode jing* then say after we’ve lost the Dao with the rise of benevolence and proper relationships?

LA: It next says when wisdom appeared, artifice arose. When family relationships lost their harmony, filial piety arose. When states became disordered, loyalty arose. They’re all inverse relationships, just like when the Dao goes down, benevolence goes up. [Pause.] So benevolence is obviously wrong if it’s a product of the fallen Dao.

DF: But if it’s so obviously wrong, then why does *The Daode jing* elsewhere *praise* benevolence? As in its eighth chapter that prioritizes it whenever we indeed form relationships with others around us?

LA: Ah, but in that passage, it’s talking about *true* benevolence. It’s not the *artificial* benevolence of show-off Confucians who put on airs for selfish reasons and hidden motives, pursuing their own false agendas.

DF: And where does it say *any* of that?

LA: ...

DF: I fear you’re just reading a story into the enigmatic *Daode jing* to account for what you want to find there. Before you came to this eighteenth chapter, you were probably thinking “Dao cool” and “benevolence good,” but then you read “When the Dao falls, benevolence appears,” and so you try to rationalize the latter away: “Oh, he must not be talking about *that* benevolence....” Such is how most scholars indeed resolve these kinds of apparent contradictions. [In mocking impersonation.] “*This* benevolence here surely must be false and artificial, but *that* benevolence there is obviously true and genuine.”

LA: Maybe, but modern scholars don’t *all* argue that way. For example, this particular translation starts by saying you should just leave all these contradictions *as* contradictions because they’re here to help us cultivate a general, deeper skepticism by embracing them. Reality *is* paradoxical, and Laozi’s paradoxes help us soften up the brain and evolve our intuition.

DF [sighing]: That’s still over-reading the text. It’s the translators themselves who are softening up your brain into mush.

LA: Isn’t that a bit harsh?

DF: Perhaps, but let’s test their conclusion about vilifying benevolence before you simply accept it.

LA: How?

DF [slight pause]: Please push forward twenty chapters – to the thirty-eighth, I believe – to look at another statement about the fallen Dao.

LA [pages turning]: Alright, but I don’t see how it’s going to help us understand a straightforward “If A, then B.”

DF: Trust me.

LA: Okay. The thirty-eighth chapter ... which is introducing the “De” half of *The Dao and De jing*, De being ... “potency”? “Power”?

DF: “Potency” is fine for now.

LA: And I think you’re referring to this line “When the Dao was lost, there was the De; when the De was lost, there was benevolence...” 失道而後德，失德而後仁.

DF: Correct, and you can already stop there. So do you see a problem with your earlier assumption about benevolence being hypocritical, artificial and annoying Confucianism?

LA [pausing]: Ah ... I ... hmm ... I suppose by that same logic, I’d also have to say the De is ... is hypocritical, artificial and annoying because it’s something that likewise appears “when the Dao falls.” That’s ... kind of awkward, slamming the De in a book actually entitled *The Daode jing*, the *Classic of the Dao and De*. [Long pause.] So something else is going on here?

DF: Something else is going on here. This book is no diatribe against Confucianism.

LA: Then I’m getting confused. How do I read it ... just as it is? *Without* stories? *Without* context? It can’t just be meaningless banter.

DF: I agree. There must be a better reason why *The Daode jing* has been translated almost two thousand times, second only to the Bible in world history. It’s not mere poetic nothingness and paradoxical nonsense. So to find that meaning, where should we begin before we resort to intuition from within or to stories from without?

LA:

DF: Where’s the simplest, most logical place to start?

LA: With the text itself? Like what you just did by putting these two chapters side-by-side?

DF: With the text itself. But as you’ve just seen, that’s not as easy as it sounds because passages that help each other out might not be located adjacent to one other or might not look useful at first. So let’s go back to your eighteenth chapter for a bit. What’s the problem here? *Why* does it seem enigmatic to you?

LA: Well ... as you said, Dao is a good thing, and benevolence is a good thing, but the text is making them inversely related. When the Dao fell, benevolence arose.

DF: So we’re indeed faced with an apparent paradox that forces us to scratch our heads.

LA: Because Confucian benevolence is false compared to true benevolence that....

DF: Stop, please. You’re only allowed to go beyond the text *after* you’ve exhausted all the possibilities within the text itself.

LA: Because ... because.... I’m lost. Let me think. So ... here you’ve got this list of specific, apparently conflicting sentiments – chaotic nations next to loyal officials, family disharmony next to filial piety, wisdom next to artifice.... A list of contraries.... Okay. That format *does* sound sort of familiar....

DF:

LA: Well, I guess it sort of reminds me of its second chapter....

[Chair scrapes floor, book slides off shelf.]

DF: Good. I like watching the brain soufflé rising. Now here – look up that chapter, but this time I think your classical Chinese is good enough that I want you to read from the original. You’ve had three years of classical studies and just one left before finals. Time to get some “unseen” practice in. Which means I’ll also take *that* from you ... [book snapping shut] ... so this modern Brain Basil with his paradoxical spiritualisms and projected stories doesn’t tempt you away from figuring it out for yourself.

[Thud, soon followed by louder crackling.]

Dear me, I shouldn’t have done that.... Please refer the librarian to me and tell him I have a nice bottle of sherry waiting for him.

[Pages being flipped. Stoker clanks inside grate.]

LA: Okay – the second chapter:

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。

The whole world understands how only ugliness makes beauty beautiful;

The whole world understands how only what is not good makes the good good.

Thus existence and nonexistence generate one another;

Difficult and easy complete one another;

Long and short are relative to one another;

High and low lean on one another;

Note and tone....

Note and tone ...?

DF: That one is rather hard, but you’re doing very well. One commentator thinks it’s the higher and lower musical tones, which would indeed fit the pattern.

LA: Okay.

The higher and lower tones harmonize with one another;

Before and after follow one another....

DF: That’s enough for now. And the pattern?

LA: Well obviously they’re opposites and they’re mutually dependent – you can’t have one without the other because they implicitly define each other. Can’t know beauty without knowing ugly, and so forth.

DF: That’s right. Dualisms. A reciprocal dependence. And this kind of thinking isn’t unusual in early China....

[Chair scrapes floor again. Another book slides off shelf. Pages being flipped.]

For example, Zhuangzi – that other great early Daoist philosopher alongside Laozi – said:

其成也，毀也。凡物無成與毀，復通為一。

Wherever there's a "coming together," there's a "falling apart." Things don't have just a "coming together" or just a "falling apart"; you must penetrate back to when those two are united as one.

So he seems to be saying that formation and collapse are mutually dependent, mutually defining, and ultimately united in a common category.

[Another book.]

Or *The Huainanzi* from the second century BCE says it's the not-hot that produces the hot and the not-cold that produces the cold. And likewise the formless produces form just as not-yet-heaven-and-earth produces our heaven-and-earth. Things are implicitly defined and created by what they are not....

[Another book.]

Or you might look at this *Guanzi* that's just a little bit older than *The Huainanzi*. It says the unworthy serve the worthy but because the notion of "worthy" is defined by "unworthy," then worthiness also serves unworthiness. So, too, with the valued and unvalued, the respected and unrespected, the beautiful and ugly....

[Another book.]

Even the Confucian thinker Xunzi says that extremely radiant enlightenment comes only from a mind fixated on the extremely dark. Extremely dazzling achievements come only from extremely murky efforts. [Slight pause.] So when it comes to defining anything, every concept implicitly generates its not-that-concept; every A implicitly coexists with its not-A.

LA: Okay. I think I can see where you're going if we then loop back to the eighteenth chapter. Benevolence.... *That's* an A. So when benevolence arises, it only arises if the concept of *not*-benevolence also arises, and so naturally the Dao is failing and falling when *not*-benevolence arises?

DF: That was quick. You're beginning to think along the right lines.

LA: We only *recognize* what filial piety is when the family's a mess; we only *appreciate* loyalty when the state is falling apart.... [Slight pause, clearing throat]: "It's only as the year turns cold when we realize that the pines and cypresses don't wither" 歲寒，然後知松柏之後彫也。

DF: Excellent! You also remember your Confucius from last year. And two thousand years ago, Sima Qian – the Grand Historian of China himself – cited that same line from *The analects* to then say only a muddy and mired age produces the purest of knights.

LA: So *everyone* was benevolent in the state of the Dao, and hence no one could recognize it because there wasn't any not-benevolence sitting around to offset it, to contrast it?

DF: That's how some early commentaries take it. They say the Dao's presence equates with there being a great peace in the world, so much so that we don't recognize good things because there aren't any not-good things to frame them. If I remember rightly, one of them concludes:

大道之世，仁義沒，孝慈滅，猶日中盛明，眾星失光。

In the era of the great Dao, “benevolence” and “proper relationships” will dissolve while “filial piety” and “kindness” will vanish, just like when the sun has fully risen and the host of stars lose their radiance.

LA: Because there’s radiance *everywhere* ... a beautiful image.

DF: It is, but ... with all due respect to them, I don’t think their logic is quite right. You see, you could just as easily have said “Everyone was *not*-benevolent when the Dao was around, and so no one could recognize that ‘not-benevolence’ until someone with ‘benevolence’ happened to come along.” It can work both ways.

LA [chuckling]: So you’re saying Daoism’s A/not-A argument isn’t about *good* things; it’s only about ... things, regardless of good or bad. The homogenous, uniform Dao is above *all* A/not-A thinking. Value-free.

DF: I believe so.

LA: So that would mean maybe the Dao is like ... like the necessary-but-invisible glue that binds every A with its not-A; it’s that thing-less thing uniting them if any A is going to be ... to be an A.... And that would mean the Dao is *above* either that A or its not-A.

DF: That’s closer to it. [Slight pause.] So in the end, I think your second chapter indeed helps us unlock the eighteenth, among many others. And you’re in good company to make that comparison. For example, there was this well-intended court adviser who wanted to vaunt the norms of benevolence and proper relationships in front of an evil tyrant. But Zhuangzi warned him against that strategy because it would be like this adviser talking up his own beauty in such a way that only made the tyrant’s ugliness all the greater. So Zhuangzi himself is directly comparing benevolence and not-benevolence on one hand with beauty and ugliness on the other, both pairs being mutually defined. You did right to unlock the eighteenth chapter via the second.

LA: And yet this time I didn’t read someone else’s story into the text to figure that out. Just chapter eighteen with chapter two.

DF: Correct.

LA: So to summarize, whenever an A comes into existence, a not-A is also implicitly generated around it. Its opposite arises next to it.

DF: Ah, careful there. That’s an easy mistake to make. Not every not-A is *an opposite to A*. “Hot” is the not-A of “cold,” but so is ... “a biscuit.” Speaking of which, help yourself to some Hobnobs while the tea is brewing. Fortunately for us, *The Daode jing* covers other types of A/not-A relationships, not just opposites. [Slight pause.] Could you take a look at the eleventh chapter, please?

[Pages turning. Crunching.]

LA: Okay, here it goes:

三十輻，共一轂，當其無，有車之用。埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。鑿戶牖以為室，當其無，有室之用。故有之以為利，無之以為用。

When thirty spokes converge on a single hub, it's at its point of nothingness where you get the utility of the cart....

DF: Please pause there for a moment. Do you understand what you've just translated? What's this "nothingness" here?

LA: Well, nothingness is a kind of spiritual space, a mind-calming experience....

[DF significantly clears his throat.]

...or that's what I might have said *last* week. Here the point of nothingness in the middle of the wheel is ... oh, is it really just ... nothingness ... *literally*? Just the actual empty space in the middle of the hub? You know – like where the cart's axle would go?

DF: That's right. If you didn't have that physical emptiness, that not-wheel in the center of the wheel, you would have an entirely useless wheel and would never get your cart anywhere. Simple as that. Go on....

LA: Right – I think I see the pattern already.

When you work water into the clay to make a vessel, it's at its point of nothingness where you get the utility of the vessel....

I suppose if you didn't have the actual empty space inside the vessel, your vessel is useless. This teacup without a not-teacup in the middle wouldn't hold any tea. Speaking of which

DF: I'll pour; you translate.

LA: Thanks.

When you cut out doors and windows to make a room, it's at these points of nothingness where you get the utility of the room. So if we're to find benefit via what's present, we must find its utility via what's absent.

I see what you mean. Here the not-A is not necessarily *opposing* A as in the first list. These are instead all *spatial* cases of not-wheels, not-vessels and not-rooms – the doors and windows in the last case – making the wheels, vessels and rooms usable. Absences allow presences.

DF: That's right. Both of these lists highlight the not-those-things; both fit under a general principle we might simply call "implicit negative frames." *Implicit* because you say one and always imply the coexistence of the other; *negative* because, whatever A is, it's coexisting with its own *not-A*; and *frames* because they're ways of defining, of fixing the borders to a concept.

LA: "Implicit negative frames." INFs? I'm just trying to make it easier to remember for finals.

DF: There's nothing like an acronym to give it a feeling of veracity. So under that general principle, we can subdivide it into more specific A/not-A formations. You get "implicit *oppositional* negative frames" – beauty to ugliness, high to low and so forth – and you get "implicit *spatial* negative frames" – hubs to wheels, not-cups to cups....

LA: So everything has either an oppositional or a spatial frame by which it's defined.

DF: Uh, no, you don't get off that easy because the story doesn't end there. If you've got implicit *spatial* negative frames....

LA: ... then you've probably got implicit *temporal* negative frames, too?

DF: That's right. For example, early Chinese poets and historians thought they saw sine waves in both dynastic history and personal fortune. What first goes up, must then come down. And *The Guanzi* I just quoted reminds us that when the sun reaches its peak, it begins to set, and when the moon waxes to full, it begins to wane. They're all just the temporal rhythms of the world. And so *The Daode jing* itself warns that "Fortune leans on disaster, and disaster crouches under fortune" 禍兮福之所倚，福兮禍之所伏。 But if you want a proper list comparable to your oppositional and spatial INFs, take a look at ... I think it's the thirty-sixth chapter ... if you would, please, while I enjoy my tea. Milk? Sugar?

LA: Both please. Okay....

[Pages turning.]

將欲歛之，必固張之；將欲弱之，必固強之；將欲廢之，必固興之；將欲奪之，必固與之。是謂微明。柔弱勝剛強。

If you want to gather it in, you must first stretch it out.

If you want to weaken it, you must first strengthen it.

If you want to cast it aside, you must first raise it up.

If you want to snatch it away, you must first share it.

This is called subtle enlightenment in which the soft and weak overcome the hard and strong.

Okay, so there's an implicit temporal dimension to these A's and not-A's just as there's the spatial dimension in the previous list. You only get "stretching it out" if you've already had "gathering it in," if you can define that movement against "gathering it in."

DF: There are plenty of examples of that one in *The Daode jing*. Elsewhere it says, "Bent, then made whole; curved, then straightened; hollowed, then filled; worn out, then renewed; reduced, then attained; multiplied, then lost" 曲則全，枉則直，窪則盈，敝則新，少則得，多則惑, the sage embracing the true unity that runs across these alterations.

LA: That unity presumably being the Dao. [Slight pause.] Is that all of them, then? All the INFs?

DF: Not quite – there's at least one more that I know of. You're translating well, so let's end on an easy one by looking at the opening lines of the twelfth chapter.

[Pages turning.]

LA: Alright – I remember this one but don't think it's really as easy as you say:

五色令人目盲；五音令人耳聾；五味令人口爽。

The five colors will make a person's eyes go blind;

The five notes will make a person's ears go deaf;

The five flavors will make a person's mouth fail.

It may be easy to translate, but I still don't get it.

DF: It's indeed tricky, but we might call this one the "implicit *categorical* negative frame" when the rest of the things in that category are the not-A which lets you define the A. You take sugar in your tea to make it sweet, and that sweetness is the not-salty, not-sour, not-bitter and not-pungent. It's defined within a set category of flavors. [Slight pause.] Or now duly inspired by *The Daode jing*, you'll walk out of here cheerfully singing it, your doh of doh-re-mi being defined by your not-re, not-mi and so forth. It's defined within your set category of musical notes.

LA: Or when I leave here singing, I'll head for my evening meal in the Buttery, walking to the not-east, not-west, not-north.

DF: Exactly. For that matter, I've been speaking of As and not-As. If I were very picky about my metaphors, the A is really defined as not-B, not-C, not-D and so forth, namely within a set category of twenty-six letters. So these are all another "implicit negative frame," one we can add to the oppositional, spatial and temporal ones.

LA: So we've got at least four types of A/not-A's, four dualisms....

DF: Well, "dualism" technically refers to just the first – to oppositional framing – but I won't balk at using the term loosely. Generally speaking, you might collectively think of them as the epitome of *relational* defining, as defining any A by interrelating it to its surrounding not-A's.

LA: Still, what does *The Daode jing* mean when it says the five colors will make you go blind and so forth?

DF: It means that ... uh, no.... I want *you* to figure that out. Confucius said that the good teacher gives one corner so that the good student can figure out the other three for herself. [Slight pause.] Besides, we're actually running out of time today, and I must feed Peeve. So let me set that as your assignment for next week. *You tell me* what it means when the five colors make a person go blind.

[Books sliding back onto shelves, coats rustling.]

LA: I just hope I can keep these four INFs straight in my head until then.

DF: Speaking of heads, I must say that's a very fetching beret you've got on.

LA: Thanks! I found it in a thrift shop, back home in Hoo St. Washbourne.... You're not intending to burn it, are you?

DF [chuckling]: Oh dear no. But it's very fetching, this ... this warm ... blue ... woolen ... beret... of yours.

LA: Sounds a bit creepy when you say it like that but ... uh, I get it ... the tutorial isn't over yet?

DF: It never is.

LA: Okay. Don't say anything and let me guess. First, "warm" ... not cool: implicit *oppositional* negative frame. Second, "blue" ... and so not yellow or red or black, etc.: implicit *categorical* negative frame. Third, eh, woolen? Ah, "woolen" ... no longer the sheep it once was: implicit *temporal* negative frame. Fourth and finally, the beret itself? That's easy. It's where I stick my head, inside where the not-beret is: implicit *spatial* negative frame. It wouldn't be of much use if there weren't some not-beret inside the beret.

DF: Excellent. Defining a thing by relating it to what's around it is exceedingly important in early and medieval Chinese thinking, whether A is defined by its surrounding not-A or I'm defined by my "proper relationships" to others surrounding my self, as we'll come to appreciate in Confucianism.

LA: So A/not-A thinking isn't the monopoly of the Daoists?

DF: Oh, by no means. In fact, there's a particularly complicated version in early Buddhism that's best associated with a third-century monk by the name of Nāgārjuna. He started what we might call the Madhyamaka revolution that led to Chinese Buddhism as we know it. He often resorted to something known as the tetralemma that maintains a fourfold logic: A ... not-A ... *both A and not-A*, which today's Daoist thinking might help us unpack ... and finally *neither A nor not-A*. But how that last one works in practice is a real puzzle that few have even attempted to solve.

LA: Sounds frightful. I'll have to think about that one. But for now, I just know that I'll never look at this hat the same way again. [Sound of book bag zipping up.] By the way, the original authors of *The Daode jing* were obviously thinking about A/not-A in general, but do you think they were conscious of these different *types* of A/not-A?

DF: I think so. The *oppositional* INFs are clustered together in one chapter, just as the *spatial* INFs are in another, and so forth. They themselves collected examples that went together as sets; you and I today are just giving each set a name and then deducing a general principle to fit all of them.

LA: But one last question before I turn this thing off, and it's back to where we started today. Let's assume that, in the eighteenth chapter, benevolence emerges against its INF, against its not-benevolence ... couldn't that still be a condemnation of Confucianism, precisely because it moved away from the pristine, homogenous Dao?

DF: Potentially yes, but not for the reasons you saw in those other books now rightfully consigned to the flames. Benevolence isn't the pretentious posturing or false fetishizing of arrogant Confucian elites. Any concept – *even the "Dao" itself when you give it a name* – is subject to the same creation of implicit negative frames. As we said before, it's not about "benevolence"; it's about creating dualistic boxes. [Long pause as another book slides from a shelf, followed by pages being flipped.] As another early commentary explained that line about benevolence going up when the Dao goes down ... yes, here: "Whenever the ruler loses the concept of *wuwei*" – of not acting upon other things – "and moreover whenever he attends to discriminations and establishes what's considered good, the Dao comes near to becoming a 'thing' 失無為之事，更以施慧立善，道進物也." Again, it's the *thing-ing* of benevolence or even of the Dao itself that's the real problem.

LA: When you put it that way, I remember reading another line in *The Daode jing* that says the deep, dark, distant realm of the Dao is itself "opposed to things 與物反矣," opposed to boxy dualisms, I guess.

DF: Good memory. "Opposed to thing-ing," you might even say. And you can do that in classical Chinese grammar. Maybe we should talk more about the Dao/not-Dao next time.

LA [over the rattle of empty teacups]: But if that's the case, then why do most *Daode jing* scholars today defend the Dao and shoot down "benevolence" in a Daoist-Confucian gunfight?

DF: I think it's because we assume there's an "I'm-right-you're-wrong" kind of fight whenever ideas we've articulated meet. We assume a Western metaphor of conflict or schism, leading us to draw thick battle lines between Confucianism and Daoism, between benevolence and Dao. But Chinese ideas don't

fight, at least not like that. They ... hmm ... alright ... let me leave you with a story from *The spring and autumn annals of Mr. Lü* which was compiled around 239 BCE.

LA: So exactly a century before the *Huainanzi*.

DF: Once upon a time an archer from the big southern state of Chu lost his bow in the wilderness, but he didn't bother searching for it, concluding that "A man of Chu lost it; a man of Chu will find it." That was rather selfless of him – as long as one of his fellow countrymen found the bow and used it, he'd be happy. But Confucius comes along and, when he hears this story, he says that such sentiment is great, but he'd personally omit "of Chu" in that concluding line. In other words, Confucius was even more selfless and regarded *all* humanity as his proper frame of reference, not just a particular state. *Someone* will find it, and that's great. But then ... our hero Laozi comes along, hears the same story and abridges the concluding sentence even more, taking out "a man." The bow will be found, and that's enough. For Daoists, the frame of reference that's important is not humanity but existence generally.

LA: So Laozi isn't saying Confucius is wrong; he saying Confucius isn't completely right.

DF: Ah, you catch on fast. And that's mostly how early Chinese schools interact with one another. Not "I'm right; you're wrong" gunfights, but "I'm more right; you're less right" negotiations. Whole picture versus little corner. In this particular case with the bow, Confucians think it's more right to focus on humanity, or as Confucius himself once admitted, "It's humans who lengthen the Dao" – literally who "forge the path" or "trail" – "and it's not the case that the Dao lengthens humans" 人能弘道，非道弘人. Granted, the Dao is a big idea, but as we're human, we should obviously focus on humans.

LA: I'm guessing Laozi would respond that, yes, the Dao is about humans but, no, it's not *particularly* about humans. It's about the nature of reality.

DF: Correct. Humans forge their paths; animals forge their paths; *all things* forge their paths. And while they all forge their paths in the wilderness, that bow will be found. [Slight pause.] Or to shift metaphors, we'll only understand humans by stepping back and seeing the humanity corner relative to the whole picture.

LA: Sounds like both Confucians and Daoists would agree there are different spheres of influence – a human-circumstanced self and a ... a totality-circumstanced self, respectively – but they would disagree on which was more important.

DF: I most like how the Daoist-leaning *Huainanzi* says it: a night can't be longer than a year because the former is contained within the latter; the standards of benevolence and proper relationships can't be greater than the Dao because they are enclosed within the Dao. So the Daoists aren't dismissing the benevolence template. Absolutely not. They're just identifying it as a subunit of and subordinate to the bigger Dao. [Slight pause.] Think of it this way: *The Daode jing* is *not* condemning benevolence in the eighteenth chapter, and the "great Dao" 大道 – its opening words – could even be translated as the "greater Dao," the ultimate Dao as opposed to Confucianism's lesser Dao. It's awarding a silver medal to the Confucians as compared to Daoist gold.

LA: And I suppose a silver medal is still good.

DF: I'd wear a silver medal with great pride, given the chance. Wouldn't you? For that matter, Confucius himself pops up over and over again as a character in the Daoist *Zhuangzi*. And he's not portrayed as a

silly straw man or half-witted nincompoop; he's a good man who's partially advanced toward the Dao and yet has a long way to go.

LA: Yet I suspect the Confucians themselves weren't entirely satisfied with silver.

DF: And I suspect you'd be right. Someone like Xunzi can take the same partial-whole pairing you find in Daoism and flip it. "Sure, your patterns of existence go on and on and on, but they're in fact *so* big, there's just no way you'll ever figure it all out even if you devoted your whole life to it," he says – although I'm paraphrasing as we don't have time for me to pull down that book. So practical learning *knows when to stop*, he says quite bluntly and explicitly, and where's the stopping point for him, for the Confucians in general?

LA: Humanity. Humans who will find the bow.

DF: That's right. Our stopping point is at the natural, practical relationships among people. The Dao isn't about heaven or earth; it's only about people, he says, and so "in the Dao of the past kings, benevolence was paramount" 先王之道，仁之隆也. Strange arguments and bizarre claims about "sameness and difference" 同異 are pointless and impractical. He even criticizes Zhuangzi directly as someone who droned on and on about "heaven" but didn't really get "people." [Slight pause.] Those silly, impractical Daoists are spread too thin, trying to compete in every game in the Olympics, and so while they're not wussy weaklings, they won't be up-to-snuff in any particular event, leaving the Confucians to win gold in the human race.

LA: Cute.

DF: I thought you'd like that. But my point is, yes – you can contextualize *The Daode jing* as manifesting historical tensions between Daoists and Confucians, but no – it's not a western-style gunfight ... no "You're wrong; I'm right, so ... DRAW!" It's not about being wrong; it's about being not-quite-as-right, not-quite-as-suitable. And that sets a very different tone in Daoist-Confucian interactions, in *all* interactions. [Slight pause.] How ideas talk to each other ... it's such an important matter, perhaps we might come back to this later in the term? But for now, just remember here that, from the Daoist side, it's big picture versus a corner of that picture; from the Confucian side, it's focused, practical application versus abstract, impractical musing. The point is ... *neither is saying the other is wrong*, but both are still privileging their own take on the Dao as better, as more important.

LA: I think I follow, and this is for the tape. Ahem.... [Slight pause.] When benevolence arises, that means not-benevolence must also arise and the dark, homogenous unity of the greater Dao gets lost as each crystallizes. But that doesn't make benevolence totally evil per se ... it's just dropped down below that pure state of the undefinable Dao where benevolence and not-benevolence are still merged. The Daoists say "The Confucians don't see that bigger picture"; the Confucians say "No, we see it but choose to ignore it for practical reasons." [A second pause.] And if I myself can't see it, I'll just hit rewind.

DF: If it's still unclear on second hearing, bring your questions next week when we carry on, starting with you telling me about how the five colors can make a person blind.

LA: Okay.... May I practice some benevolence and help with the washing up?

DF: Oh, no. I'll see to the cups and their not-cups. It's time for you yourself to head not-east, not-west, not-north for your not-breakfast/not-lunch. And please be sure to close the not-room behind you as you head not-up the....

[Tape ends.]

Transcribed by Kennedy B.
Townvilleton City: November 13, 2012

求賢取士屬熙辰， Seeking out worthies and hunting for scholars to join the shining
celestial sanctum,
朝野喧傳詔墨新。 I will widely circulate my summons – its ink still fresh – from
central court to wild periphery:
省試更增人百數， “The government examinations must recruit an additional
hundred-plus people!”
大庭將見出平津。 The palace bureaucracy will make this known, sending my
summons outward via the imperial highways.
– Song Emperor Huizong (1082-1135) (L.Nul, trans.)

The Dao in a fly’s head

蠅頭之道

Preface: An explanation of the title and the purpose of this handbook

(November 1115)

Most of us are common houseflies, not imperial phoenixes, but the Dao also extends downward into our lowly, swarming, buzzing world. Did not Zhuangzi say as much?

東郭子問於莊子曰：「所謂道，惡乎在？」	Dongguozi asked Zhuangzi, “Just where is this so-called ‘Dao’?”
莊子曰：「無所不在。」	Zhuangzi said, “There’s nowhere it’s not.”
東郭子曰：「期而後可。」	Dongguozi said, “You’ll need to be more specific.”
莊子曰：「在螻蟻。」	“It’s down in the crickets and ants.”
曰：「何其下邪？」	“So low as that?”
曰：「在稊稗。」	“It’s down in the grass and weeds.”
曰：「何其愈下邪？」	“Even lower?”
曰：「在瓦礫。」	“It’s down in the tiles and bricks.”
曰：「何其愈甚邪？」	“Even <i>that</i> low?”
曰：「在屎溺。」	“It’s down in the piss and shit.”
東郭子不應。	Dongguozi offered no response.

The Dao is indeed everywhere, both around us and in us; it doesn’t just hover overhead in the sacred heavens. It’s down here in the palpable, not up there in the metaphysical. But good friend, were you

surprised to discover that it's now reached all the way down into the civil service examination, a test of talent that for five centuries had usually been devoted to *Confucian* matters?

In the earlier triennial examinations of our present Emperor, only two had even mentioned the Dao and instead asked their examinees to think about “the utmost in benevolence and the consummation of proper relationships” 仁之至，義之盡也。For past examinees, those phrases “benevolence” and “proper relationships” – *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義 – most likely triggered reflex responses and programmed answers because they are of course Confucianism's most famous watchwords. When the examinees saw them, they no doubt felt confident – perhaps even cocky? – in their ability to regurgitate competent and erudite essays in answer to our Emperor's expected questions about them.

But last spring all that changed with the most recent triennial examination. This time when examinees picked up the test, they no doubt recognized a half dozen allusions to *The Daode jing*, after which our Emperor concluded: “I now wish to *survey the Dao*, sorting out a myriad of different views as well as clarifying all the points of contention, in order to unravel the brambles and vines.” Did the examinees in disbelief reread the question several times, looking for the Confucian angle? Did their brushes reveal a shaky hand as they attempted any kind of answer? Did they leave their examination cells early?

The more-astute examinees no doubt saw this coming. In the past three years, our Emperor has built sumptuous Daoist temples; he has commissioned lifelike Daoist statues of Laozi, Zhuangzi and Liezi; he has personally composed Daoist hymns; he has collected Daoist texts into a formal canon of more than five thousand scrolls; he has slavishly submitted to his chief Daoist priest; he has updated the state cult's liturgy to include Daoist adepts in its rituals. Hence it's hardly surprising that he would also refocus the triennial palace examination toward Daoism. And with this change in subject matter, he may also be seeking out a new kind of worthy to join his bureaucracy; he may be hunting for a new kind of scholar to advise his court. He may finally be looking for *us*.

The Daode jing itself sums it up: “To pursue learning is daily gain, but to pursue the Dao is daily loss” 為學日益，為道日損。In the past, “gainers” first gained wealth and power, becoming influential family heads with long pedigrees or regional military commanders with secure marriage connections; they then gained the opportunity to study and learn for themselves and their children, unhindered by endless fieldwork and laborious drudgery; and through all that traditional learning, they ultimately gained knowledge, knowledge of matters beyond their own circumstances. Hence the aristocracy and Confucianism went hand-in-hand because the aristocrats could afford to be Confucians. But curbing their power, our Emperor has expanded his search for worthies beyond the established know-it-alls. With his new quotas of successful examinees from poorer, outlying regions and with his proactive measures to keep examination answers anonymous – even employing clerks to copy the answers in vermilion ink so that the original handwriting won't be recognized – he chips away at aristocracy and favoritism. And now with his new pursuit of the Dao, he is reaching down to us, the ungainly ... the lowest of his lowly insects born of piss and shit.

And now thanks to printing blocks and their resulting mass-produced, affordable texts – such as the one you yourself are holding in your hands – the ungainly can at last tackle the examinations without devoting long years crawling around exclusive academies, without droning memorized Confucian classics before expensive tutors. Besides, the old-fashioned career students still got swatted down along with nine-tenths of the prefectural examinees, and even had they managed to survive the first round of exams, nine-tenths of *them* were slapped away by the subsequent departmental examinations. Was it worth the expense? Isn't the price of this small handbook much more reasonable for anyone who would wing his way into the palace for the final triennial examination, set by our Emperor himself, and then outward to the empire for a secure lifetime of comfortable officialdom?

Making any traditional training moot, these examinations have indeed become less predictable over the years. As for their format, a generation ago aristocrats would have been asked to pointlessly compose a cultured poem or to perfectly regurgitate a classical passage from just its first few characters.

No more. As for their content, prior to this year they would have rightly expected a question relevant to “benevolence” and “proper relationships.” That, too, has now changed.

But to appreciate this change and our Emperor’s new Daoist priorities, let us by way of preface consider the Confucian world we’re flitting away from.

1. Good friend, what was “benevolence”? Fifteen hundred years ago when Confucius was asked this question, he simply said it’s “an affection for others” 愛人 and then taught us:

夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人。能近取譬，可謂仁之方也已。

If he himself wants to stand upright, the benevolent person will get *others* to stand upright; if he himself wants to get somewhere, the benevolent person will get *others* there. He makes what’s near him parallel to what’s farther away, and that’s the “recipe for benevolence.”

Beneath this laudatory message of helping others to simultaneously help the self, we can here excavate two simple assumptions from the Master’s words about this kind of affection: First, benevolence connects self to other, and second, self and other share parallel aspirations.

More than two centuries later, his follower Xunzi complicated both of these assumptions. Like Confucius, Xunzi said “benevolence is affection” 仁、愛也, but instead of just leaving this connection as an either/or relationship, he recognized how there were “gradations of benevolence” 仁之殺. The tie of affection that binds me to my eldest boy is a thick rope relative to the string that binds me to my friend and the filament that binds me to my servant.

As for self and other sharing parallel aspirations, that’s because self and other want to align with the same ideal pattern that structures all of existence. Xunzi said:

若夫忠信端慤，而不害傷，則無接而不然，是仁人之質也。忠信以為質，端慤以為統，禮義以為文，倫類以為理，喘而言，臚而動，而一可以為法則。

The core of the benevolent person is, in every relationship, being loyal and trustworthy as well as being upright and honest, without doing harm or injury. Loyalty and trustworthiness are his core; uprightness and honesty are his starting point; ritual and proper relationships are his surface design; systems and categories are his pattern. His every gasp, his every twitch can become a model and a norm for others.

Here the benevolent self must uncover that universal pattern fundamental within all of us. Even the written character for “pattern” 理 derives from striations in an agate or piece of “jade” 玉 – they’re a visible example of the embodied pattern within all things – and Xunzi elsewhere likened precious jade to the world’s structure because this treasured stone is “firm and patterned” 栗而理. So the benevolent person reveals this jade-like inner pattern through his outward trappings, through her ritual behaviors, for others to witness and copy as benevolence spreads and as we all true ourselves to the universal “systems and categories” of existence. The Confucians assume and aspire to a universal pattern out there.

2. And what were “proper relationships”? If “benevolence” is an affectionate tie from the self to one other, “proper relationships” allude to the whole network of relevant ties around that self. A century after Xunzi, *The Huainanzi* summarized, “Proper relationships are how the divisions between ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife as well as friend and friend are brought together” 義者，所以合君臣、父子、兄弟、夫妻、朋友之際也.

Not everything is surrounded by such a complex network of ties. Xunzi said that 1.) water and fire may possess *qi* – the flowing psychophysical stuff that’s everywhere – but not life; 2.) plants may possess life but not awareness; and 3.) animals may possess awareness but not proper relationships. As for an animal’s awareness, it’s indeed a singular awareness of an other, but it’s not yet the complex interrelatedness of whole communities that we ourselves enjoy. For example, he described the goose who,

having lost her gander, mournfully cries and circles the sky over his corpse before finally moving on. She is instinctually aware of her mate – of her mate’s absence – and all of us most experience that awareness of the other at their absence. But we humans take this instinctual awareness to a much higher level, and *the sum of our intricate relationships then defines our very selves*. Without our networks of proper relationships, we would have indeed remained among those other animals, and *The spring and autumn annals of Mr. Lü* imagined a world without a fully developed and patterned awareness, a world in which people still live like beasts, daily harming one another and never having a moment’s rest:

先王所惡，無惡於不可知，不可知則君臣、父子、兄弟、朋友、夫妻之際敗矣。十際皆敗，亂莫大焉。凡人倫以十際為安者也，釋十際則與麋鹿虎狼無以異，多勇者則為制耳矣。不可知則知無安君、無樂親矣，無榮兄、無親友、無尊夫矣。

The ancient kings most hated the inability to develop an awareness of others because, without it, the divisions between ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, friend and friend as well as husband and wife would all collapse. There is no greater chaos than the collapse of the divisions between these ten parties. In general, human relationships find structure via these divisions, and without them, humans would be no different from deer, tigers and wolves among whom only might makes right. Without such awareness, no ruler would be at peace, no parent happy, no elder brother celebrated, no friend intimate and no husband respected.

In sum, our proper relationships with others are what define us as civilized humans.

Above, Xunzi had said that *ritual* is affection’s surface display. Here, too, ritual transforms this complex network that is the self into something tangible via its commonsense hierarchies and daily interactions. As Guanzi explained:

君臣父子人間之事謂之義，登降揖讓、貴賤有等、親疎之體謂之禮。...義者，謂各處其宜也。禮者，因人之情，緣義之理，而然之節文者也。故禮者謂有理也。理也者，明分以諭義之意也。故禮出乎理，理出乎義，義因乎宜者也。

“Proper relationships” refer to matters concerning the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, person and person. “Ritual” refers to ascending, descending, bowing and yielding, to the gradations between what is valued and not, and to reifying the different degrees of kinship... “Proper relationships” (*yi*) mean that everything finds its “appropriateness” (*yi*). “Ritual” (*li*) accords with people’s circumstances and clings to the “pattern” (*li*) of their proper relationships, giving them structure and surface design. Thus ritual refers to the presence of a pattern, and when this pattern is clearly demarcated, it conveys the meaning of proper relationships. To be sure, ritual comes out of pattern; pattern comes out of proper relationships, and proper relationships are in accord with what’s appropriate.

That is, proper relationships are the proper pattern of interrelated people surrounding each self; bowing, yielding and all the other bits of daily ritualized life help us see it, reify it, embody it.

And please remember throughout that the Confucian world consists of *relationships* being made visible by our ritual exchanges, not of a person’s independent essence. Because they crystallize how we interrelate with each other, benevolence and proper relationships aren’t embedded within any *single* person; they are only manifested *among* people who are correctly connected with one another and who are correctly aligning with the universal pattern.

3. And how did benevolence and proper relationships function in tandem? It’s already obvious these two concepts aren’t just loosely related to one another, and in the early texts, they’re tightly married. Did not Mencius more than a thousand years ago proclaim that the great man perfects himself by “dwelling in the house of benevolence and following the road of proper relationships” 居仁由義? Did not his rival Mozi proclaim that benevolence and proper relationships must together “extend far away to circulate

everywhere but also come home to cultivate selfhood” 遠施周偏，近以修身? Did not Xunzi describe “the guiding thread of benevolence and proper relationships” 仁義之統 as the greatest consideration of all under heaven?

Echoing other Confucian texts, *The heavy dew of spring and autumn* explains how the two function in tandem with one another by drawing our attention to the words themselves. Because affection or love focuses on the other, “benevolence” (*ren*) is a homophone of “other” (*ren*). Because proper relationships are the network that ultimately defines the self, the written character for “self” 我 is in fact the lower half of the character for “proper relationships” 義, a homophone of which is “appropriateness” (*yi*). *The Heavy dew* then goes on to say that the benevolence relationship has an outward vector to the other, whereas the full set of proper relationships defines the self within:

仁主人，義主我也。故曰仁者人也，義者我也，此之謂也。...是故內治反理以正身，據禮以勸福。外治推恩以廣施，寬制以容眾。

Benevolence prioritizes the other; proper relationships prioritize the self. That’s why we say benevolence belongs to the category of other, proper relationships to the category of self....

- Hence when the nobles *internalize* good order, they return to the pattern, rectifying their selfhood, and they rely on ritual, inciting good fortune.
- When they *externalize* good order, they extrapolate their kindness, spreading it outward, and they’re generous in their governing, accommodating the people.

Both “other” – the object of a benevolence tie – and “self” – defined via that complete network of proper relationships – ultimately become aligned with the universal pattern, and everyone benefits when we all keep in step within the eternal cosmic dance.

Today’s literati don’t simply treat these Confucian ideals of benevolence and proper relationships as intellectual talking points; to their credit, they embrace these life lessons with a missionary zeal. They habituate and teach them; they sing and dance them; they *do* them.

4. But how do Confucian benevolence and proper relationships relate to the Daoist Dao? Now we come up short: they *don’t*.

In his edicts and essays, our Emperor has repeatedly and explicitly said that, long ago, Confucianism and Daoism arose from a single source, from a common root deep beneath our empire that then sprouted and grew into an unrivaled culture here and here alone. His assumption of fundamental commonality is an easy mistake to make because they both use many of the same words. For example, the Confucian classics repeatedly and explicitly lay claim to the Dao, the famous essay “Zhongyong” 中庸 or *The balanced norm* stating:

故為政在人，取人以身，修身以道，修道以仁。

Therefore, the conduct of government rests with the people, and one gains the people through the self. One cultivates the self *through the Dao*, and one cultivates the Dao through benevolence.

In other words, an affection for others leads to our “doing” the Dao, that cultivation of self then spreading everywhere to order the world. But is this the Dao, or is this merely ... the *Confucian Dao*?

Conversely, the Daoist classics in turn applaud benevolence, *The Daode jing* observing that “relationships prize benevolence, and words prize reliability” 與善仁，言善信. But would Daoism then universalize this benevolence like the Confucians would? The problem is that, while Confucianism and Daoism indeed use the same words, these words don’t necessarily carry the same meaning, the same application, the same weight.

Let me close this preface by returning to Zhuangzi who once imagined a conversation between Laozi and Confucius. Laozi directly asked the Master what “benevolence” and “proper relationships”

meant, and Confucius predictably responded that they are the mind “universalizing its affection without self-interest” 兼愛無私. Like *The balanced norm*, this version of Confucius wanted to spread benevolence beyond the self’s own circumstances. But this version of Laozi then replies:

夫兼愛，不亦迂乎！無私焉，乃私也。夫子若欲使天下無失其牧乎？則天地固有常矣，日月固有明矣，星辰固有列矣，禽獸固有群矣，樹木固有立矣。夫子亦放德而行，循道而趨，已至矣，又何偈偈乎揭仁義！

Yet isn’t “universalizing affection” rather impossible? And isn’t being “without self-interest” itself a kind of self-interest?

Why do you want to make the world lose its own guidance? Heaven and earth clearly have their regularities; the sun and moon clearly have their brightness; the stars clearly have their constellations; the birds and beasts clearly have their flocks and herds; and the trees clearly grow upward. You, too, would reach your own utmost if you heeded the De in your actions and followed the Dao in your haste. Why rush about vaunting “benevolence” and “proper relationships”?

When it comes to heaven and earth, the sun and moon and so forth, each simply exists in its own right; they behave as they do *on their own*, uncaused and unconditioned by anything outside their individual circumstances. That self-guidance isn’t just true for the sun, moon and stars; it’s also true for the piss, shit and flies. *Us* flies.

Daoism’s own watchword is *ziran* 自然, each thing being “responsive to just its own circumstances.” That’s because my own body is a nexus of what’s around me and my own mind is entirely trapped by what came before me. I can’t truly know anything about existence beyond the horizon of my own circumstances. As I bodily sit here at my western window, I may know that *I* am conscious and have a self, but how can I truly know that my landlady, sitting opposite at her own window, is conscious or has a self? And you’re no different ... that is, *if* you have a conscious self. (I can’t know.) How could *you* truly know that I am conscious or have a self? Daoism recognizes the full implications of your being trapped within your circumstances, and within your circumstances *alone*.

Yet Confucianism believes in those universals beyond my circumstances. Benevolence and proper relationships are external templates from above that would stamp an ideal pattern onto each thing’s uniqueness, onto each person’s own circumstances. These templates not only originate from exemplary heroes and prescriptive classics that existed beyond and before my own here-and-now, by their very nature they would deny the simple fact of my persisting uniqueness. That is, Confucians look at what happened in one place and time, lift up a model from it, and then plop that model down onto another place and time, all the while claiming there’s just one ideal pattern overlaying everything.

But when faced with these ideas of benevolence and proper relationships, Laozi and Zhuangzi would ask the Confucians, “If we each start from a position of circumstantial uniqueness, how can we logically *know* there’s just one such pattern out there?” Daoists insist there’s no creator above creation, no first axiom before reality, no absolute existence divorced from circumstanced things, no timeless and locationless universal pattern with which to align. Or perhaps there *are* such things out there, but we circumstanced beings frankly can’t know that for sure. “Your self remains unique” 我獨, Laozi repeatedly tells us. And so it must simply merge with its own unique circumstances as best it can; it should *be* the nexus it is, in place and time.

In summary, the Confucian Dao is a universal pattern, and we leave behind our individuated circumstances to align with it by using ideal templates such as benevolence and proper relationships. The Daoist Dao denies the universal pattern and its templates – or, more precisely, it denies certain knowledge of and direct access to any universal pattern, if it exists at all – because each of us is obviously uniquely circumstanced, and so we each must best fit our own here-and-now without recourse to external templates. *Whether to heed a universal pattern or to become the nexus of our immediate circumstances – this is the most fundamental and insurmountable difference between Confucianism and Daoism.*

Good friend, which do you think is correct? Are *you* universally patterned? Or uniquely circumstanced? And how do you decide which? How does your decision then affect your behavior? We will flesh out both sides of this difference in the following handbook.

Earlier this year when our Emperor determined to break from centuries of tradition and focus his civil service examination upon Daoism, he was grievously misguided to assume that Confucianism and Daoism simply dovetailed with one another. He was horribly ill-advised to think these two ideas describe the same perspective of reality. They don't. But I would contend there *is* a solution to the coexistence of the Confucian *and* Daoist Dao – to being universal *and* circumstantial at the same time – even though our Emperor will not like it. He openly hates Buddhism that long ago arose *outside* this realm, and he would stop up his ears before listening to us Buddhists who would offer him a third way of relating self to circumstance, a third way I'll explain midway through this handbook. And while Buddhism will provide the only possible answer to our Emperor's new twist on the examination questions, you will need to present it to him in such a way as to remove its foreign fingerprints and to make it acceptable in the eyes of both Confucians and Daoists alike. That will be tricky.

And even if you yourself, good friend, deny Buddhism's truth, this handbook will still offer you a plethora of ideas you can claim as your own as well as ample quoted material you can copy into your next examination essay. By answering a sequence of fifty-seven questions, *The Dao in a fly's head* will give you the necessary resources to navigate the forthcoming examinations as you see fit, and given your *ziran* – your own particular circumstances in the here and now – that's more important than whether Confucianism, Daoism or Buddhism is ultimately right.



Two years ago, our Emperor modified the Confucian rituals for the solstice sacrifice by commanding an entourage of a hundred Daoist adepts to escort his imperial procession up the hill where his Altar of Heaven stands. Because he'd just introduced this Daoist element into a Confucian ceremony, he was particularly anxious to detect any heavenly sign that indicated the gods' approval when, as he scanned the skies, he chanced to see the "genuine beings of heaven" 天真 sallying forth in a glorious entourage. At first he was only able to glimpse the Daoist paradise with its palaces and mansions; he was only able to just make out the entourage of phoenix carriages streaming forth with thousands of attendants. But then sunlight momentarily flooded the scene, giving him ample opportunity to clearly see all the billowing banners, all the courtly costumes, even all the cosmetic powders and delicate paints that adorned each face of these genuine beings parading through the sky. This was no mundane land-based human procession, and their flying carriages were pulled not by horses and oxen but by dragons and tigers.

His vision was fleeting but its impact not so, having resulted in a new annual festival on the fifth day of the eleventh lunar month that, by imperial decree, is to be celebrated on par with the birth of Laozi and even of our Emperor himself. And today *is* the second annual "Celebration of Heavenly Resonance" 天應節, the first since the triennial examination shifted its focus.

Thus I've chosen today to commence this project about the Dao celebrated by Laozi and Confucius, by Zhuangzi and even the Buddha. After burning my incense and offering my prayers at the nearby King of Xiang Grand Temple, I composed the above preface presenting this handbook's first four questions and then answered them, and I intend to raise and answer my final question, the fifty-seventh in this guide, exactly one year hence during the third annual "Celebration of Heavenly Resonance." Over the course of the next year, I hope to develop this text into a useful companion for your examinations.

But reducing the three teachings into a small, portable volume will not be easy, and we have a great deal of work ahead of us if we are to fully understand both the errors and the genius behind our Emperor's revolutionary thinking and if we are to bend your learning to this new Daoist agenda in the civil service examinations. How can we vaunt Confucian templates such as benevolence and proper relationships and yet stay true to the Daoist circumstantial independence found in the *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi*? And how can we then *apply* that Dao when we "get up every morning and go to bed every

night, attending to our myriad duties,” as the Emperor himself has asked? In this convenient handbook of classical quotations and personal commentary, I will tell you how. As for the next triennial examination question, it will no doubt align with one or more of the questions I intend to address below, meaning that you’ll have your answer in hand.

As we’ll discover, the Dao is already down inside each of us, pesky uneducated flies though we be. This handbook’s collected passages from past sages are merely a way of helping us articulate it, of bringing eloquence to our buzzing.

– From *The Dao in a fly’s head* by Wu Youren 吳友仁 (unpublished Angerbell translation)
Fifth year of the “Harmony in governance” reign period (1115 CE)

[This ends “Chapter one: Mid-slide.” If it succeeded in educating and entertaining, please let me know and I will send you the rest of *The silhouette of Lancelot Nul*. I sincerely thank you for taking the time to read this far. – K.E. Brashier.]