A silhouette of a person climbing a tall ladder against a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The person is positioned on the left side of the frame, reaching up towards the top of the ladder. The ladder is a simple A-frame structure with rungs.

# Parables of the Middle Way

Robert M Ellis

Middle Way Society

# **Parables of the Middle Way**

**by Robert M. Ellis**

Copyright Robert M Ellis 2016

ISBN 978-1-326-64876-3

Published by the author

Printed and distributed by Lulu: [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)



Approved by the Middle Way Society

[www.middlewaysociety.org](http://www.middlewaysociety.org)

# Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| INTRODUCTION .....                             | 8   |
| THE PARABLES                                   |     |
| 1. THE SHIP .....                              | 15  |
| 2. THE LUTE STRINGS .....                      | 22  |
| 3. THE WALLED CITY .....                       | 26  |
| 4. THE TWO MULES .....                         | 32  |
| 5. THE RAFT .....                              | 40  |
| 6. THE FISHING NET .....                       | 45  |
| 7. THE ACRE OF FOREST .....                    | 51  |
| 8. ACHILLES AND THE TORTOISE .....             | 54  |
| 9. THE INFORMATION CONTROLLER .....            | 59  |
| 10. THE CHINESE ROOM .....                     | 64  |
| 11. THE INSIDE-OUT CAVE .....                  | 69  |
| 12. DESTROYING THE ONE RING .....              | 75  |
| 13. THE BOREDOM OF HEAVEN .....                | 80  |
| 14. TEN VARIATIONS ON THE GOOD SAMARITAN ..... | 86  |
| 15. THE BLACK SWAN .....                       | 92  |
| 16. THE RAT AND THE PANDA .....                | 97  |
| 17. THE ARROW .....                            | 100 |
| 18. LADDER TO THE SUN .....                    | 108 |
| 19. REBUILDING THE HOUSE .....                 | 116 |

|     |   |     |
|-----|---|-----|
| 20. | THE TOWED BOAT .....                      | 120 |
| 21. | THE FIREFIGHTER AND THE STOCKBROKER ..... | 124 |
| 22. | THE LEATHER SHOES .....                   | 129 |
| 23. | THE TALENTS .....                         | 136 |
| 24. | HARVESTING ON THE SABBATH .....           | 144 |
| 25. | THE ANTI-CHURCH PROTEST .....             | 150 |
| 26. | THE THREE BILLY GOATS GRUFF .....         | 153 |
| 27. | THE GREAT DAM .....                       | 157 |
| 28. | THE STARVING CHILD EXPERIMENT .....       | 165 |
| 29. | DISCOVERY OF THE MIDDLE WAY .....         | 170 |

## COMMENTARIES

|     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 1.  | THE SHIP: THE MIDDLE WAY AND INTEGRATION .....                           | 181 |
| 2.  | THE LUTE STRINGS: THE MIDDLE WAY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES<br>186         |     |
| 3.  | THE WALLED CITY: CONFLICT AND THE EGO .....                              | 189 |
| 4.  | THE TWO MULES: INTEGRATION .....   | 194 |
| 5.  | THE RAFT: PROVISIONALITY .....   | 199 |
| 6.  | THE FISHING NET: SCEPTICISM AND INFORMATION .....                        | 203 |
| 7.  | AN ACRE OF FOREST: VARIATION OF BELIEFS IN AN INDIVIDUAL... 206          |     |
| 8.  | ACHILLES AND THE TORTOISE: THE LEFT AND RIGHT BRAIN<br>HEMISPHERES ..... | 208 |
| 9.  | THE INFORMATION CONTROLLER: POWER AND THE LEFT<br>HEMISPHERE .....       | 213 |
| 10. | THE CHINESE ROOM: MEANING AND THE BRAIN HEMISPHERES ... 217              |     |
| 11. | THE INSIDE-OUT CAVE: REVERSING PLATO'S ACCOUNT OF DELUSION<br>221        |     |

|     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 12. | DESTROYING THE ONE RING: EVIL AS DOGMATISM .....                           | 228 |
| 13. | THE BOREDOM OF HEAVEN: THE IRRELEVANCE OF PERFECT GOOD<br>232              |     |
| 14. | TEN VARIATIONS ON THE GOOD SAMARITAN: MORAL PLURALITY                      | 236 |
| 15. | THE BLACK SWAN: UPSETTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS .....                            | 244 |
| 16. | THE RAT AND THE PANDA: ADAPTIVENESS AND ANTIFRAGILITY ...                  | 246 |
| 17. | THE ARROW: LETTING GO OF CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS .....                         | 249 |
| 18. | LADDER TO THE SUN: LETTING GO OF ULTIMATE GOALS .....                      | 253 |
| 19. | REBUILDING THE HOUSE: THE INTEGRATION OF MEANING AND ITS<br>BENEFITS ..... | 257 |
| 20. | THE TOWED BOAT: MIMESIS AND INTEGRATION .....                              | 261 |
| 21. | THE FIREFIGHTER AND THE STOCKBROKER: INTUITION .....                       | 266 |
| 22. | THE LEATHER SHOES: OBJECTIVITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT .....                   | 269 |
| 23. | THE TALENTS: INVESTMENT.....   | 275 |
| 24. | HARVESTING ON THE SABBATH: RELIGION AND RULE-FOLLOWING<br>280              |     |
| 25. | THE ANTI-CHURCH PROTEST: THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION .....                  | 284 |
| 26. | THE THREE BILLY GOATS GRUFF: DEFERRED GRATIFICATION .....                  | 288 |
| 27. | THE GREAT DAM: UTILITARIANISM.....   | 292 |
| 28. | THE STARVING CHILD EXPERIMENT: MORAL DESCRIPTIVISM .....                   | 297 |
| 29. | DISCOVERY OF THE MIDDLE WAY: REWRITING THE LIFE OF THE<br>BUDDHA .....     | 303 |

# Introduction

The parable often seems to be an unfashionable medium. Revered as its past use may be by Jesus or the Buddha, parable today often seems to be neglected and despised, along with its sisters, fable and allegory. My justification for using it is roughly this: that though parable may sometimes make poor literature, it potentially makes good philosophy.

If read as literature, parable may sometimes seem heavy-handed – a relic of Victorian didacticism in which an indigestible ‘moral’ is forced down the gullet of some long-suffering target of instruction. For refined modern minds, the autonomy of the reader is paramount, and morality a matter of individual preference. The symbolic story, then, should not point out its meaning, but be left in a state of ambiguity for the reader to interpret. The storyteller should exercise the same restraint as the teacher or the parent, in letting the reader make their own mistakes and their own discoveries, playing for themselves with the fascinating material of story.

From the viewpoint of philosophy, on the other hand, the parable has nevertheless been sneaking into modern acceptance from time to time under the guise of its twin brother, the thought experiment. Imagine if such-and-such were the case, the thought experiment tells us, then such-and-such another remarkable result would also follow, and that would help to justify my theory. The reader thereby thinks she is engaged in a sort of ‘experiment’, which

sounds like an autonomous thing to be doing, but actually the result of the experiment, as related by a thinker, is every bit as laid down in advance as that of the parable or fable.

For example, when philosopher Derek Parfit tells us to imagine teleportation to Mars, he already knows what conclusion he wants us to draw about identity – the moral of the story. Likewise when John Searle asks us to imagine being sealed in a room with instruction manuals that help us translate one incomprehensible Chinese character into another, this whole situation is directed towards helping us understand the difference between an organic and an artificial intelligence. These profound and fascinating thought experiments work so well precisely because they do not leave the reader too much to her own devices. Rather they lead us in a path of thought already trodden by a philosopher, recapitulated much more powerfully because of the imaginative form in which it has been related. A thought experiment is often very difficult to tell apart from a parable.

Given that some of the philosophers I most admire (not to mention great religious figures of the past), are thus already using parables to good effect, I feel not too much embarrassment in taking up the genre: not as bad literature, but as good philosophy. I want to use parable as a way of conveying ideas.

However, as the ideas are likely to be unfamiliar to most, I do think that in most cases they will need pointing out. This is no more disrespectful to the reader's autonomy



than the arguments of any philosopher with a case to make. To leave the stories I want to offer without commentary might possibly succeed in intriguing the reader: but my goal is not merely to intrigue, it is to suggest ways forward. To consider such suggestions in a critical spirit, and (if they are judged helpful) to apply them to other contexts requires autonomy enough. So I will be offering commentary and discussion with each story. That does not imply that the story is not potentially independent of the teller, and may not also have implications that remain untold in any such commentary.

Nevertheless, I also don't want to create a false division between literature and philosophy. Many of the purposes and benefits of each are compatible. Personally, I was a student of literature long before I became one of philosophy. I probably learnt much more of importance about ethics, for example, from rich and ambiguous characters like those in, say, George Eliot's 'Middlemarch', than from say, Immanuel Kant's extremely abstract treatment of the subject. Good literature is better than philosophy, even at fulfilling philosophical goals, when the literature is rich and the philosophy clunky.

So when I say that I want to create good philosophy rather than bad literature, I mean that if the philosophy is both subtle and adequate to the complexity of experience, it can have many of the strengths of literature, whilst still allowing itself the explicit explanations and models offered by philosophy. A philosophy that cannot be conveyed in an imaginative form may well be less adequate for that, as well as harder to read and engage with and thus limited in

the audience it is likely to reach. So I aspire to create philosophy that is good because it adopts some of the adequacy to experience found in literature, rather than taking away the adequacy of literature by imposing an inadequate conceptual framework on it. Parables do convey a moral, but are better when that moral goes beyond traditional pieties.

As to my theme, the Middle Way, I have already toiled for a long time in conceptual explanation, both at introductory and at a more advanced level. I refer you to 'Miggism' for introductory explanation, and the 'Middle Way Philosophy' series for a more detailed one. The purpose of this book, instead, is imaginative exploration of the philosophical themes in those books. Instead of occasionally using examples to illustrate points, I will draw points out of examples – letting the stories take the lead and allowing the philosophy to take a secondary role to the stories.

As to the stories themselves, they are a mixed bag of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Some of the stories have developed from examples that I have already used in trying to explain Middle Way Philosophy in one context or another. In other cases I want to point out the Middle Way implications of a story that is already well-known, and in yet others to revise or up-turn a well-known story so that it does become more helpful. Some of these stories come from the Buddha, some from Jesus, some from various philosophers, either retold in a way similar to the original, or in a form substantially altered, according to my purpose in relation to the story. Very often I have explored the implications of a relatively simple parable or example more

fully by imagining their application in some context in modern life.

When I first drafted this book, it consisted in interleaved stories and commentaries. The commentary would follow each story directly. However, the Middle Way Society's publications committee unanimously urged me to give the stories a little more breathing space. At first somewhat against my own immediate inclinations, I removed the commentaries to a separate second part, and concluded that they were right. This arrangement still leaves you free to read the commentary directly after each story by leafing ahead if you wish, but encourages the alternative of reading the stories alone first. You may then prefer to come back to the commentary at a later stage. However, I would urge you not to just to read the stories and skip the rest altogether, even if the reading may seem a little heavier. The commentaries are an integral part of my purpose here, of bringing together story and philosophy.

At the end of each commentary I have also recommended some further reading, to encourage you to follow through these themes in my introductory book, 'Migglism', and the more detailed 'Middle Way Philosophy'. The references to 'Middle Way Philosophy' follow the form I.1.a etc, where the initial roman numeral is the volume, the arabic numeral the section, and the lower case letter the chapter.

Whenever we start relating to ideas through the imagination rather than only through conceptual belief, I think creative results are perhaps made more likely. New weak neural connections may be formed rather than old

strong ones merely being reinforced. In the terminology in which I have come to discuss these things, meaning is integrated by such stories. They may also lead us to re-examine our beliefs, as new models become available for thinking about old problems. The spark between imagination and critical thought can, I hope, be a powerful catalyst for such re-thinking.

# The Parables

# 1. The Ship

The lovely ship 'Progress', laden with important passengers and precious cargo, was just entering the dangerous strait between Scyllia and Charybdisland when the weather began to look more threatening. Captain Jack Everyman scowled at the gathering cloud and the rising wind.

"It's not looking good", he said to his first mate, Mr Scyllius, "We could be driven straight onto those rocks if we call in at Scyllatown."

"But we have to call in there!" protested Mr Scyllius, "My mother will be waiting for me, and she has a legacy to give me from my lately deceased uncle! Also the Prince of Scyllia wishes to join us on the voyage. We will displease him!"

"That won't do any of us any good if the ship is turned to matchwood on the way" said Everyman, "You and the Prince and your money will all alike go to feed the sharks."

"Yes," chimed in Mr Charyb, the Second Mate, who came from the rival state on the other side of the strait, "Scyllia is too dangerous at the best of times. The docks are thronged with cut-throats! I don't know why the ship has to include it on the itinerary at all. Come to Charybdisland instead: it's a great deal safer and friendlier. The people

there are actually rational and behave like proper human beings!”

“Not likely,” replied Everyman gruffly, “The passage into Charybport is just as dangerous. Not rocks but sandbanks! It may look smoother, but the threat lies just beneath the surface. Not in this weather!”

“But the Oracle of Charybport is due to give a final revelation!” cried Charyb, “I need to hear it! And the Chief Priest wants to join us on the voyage. He will be most displeased!”

“That seals it,” replied Everyman ironically, “If we’re lucky enough not to be eaten by sharks, the Prince of Scyllia and the Chief Priest of Charybdis will probably kill each other in any case, and trash the ship in the process!”

“What do you expect if you let hypocritical scum from Charybdisland on board?” cried Scyllius

“It’s the immoral rabble from Scyllia that cause the trouble!” protested Charyb. “Just look at the statistics on crime in sea-going vessels. They bear me out!”

“That’s enough!” said Everyman sharply. Both men knew that he had no sympathy with their partisan bickering, and the tone of command was enough to silence them. “Either I please you both or I please neither. There’s no way I’m going to visit one port but not the other.”

At the moment, a sudden shaft of sunlight burst through the gathering black clouds, and the wind seemed to drop.

“That’s an interesting meteorological indication, sir” said Scyllius carefully, “Do you think it might mean we could risk it?”

“It’s a sign!” cried Charyb in half-ironic triumph, “God wants you to go to Charybdisport! He could never allow you to leave his Chief Priest standing on the quay.”

“Maybe it’s a sign, and maybe it isn’t,” said Everyman, “But if we take the risk, we go to both ports. Agreed?”

Reluctantly, both men agreed. Everyman turned the ship towards Scyllatown.

As they neared Scyllatown, however, the weather deteriorated again. The clouds massed, the rain lashed down, and the winds blew up to storm force. Having made up his mind, though, the Captain set his jaw, held course and ordered the sails down.

“Look at those rocks!” cried Charyb, “We’ll be wrecked! Let’s get out of here, Jack!”

“Just hold your course!” urged Scyllius, “We’ll be OK. Many ships have still managed to dock safely in weather like this.”

They were driven closer and closer to the rocks, to the terror of all on board, but Jack Everyman held his nerve.



At last the wind began to abate a little, and the quay of Scyllatown loomed before them through the film of rain.

As soon as they docked they sent messengers into the town to find Scyllius's mother and the Prince. Both were surprised but happy to find that the ship had dared the weather to dock there. Captain Jack Everyman urged the Prince to board without delay, and made sure that all cargoes were loaded and unloaded immediately.

"Are you not going to wait for better weather, Captain?" asked the Prince's Aide-de-Camp, "Why do we go so soon?"

The Captain shook his head, "We're leaving immediately," he said, "and sailing to Charybdisport". The Aide-de-Camp looked at him incredulously, as if he had said they were sailing for Hell. The Captain did not tell him why he feared lingering in Scyllatown even more than the storm. Charyb had been right about the throngs of cut-throats.

With the Prince and more precious cargo on board, the ship set off again in weather that was not much better than the conditions they had arrived in. This time the journey lay straight across the strait, for Scyllatown and Charybdisport, each the capital of a diametrically opposed kingdom, lay right opposite each other. Each could even see the other in clear weather. Many had been the ships sunk and men's lives wasted in endless warring over that strait. In public all was enmity, with all visitors from the opposite realm requiring special clearance from the authorities. Any stray sailor from the opposing realm who

wandered incautiously in either city would first be spat upon, then quietly dispatched in a dark alley. Yet behind the scenes, the authorities in fact maintained quite a cordial relationship with each other.

It was a battered-looking *Progress*, with a snapped foremast but otherwise intact, that limped into the harbour of Charybdisport a few hours later. The Prince of Scyllia had barricaded himself into a stateroom below decks and refused to stir, the misery of seasickness only slightly alleviated by the news that they had landed in Charybdisland. The quay in Charybdisport was much better maintained than that in Scyllatown, but the sailor who jumped onto the quay was immediately upbraided by the harbourmaster for wearing what he took to be leather shoes. "This is an insult to Charybdis!" he roared, "Take away your unclean footwear this instant!" The terrified sailor soon leapt back on board to comply.

After an inspection by the harbourmaster for both leather footwear and signs of disease, a few sailors were judged pure enough to be able to land temporarily. However, they were only able to precede into the town to view the wonders of the Great Temple and listen to the Great Oracle after paying hefty additional bribes to the harbourmaster. Only Mr Charyb, as a native, was able to avoid these strictures. Captain Everyman was again desirous to be off as soon as possible, and instructed the sailors to be back in an hour at the most. He was relieved to see that the Chief Priest's sumptuous carriage soon rolled up. The extremely obese Chief Priest was then brought on board in a litter borne by four slaves.

He was greeted, somewhat to his surprise, by the Prince of Scyllia, who had unbarricaded his state room as soon as he glimpsed the Chief Priest's arrival through a porthole. "Hello, old fellow!" He proffered a hand, "Terrible weather, what!".

"Fancy meeting you here!" the Priest responded, "Don't think I've seen you since the Ball after Finals! Time goes by, what!"

But then the Prince glimpsed the Captain coming towards them along the passage. "Quick, the Captain's coming," he said in an undertone, "It might be prudent to be more statesmanlike."

"That's an insult to Charybdis!" shouted the Priest suddenly, putting on a convincing, but rather wobbly, shake of anger. "I will hear no more of this blasphemy!" He then turned and waddled back along the passage towards the Captain.

"Your holiness is quartered in the front state-room, as his highness from Scyllia occupies the rear one." said the Captain politely, "I hope it will be to your liking."

The priest waddled on to inspect the front state room, "It will do," He said eventually. "Just don't let that sacrilegious scumbag anywhere near me!"

Once more, then, the ship set sail in some haste, as soon as passengers and cargo had been loaded and unloaded,

and the foremast replaced. One sailor who had lingered too long, captivated by wonder in the Great Temple, had to be left behind. As they set out the storm had already abated to a gale, and before long it sank to a pleasant breeze. Within hours the clouds had drifted away, and the sun shone, as the ship beat down the strait to further its journey.

The captain and mates gathered again on the bridge. "That was a hard passage, captain," remarked Scyllius, and Charyb for once nodded his agreement.

"Ay, 'twas hard," remarked the Captain. "It would have been hard enough just to sail down the strait in such weather, let alone pick up passengers. Yet I'm glad I allowed you both to persuade me. What would be the point of a voyage without passengers?"

"As long as the Prince and Chief Priest don't kill each other." added Charyb.

"They haven't yet." said the Captain, "Who knows, a pleasant voyage in the sunlight may help ease their enmity!"

## 2. The Lute Strings

Gaynor had now given up her early obsession with music and decided to focus on her career. In fact, it had been several years now since she had even thought about music. Instead, her focus was on the completion of this project, the approval of her boss, the likelihood of more responsibility in the next project, the need to overcome obstructive colleagues and placate demanding customers, the determination to make an impression for her ability and commitment. She had barely noticed as her relationship unravelled and her boyfriend moved on. She lived alone now, and worked.

But suddenly, like a swimmer stricken by weakness in mid-channel, she began to find herself undermined by turbulence around her that she only started to recognise because she had ceased to make progress forward. One morning she woke up at 3am overwhelmed by despair – knowing suddenly that she was not good enough and there was no point. She could not go to work and she could not go on. She took time off, and at first her boss was sympathetic. “You’ve been overdoing it, Gaynor” she said on the telephone, “But you’re a valuable asset to the company, so you need to look after yourself. You take some time off and get better.” The doctor advised a new treatment: mindfulness based stress reduction. Really good for depression, he had said, much better than giving her drugs. So one afternoon, Gaynor found herself in a class learning how to meditate.

At first it was really annoying. The mindfulness teacher led them in a body scan and then told them to focus on the breath. For Gaynor, the body scan had just made her feel insecure about her body: it wasn't good enough, it was full of tension. Then when asked to focus on the breath she just found it boring. She tried doing it for a few seconds, but then immediately started thinking about the office again.

In the discussion afterwards, Gaynor asked the mindfulness teacher how she could focus on her body or on the breath without getting stressed about it. To her they just seemed like new sources of stress. Why go to a meditation class and fail at doing something else, having just failed at going to work? If she tried to stop doing these things, she would float around and then just land right back on her stress points.

“Well,” the Mindfulness Teacher seemed to be searching for the right response, “have you ever played any music – an instrument of some kind?”

A sudden stab of memory at the word “music”: Gaynor and her lute, at the age of 14. That lute given to her by her aunt, and the local guitar teacher keen on the baroque, who had taught her and encouraged her. At one time she hadn't just played music, it had seemed that music had also been playing her.

“Yes,” responded Gaynor after a pause, “I used to play the lute, but I gave it up to concentrate on my career.”

“Ah! Well, there’s a story told by the Buddha about a lute. Once there was a monk who came to him whose name was Sona. Sona had been trying too hard in meditation. Like you he was just finding it another challenge, another source of stress. But Sona also used to play the lute. So the Buddha asked him, ‘What happens if the lute-strings are too tight?’ What would you say, Gaynor?”

“You don’t get a good tone. You get distortions, and it’s bad for the instrument.”

“And what happens if the lute-strings are too slack?”

“Similarly, you don’t get a good tone. It’s out of tune.”

“So you need the lute-strings to be neither too taut nor too slack, but somewhere in between, the Middle Way. Meditation is just like that. You have to find a point in yourself where you start getting the right tone, the one that just hits the note and is in tune. You won’t do that by forcing your effort or having too rigid an idea of what you want to achieve. You have to be a bit exploratory and provisional. On the other hand you do need to have a sense of purpose in meditation, and to maintain that sense of purpose, otherwise you will just drift off.”

When she got home, Gaynor went impulsively to her wardrobe, where, under a pile of clothes and other detritus, she found her lute in its case. In excitement, she took it up and tried to tune it, but straight away one of the strings snapped. She had to make a trip to a music shop before she could go any further. But then at last she was

there, with a lute once more in her hands, and with the strings neither too taut nor too slack. After a few minutes of initial clumsiness, she was amazed at how quickly her musical agility returned: the technique, the expression, the memory of the pieces, all were still there.

She played solidly for two hours, and then realised that her depression had apparently lifted. But she felt no urge to go back to work.

The next week she returned to the meditation class. In the practice, this time, she tried to tune her breath like a lute-string: neither too taut, nor too slack. For a while she seemed to find that point, then she got distracted by congratulating herself and thinking about her lute. At least she wasn't thinking about work, she thought.



### 3. The Walled City

Jake did not want to be on sentry duty again. It was a damned nuisance, having to stay up all night in the cold, missing the company of friends and the embraces of his wife, but there it was. Somebody had to keep a look out, because you really never knew when the enemy might decide to stage a surprise attack. They might suddenly decide to do anything, because they didn't follow the same rules as decent civilised people, the enemy. We wouldn't attack them at night, but we still have to be on our guard in case they do that to us.

It was a clear and frosty night, with the ramparts of Egopolis softly illuminated by a half moon. Vaguely, beyond the walls, Jake could just about see the tents of the enemy. Nothing seemed to be happening, with not the slightest sign of activity, let alone an attack. But he would have to stay awake nevertheless. Though the fire in the guard house was a temptation, Jake decided to keep walking up and down the ramparts so as to keep sleepiness at bay.

As he was walking up and down, however, he was surprised enough to see activity on his own side of the wall. An old man, leaning on his stick, slowly approached him along the ramparts. Jake could not quite recollect where he had seen him before.

“Tis a cold night to be out, father.”

“It’s a cold night to be doing sentry duty, too. Why don’t you go home and go to bed?”

Jake was momentarily speechless at how an old man would dare to make such a suggestion. “What! Do you really think I should leave my post? Neglect my duty to the city? Shame on you to suggest such a thing, father! I am surprised at you!”

“But there is nothing to guard against, Jake.”

How did the old man know his name? And how dare he be so informal and speak such nonsense!

“If it were not for the respect due to your age, sir, I would arrest you this instant and take you to the captain for such treasonous words. But perhaps you are losing your reason. Please go home and let me hear no more of this!”

“I assure you, Jake, that my mind suffers from no infirmity. Indeed, it could not, unless you yourself suffer from such infirmity, for my mind is your mind. I am merely an archetype representing the potential for wisdom in yourself, and I take the form of an old man because you yourself have the potential to become such as I appear.”

“But...What do you mean? That you are some kind of ghost? That you are not really here?”

“I am indeed here, as much as the walls and ramparts and the moon. And I tell you again that there is nothing to guard against. For not only am I part of you, Jake, but the

enemy also is part of you. It takes the part of 'enemy' only because you give it that part."

"How can that be? Why, only last week the enemy killed my cousin Randolph! I was there when the arrow hit him in the throat. I carried his body back to his grieving widow. Are you going to tell me that the enemy doesn't really kill people?"

"Of course not. The loss of your cousin is real enough, but so are the losses you have inflicted on the enemy side. The enemy soldiers also have people who are their cousins, and they also have grieving widows. If you did not hate them and attack them, there would be no enemy. And if they did not hate and attack you in their turn, they would not make you their enemy."

"But if we didn't attack them, they might attack us. We are only defending ourselves."

"That's what they say about you as well."

"How do you know? Are you treasonously party to their plots, old man?"

"If knowing about what is part of you is treasonous, then everything is treasonous. I know because they are part of me and part of you. As much as you know that you think one thing or another, I know that your condemnation makes them enemies, and if you did not condemn them they would not be enemies. Likewise, as they are like you,

if they did not condemn you, you would not be their enemy.”

“So what do you propose? That we throw down the walls and rush to embrace them?”

“That would be the best course.”

“But how do we know that they would do likewise? They would probably betray us and kill us all!”

“Now it is my turn to ask how you know such things, young man. We do not know whether they would: but even if they did, the loss would be no greater than if we did the same to them. It would be worth the risk, because the walled city is a sham. It is defending against an enemy that is not an enemy, who is no more than our own shadow. Think how powerful and how happy we could be if we united with the enemy instead of fighting them!”

“I believe you are an enemy spy, old man. Either you are an enemy spy, trying to undermine our morale through philosophical subtleties that make black into white, or else you are just crazy. Either way, I think you are dangerous, so I am going to arrest you and take you to the captain for questioning.”

“But what if I don’t agree to being arrested?”

“Then I will take you by force, if need be. The good of the city is at stake.”

The old man began to walk calmly away, and Jake tried to seize him. He laid his hands on the old man's shoulders, but oddly enough at the same moment someone else seemed to be seizing his own shoulders. He could not arrest the old man because he was himself being overpowered at the same time. He wondered if an enemy had quietly scaled the walls while he was distracted by the conversation with the old man and crept up on him from behind. He resolved to fight back. He struggled, he managed to draw his sword and thrust it blindly towards his assailant. Suddenly an agonising pain bit him in the vitals.

With a jerk, Jake woke up. He was sitting beside the fire in the guard room. The Captain was standing there, pausing in his round of inspection and regarding him severely. "Sleeping on duty?" he barked.

"N-no. I found an old man on the ramparts. Talking treason. Tried to arrest him, but then someone attacked me."

The Captain looked around. "What old man? And you don't seem to be on the ramparts. Instead you're in the guard room having a *snooze*. D'you think this is the best way to defend your city, soldier? What if an enemy had crept up and scaled the walls while you were having your nice dream, eh? Would that have been in the line of duty?"

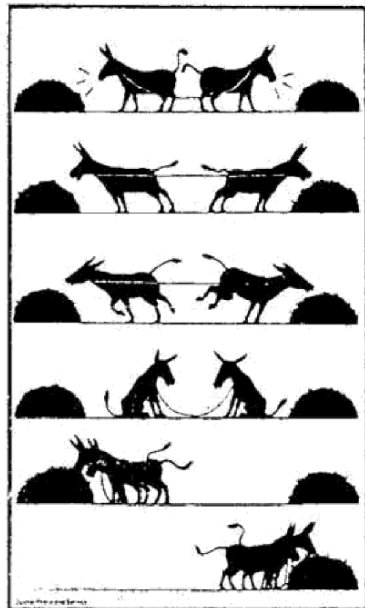
Jake flushed, "No, sir. I'm sorry, sir. I assure you it won't happen again, sir. I just must have dozed off."

“Make quite sure it doesn’t!” The Captain scowled and moved on.

## 4. The Two Mules

Ken was weary of the politics of his office. Endless bickering and underhand manipulation. The boss wanting time off when it suited him, regardless of what suited the company. His female colleague Cynthia doing a 'sickie' just when things were tightest, and starting to look close to tears if he even hinted that she might have been able to come in to work. Then there were Jack and Vince always arguing about politics, stridently taking opposite sides when it came to the independence referendum.

Sometimes he got so fed up that he'd just stop working and wander the internet randomly. Anything to get away from the conflict and stress. He knew that the work would just pile up waiting to be done while he did this – that it didn't make any of it go away, but just at that moment he couldn't face it. This time he was scrolling down his Facebook feed, and came across a picture posted by his cousin. His cousin was into spirituality and radical politics and things like that, sometimes posted interesting things, but a bit strange as well. This time it was a picture of what looked like two



donkeys tied together. Each was trying to eat a different bale of hay, but neither of them could succeed because the rope tied them together and they were pulling opposite ways. Eventually, though, they realised how silly this was and that they could just eat each bale of hay together in succession.

Oh no, they weren't donkeys, they were mules – now he saw the title underneath, 'The Two Mules'. His cousin had just put two words underneath – 'Like us'. Well, yes, they were, thought Ken. Like the people in this bloody office. Always fighting and bickering unnecessarily. Then there's the Israelis and the Palestinians. Why can't people be more sensible?

Then Ken had to quickly close his browser window and pretend to be working, as the boss was coming past. The boss came right up to him, in fact. "Hm, Ken, please could we have a quick word? In my office, if you don't mind."

Ken's heart suddenly started beating about twice as fast as he jumped into fight-or-flight mode. The boss must have known he was on Facebook! You never know, perhaps they were actually monitoring. And they might take the rules seriously. Most of the time they didn't, but you never knew really. It was probably a sackable offence, or at least a formal warning offence, he wasn't really sure. Either way, bang goes the hope of a promotion. Should he make an excuse and not go into the boss's office? No, too obvious. He would have to comply.



He sat down opposite the boss. “Ken, I wanted to have a private word with you, because a new opportunity has come up in our London office. I thought you might like to know about it first, because it’s right in your line of work. Not that I want to get rid of you, you understand, but just with your best interests at heart. I’m quite happy to give you a great reference, and I understand they will favour internal applicants first, so I’d guess the job is probably pretty much yours for the asking if you want it. Pay’s pretty good, too. Have a look on the intranet if you want to see all the details – it’s just been posted today.”

“Oh, er, right, er, thank you very much. That’s very thoughtful.”

“Do you think you’ll be interested?”

“I’ll give it some thought. And talk to the wife of course. It’s tempting. But moving to London would be a big deal, especially with my son coming up to school age.”

“Of course. Anyway, remember I’ll give you an excellent reference. And I hope you believe me when I say that in no way is this an attempt to get rid of you. You’re doing excellent work, in fact. You’d be a loss to this office. But individual careers have to come first.”

When Ken got home that evening, he broached the subject tentatively with Thelma, and at once a look of horror came over her face. “London! No way do we want to go there. The housing is so expensive! I’d have to get another job. And remember that Jimmy’s starting school in

September. Beaufort primary's just down the road and has got 'excellent' in all the OFSTED categories. But in London, for all I hear, there are waiting lists a mile long for all the decent schools. I'm quite happy here, thank you very much."

"But I really want to get away from that awful office. And it's a more interesting job. And it pays much better, so we'd probably be able to afford the housing. There are plenty of jobs for you in London – I looked at the figures on the internet and it said that London had more vacancies than anywhere else in the country. And there are plenty of schools, too. I'm sure we could get Jimmy into one."

"Why don't you ever think about anybody else? It's all me-me-me. / want to get out of the office. / want a more interesting job. / want a pay rise. How about considering your family for a change?"

Never one to engage in an argument, Ken went straight out at this point. Whenever Thelma had a go at him, it felt as though someone had stuck him with a knife. His heart was beating too fast again.

He went up the hill. That was the usual place he went to avoid arguments. The wind roared, the rooks cawed in the trees, and the occasional person called to their dog. Gradually he started to feel a little calmer, and then suddenly he remembered something else that had happened this morning – the Two Mules picture.

Hadn't he been thinking about how stupid people were, pulling away at opposite ends of the rope for different piles of hay? And now – he felt with embarrassment – here he was himself doing exactly the same thing with Thelma. It really wasn't that easy, when your emotions got going. He could see now just why those mules kept pulling for a long while. For one thing, they couldn't stand each other, and once their emotions got going they were as stubborn as – well, mules. He laughed at his own little inner joke (a habit of his) and started to feel a bit better.

But could he find the same solution as the mules? Let's see – his pile of hay was the job and the money and the change of scene. But Thelma also had her pile of hay – her job and Jimmy's school and the house prices. They couldn't both get their piles of hay at the same time, so they both kept pulling. At this rate, well probably she would pull harder and would get what she wanted, as she usually did. Or maybe he would get what he wanted, in which case she would be unhappy and not get what she wanted. Or they would both keep pulling and neither would get what they wanted.

So, could they both get what they wanted by thinking again about the situation, as the mules did? Eating one bale of hay first and then the other. Could they stay here first and then go to London? No, the job would be gone by then. Or could they go to London first and then come back here? No, that would make no sense, because needing to move was most of the problem, and then they'd be moving twice. The picture was all very well for mules with bales of

hay, but jobs and families were more complicated than that, it seemed.

When he got back home, though, he told Thelma about the picture.

“Well, I’m glad you’re talking about it sensibly now rather than just storming off” she responded. “That’s progress at least. But I don’t see how we could do one thing and then the other. You can’t apply the story in the picture to our circumstances, as far as I can see. There’s no possible compromise. Either we move to London or we don’t.”

Ken thought some more. “Perhaps we can’t both get everything that we want,” he said at length, “but what about if we get some of it? For example, what if I prove to you that there’s a job you can easily get, and a good school available, and housing we can afford in London. Those are the things you want, aren’t they? So if they’re available, you’d be OK with moving to London, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, but that’s a very big *if*.” She replied. “You could put it all the other way round. What if you can get the things you want without moving? You don’t have to get the job in London, there might be other ones locally you could go for. You don’t have to stay in that office. But the problems you’re having in the office might be to do with your attitude to it anyway. Maybe you don’t even need to change jobs to be happier.”

“What do you mean?”

“Perhaps you and your office are another pair of mules, pulling in opposite directions, but if you sat down and had a discussion about what you wanted and how you could best get it together, you’d all be fine. You’re not all such unreasonable people that you can’t do that. Your boss was looking out for you today, for a start, wasn’t he?”

“Well, unless it was really an attempt to get rid of me.”

“He said it wasn’t, and why should you disbelieve him when he’s trying to be reassuring? I bet if you had a word with your boss about how stressed you feel when Cynthia’s off sick, he’d listen to you and try to sort it out, wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe, if he wasn’t off playing golf.”

“The guy isn’t perfect. He plays golf, and you look at Facebook in work time. Give each other a bit of slack. Talk about it. Then there might not be any need to move anywhere.”

“But what about if I can prove to you that you can get all the things you want in London?”

“Moving to London is still a big hassle. Try the first, eh, it’s the easiest thing. Then if it doesn’t, see if there are any jobs locally, then if neither of those work, you can start researching London and trying to convince me.”

“OK. It’s a deal.”

“We don’t really have to pull in different directions, you know, love.” They sealed it with a hug.

## 5. The Raft

Once upon a time there was an archaeologist. The archaeologist lived on one side of a great ocean, but, thanks to the development of modern flight, was able to cross that ocean very easily. In the lands on the other side, he conducted archaeological excavations in one of the ruined ancient cities of the people of that land.

He made great discoveries and became well-known. Then, one day he found an especially puzzling discovery. He found a tablet with writing on it that came from his native land on the other side of the ocean. The alphabet and the writing on the tablet could not possibly have been created by people on this side of the ocean, but must have come from the opposite side of the ocean. He had the tablet carefully tested by a scientific colleague who was an expert at dating objects, and he confirmed that the tablet dated back at least two thousand years. Yet the ocean was not believed to have been crossed until one thousand years ago at the earliest. The two civilisations had simply had no contact with each other. If the tablet was genuine, it would mean a massive rewriting of the history of the contact between two great civilisations.

The archaeologist thought for a long time about the genuineness and significance of the tablet – whether it could be a fake, and whether there were any other ways of explaining it. But at length he decided that it must be genuine and that it must indicate a trading link across the great ocean a thousand years before the time when such

links were previously thought to have existed. Then he came across a further problem: neither side had boats that seemed at all adequate to the task of crossing the ocean at that time! Indeed, they didn't have proper boats at all, but only rafts. Apparently, it seemed, one civilisation must have crossed the great ocean so as to reach the other on a raft!

When the archaeologist published his theory, even though he made it clear that he had reached it with reluctance in the light of the evidence, he was widely ridiculed. How could anyone cross the great ocean on a raft! The archaeologist was so irritated by this response that he began to adhere more stubbornly to this theory that at first he had only embraced reluctantly. He argued vehemently with other scholars in universities. He fielded foolish comments on TV chat shows. He wrote articles in newspapers defending his viewpoint.

Then one day, on a TV chat show, a critical member of the audience said "OK, if you are so sure that it's possible to cross the great ocean on a raft, why don't *you* try crossing the great ocean on a raft?" Stung, the archaeologist replied, "OK, I will.", and that was the beginning of his raft adventure.

He decided to start in his native land and try rafting his way across the ocean to the land where the tablet had been found. He carefully researched the raft construction of the culture in his native land 2000 years before, and, using only materials and construction methods that were used there at that time, built a large raft with a shelter on



it. Maritime experts warned him about how dangerous it would be to try to cross the great ocean on such a craft, but the archaeologist persisted.

At last he set sail, accompanied by two devoted friends who agreed to share his danger. Precisely seeking to reproduce what had happened 2000 years before, they did not use modern navigational aids, but steered only by the stars. Very often they were at the mercy of the winds and currents, and were driven way off course or a long way back towards their starting point. They ran out of food and were forced to live only on fish that they caught from the raft. They ran out of water but managed to distil sea water using solar power. Nearly two years after they set out, with one man dead and the other two having narrowly survived many times, they finally reached the other side of the great ocean.

Of course, they were then treated as heroes and surrounded by media attention. The book rights and the film rights to the story of their trip were snapped up for large sums. But most of all, the archaeologist was able to announce that he had proved his theory correct. It was indeed possible to cross the great ocean on a raft. The tablet must have been genuine, and a major revision of early human history must be made as a result. Many, on both sides of the great ocean, hailed him as a great scholar who had revolutionised our understanding of the past.

But then the archaeologist's friend, the expert on dating who had authenticated the tablets, came to visit him. He

said he had a confession to make. The dating method that he had used on the tablet had since proved misleading on a number of examples. Further research had led him, together with colleagues, to develop new, more reliable dating methods. They had now used these new methods on the ancient tablet that had caused all the trouble.

“And what was the result?” asked the archaeologist, by now supremely confident that the answer would confirm everything else that he now knew.

“The tablet is twenty years old, carefully produced to seem much older and to produce deceptive results with the dating techniques we previously used. It’s a fake.”

The following day, headlines blared the discovery of the hoax. The archaeologist, previously so widely respected, was now derided as a hoaxer or as a dupe. It was even implied by many media commentators that his famous raft crossing of the great ocean may have been faked – after all it had not all been recorded. The archaeologist could have got a ship to pick him up secretly soon after setting off, waited two years, and then got the ship to drop him close to the other side of the ocean, with all the other effects of the journey carefully faked.

For a few days, the archaeologist tried to defend his reputation. The faking of the tablet did not prove that the theory of the ocean crossing was not true, he said. After all, he had proved by his raft journey that it could be true. Perhaps they would still find genuine tablets that showed

the same link between the civilisations that the fake one had indicated. But he was derided by all.

Then one night, the archaeologist was rushed to hospital, having been found unconscious in his bath after taking an overdose of sleeping pills.

While he was recovering in hospital, the archaeologist was visited by a Buddhist chaplain. “What does your religion tell people about rafts?” the archaeologist asked her gloomily.

“Well, the Buddha told a story about a raft – a parable” she replied.

“Tell me the story” urged the archaeologist.

“There was once a man who wanted to cross the great river Ganges. So he built a raft. He used the raft to get to the other side of the river. Then, the Buddha asked his auditors what they think the man did with the raft when he had reached the other side.”

“And what did they say?”

“They agreed with the Buddha that the man, if he was wise, did not pick up and carry the raft, which would be a burden of no use to him on dry land. Instead he left the raft at the far river bank and went on without it.”

“Those sound like wise words to me.” said the archaeologist.

## 6. The Fishing Net

“Barton Jackson: Marine Surveys Department of Bunjee University.”

The fisherman took the proffered hand with no great enthusiasm, and offered no words of warmth, or even of personal identification, to reciprocate the introduction.

“I believe that a marked depletion of stocks of all the main edible white fish has been noted in this area. I’m here to investigate and get some clear data, so I’ll need to go out to sea with you and monitor your catch tomorrow.”

“What for?”

“Well, so that we know for sure how much stocks have depleted, and can advise the authorities on appropriate conservation measures where appropriate.”

“Y’mean, fishing quotas?”

“That’s what it might mean. I don’t know for sure yet. It depends what I find. But it’s all in aid of preserving your livelihood in the longer term.”

The fisherman made an indeterminate grunting noise nicely summarising the entirety of his feelings about scientists, stocks, fishing quotas and his supposed long-term livelihood, all rolled into one. He turned his back on Jackson and started to walk back towards his boat, saying

in the wrong direction as he went, "We start at 5.30: first light."

"Very well," replied Jackson in the right direction, impeccably polite as always, as though the fisherman was behaving in an entirely normal way. "I'll be there."

The first haul that the fisherman brought up the next morning was generous enough. Plenty of by-catch, but lots of haddock as well. "You see," said the fisherman almost cheerfully, "Plenty of fish in the sea! No need for quotas."

At first glance Jackson was inclined to agree with him. Of course, he needed to look at averages of catches in different places and times, but this was a good start. Then he started to look a bit more closely at the haul. Many of the haddock were slightly smaller than average.

"You're catching juveniles here!" he shouted to the fisherman, to be heard over the roar. "How big is the mesh you're using?"

"Normal mesh" replied the fisherman laconically.

"Let me see." said the scientist, and he found what he had expected. The mesh was slightly too small to catch only adult haddock. If this was his 'normal mesh', the fisherman was breaking the regulations and fishing for juveniles. It would have been easy not to notice, because the mesh wasn't small enough to catch very small juveniles. Just catching some of the immature ones made it seem as

though the availability of fish was greater than it actually was.

Jackson obliged the fisherman to retreat to his cabin where they could talk. "I must warn you about the size of your mesh." He said. "It's too small and you're catching too many juveniles. That also gives a misleading impression of the stocks. I must insist that you throw back the juveniles and start using standard mesh size."

The fisherman shrugged his shoulders. "That's just the mesh I always use. I don't have any other size."

"Then I'm afraid you're breaking the law." The fisherman stiffened but said nothing. He went back outside and returned to his work, showing no sign of any intention to throw back the juveniles.

As Jackson drove back home that night, he worried about how to act. If he reported the fisherman, he knew it would be very difficult to get anything like a feasible working relationship in future. Without some level of personal trust, Jackson felt vulnerable, sharing a relatively small craft in the middle of a rough sea with a hostile person. Reporting him might not come to anything in any case, as the inspectors didn't always act on such reports. That was why the fishermen thought they could get away with it. In the end he reluctantly decided not to take it any further. He had at least done his duty by giving a warning.

What else was it he had to do this evening? Oh yes, his philosophy class.

After an early start and a good deal of exposure to wind and spray, Jackson started to feel sleepy almost as soon as his philosophy tutor started explaining Immanuel Kant's epistemology. Terms like 'categories', 'phenomena' and 'noumena' washed over him. But then somehow his attention was grabbed and he woke up again when he heard the term 'fishing net'.

"You could explain the relationship between phenomena, noumena and synthetic a priori using the image of a fishing net," said the tutor. "When you trawl the sea with a net using a certain size of mesh, you only catch things that are big enough not to slip through the mesh. Your idea of what there is in the sea is limited by the size of net mesh you have used. For example, there could be little fish in the sea, too small for the net, that you just don't find out about, because they slip through your net. The use of synthetic a priori categories is just like that. You could say that we only have a fishing net mesh to haul up causes, and substances, and number – what we can fit into the categories we use. But there may be other things or other attributes of things, out there in the noumenal world beyond experience, that we don't know about. We only know about the phenomenal world that fits the categories."

"That's a very interesting analogy," said Jackson. "As it happens I've had lots of issues with fishing mesh sizes today. Remember I'm a marine scientist, and I go out with fishing boats to take surveys of the size of catches."

“Oh yes,” replied the tutor, “I remember. So you have first-hand experience of not knowing about things because they ‘slip through the net’, as it were?”

“Well, today it was more a question of things getting caught in the nets that shouldn’t have been, because the mesh was too close. Because more juveniles were being caught, it made it look as though the catch was bigger. But actually, as you probably know, the more fishermen catch juveniles before they have chance to breed, the faster stocks tend to decline. It created a moral dilemma for me, because I need as good a relationship with the fishermen as I can manage, and if I report them for the wrong mesh size that will probably spoil the relationship.”

“Interesting.” The philosophy tutor paused, then went on, “But didn’t the smaller mesh size actually give you more information rather than less, even if the fisherman was breaking the rules? I mean, presumably you could tell how many juveniles there were, which you wouldn’t have known otherwise.”

“I got a bit more of an idea of the number of juveniles, yes – or at least the ones that were big enough to be caught, since the mesh wasn’t small enough to catch all juveniles, of course, only the larger ones.”

Another member of the class then made a contribution: “Purely from the information point of view, shouldn’t we have as small a mesh as possible? That would be like knowing more about the world.”



“Not necessarily,” replied Jackson, “at least from the marine science point of view. I had to look quite carefully to spot the immature fish this morning, because the fisherman had been quite cunning and only used a mesh that was very slightly too small. Actually, any scientist will tell you that it’s possible to have too much data, so then you can’t spot what’s important. It would have been clearer and quicker for me to just check on how many adult fish there were.”

“OK”, said the tutor, concerned not to let the discussion wander too far from the point, “That’s interesting, but the bigger point is surely that there are smaller things we don’t catch. That’s what Kant called the noumena – the things out there that we don’t catch in our conceptual nets. So we can’t claim to have knowledge of the whole of reality.”

“Sure,” said Jackson, “I don’t know exactly how many juveniles there are out there. Even counting the adults from the catches is an approximation. But I can have a good guess, just from the decreasing numbers of adults, that there will be a lot fewer of any age in a few years’ time.”

## 7. The Acre of Forest

“In addition to the property we have discussed, your grandfather left you something you might not have expected in his will” said Mr Jenkins, looking over his documents.

“Oh, what’s that?” replied Petra, intrigued.

“An acre of forest.”

“An acre of forest? I didn’t even know he had an acre of forest to leave! Where is it?”

“In the Elwyn Valley, I believe, about five miles from here. It’s an odd little bit of land, and I’ve no idea how he acquired it or why. He doesn’t seem to have exploited it for timber, or anything of that kind.”

“He did love forests” said Petra. “Perhaps he just wanted to preserve it.”

“Perhaps that’s the best explanation” replied the solicitor. “Still, Mrs Dawkins, what do you want to do with it? If you’d like me to put it on sale on your behalf, I could set that in motion.”

“What sort of forest is it? Is it ranks of conifers, or are they broadleaved? Are the trees mature?”

“I’ve no idea, I’m afraid. I’ve never viewed it. We could go and look if you think that’s important.”

“Well, I don’t need to take up your time with that, Mr Jenkins. Just show me on the map where it is, and I’ll go and look by myself. Once I’ve seen it, perhaps I’ll be able to make a sensible decision.”

“Well, don’t expect too much. A single acre is not a very large area. And it may not have been well-managed so as to look its best. Here, you can see where it is marked on the map.”

Despite this premonitory warning, when Petra parked her car in what she was sure was the right place, and looked at *her* acre of forest, her heart immediately fell. All she could see were ranks of pines: Norway spruce of a kind that is grown all over the British uplands simply to make as fast a profit from timber as possible, of the kind that shades out all undergrowth and forms a thick mass of impenetrable dead branches under the trees. She found it difficult to believe that her romantically-minded grandfather would have bought a timber plantation just to make money, and her opinion of him began to take a plunge as a consequence.

She was about to drive off in a rage against her grandfather, when she thought perhaps she should look beyond the initial rank of pines, in case there was a clearing there or something. Also, if she was going to sell it, she’d better check what condition the trees were in and how mature they were. So, she barged her way through an initial row of dead pine branches. To her surprise, there were no pines behind the first row. Instead there was a

stand of ash trees. Oh, and over there were some beeches, and there were some oaks too. A clearer way opened out between the trees, with undergrowth around her, and she found herself in a charming clearing, with wild flowers, birds singing and a squirrel skittering off through the branches. Quite a variety of trees surrounded the clearing: sycamores, rowans, London plane... She couldn't even identify all the types of tree.

No wonder her grandfather had bought it! Now she understood. Grandad had had an eye for the hidden and unappreciated. Her grandmother had been rather like that: an initial austere, utilitarian exterior, but when you got to know her she could be the warmest, kindest person in the world. This acre of forest was exactly the same: not just one type of tree but many. Not just ugliness but beauty too. Not just commercial timber, but beautiful mature broadleaved trees as well.

It was clear what she needed to do. She would preserve it too, and pass it on to her grandchildren as well. Her grandfather had left no particular instructions for his ashes, but now she also knew where to scatter them.

## 8. Achilles and the tortoise

“Let me show you a paradox“, said Dad. It was getting towards two thirds of the way of a long, boring train journey. They were sitting at a table in a carriage that was almost empty.

“What’s a paradox?” asked eleven-year old Laura. She was not too old to cease being almost constantly curious, but not too young for a slight note of potential detachment to be there as well.

“It’s a kind of puzzle where there’s a contradiction. If you take it one way, it makes sense, but if you take it another way, it doesn’t.”

“I like puzzles.”

“OK. This one is about a race. The race was between a Greek hero called Achilles, who being a hero of course could run fast as well as fight. And he was racing a tortoise. Who would you expect to win?”

“The hero!”

“Well, that’s what everyone else thought too. So to give the tortoise a chance they said they’d give him a head start. In fact they gave him a big head start. They worked out that the tortoise moved at about a tenth the speed of Achilles, so he needed a tenth of the distance to cover. Let’s say the race was 100 metres long, they put the

tortoise at the 90 metre mark.” Dad drew a little diagram to show the set-up of the race.

“I still think the hero would win. Tortoises are so slow. He’d catch up with the tortoise in no time.”

“Well, Achilles did catch up pretty quick with where the tortoise was when he started. But by that time the tortoise had moved a little way forward. Not very far, but a little way.”

“Surely the tortoise didn’t win?”

“You’ll have to wait and see. Because after Achilles had caught up with where the tortoise was at first, he went a bit further and caught up with where the tortoise had been next.”

“So did he catch up with the tortoise then?”

“No, because the tortoise had moved a bit further ahead. Only a tiny bit further ahead, but still ahead. In fact, that happened every time Achilles caught up to where the tortoise had been previously. In the time it took Achilles to get to where the tortoise had been previously, the tortoise had moved ahead a little bit more.”

“But surely it got to be such a little bit that it didn’t matter any more?”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. Every little bit of distance, no matter how small, could be divided up a bit

further. So every time Achilles caught up to where the tortoise had been, he was still a little bit ahead.”

“But that’s silly! The little bit ahead would start to be too small to notice. It would get so small you’d need a microscope to see it!”

“It would get even smaller than that eventually, but the tortoise would still be ahead of Achilles just a tiny little bit. So Achilles would never catch up with the tortoise.”

Laura made a face. “Is it true then? Is that what actually happened?”

“No, it’s what is called a thought experiment. You think something through and see what will happen when you think out the consequences. But it’s only when you *think* about it that Achilles would never catch up with the tortoise. If you got a real man and a real tortoise and got them to run a race like that, of course the man would actually catch up with the tortoise. So that’s why it’s a paradox. If you think about it one way, it’s true, but if you think about it the other way, it isn’t.”

“But how can it be true and not true at the same time? I don’t understand.”

“Well, here’s one way of understanding it. One half of your brain thinks it’s true and the other half thinks it isn’t. Our brains all have two halves: they’re called the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere. The left hemisphere thinks in terms of ideas of how things are, and works out

what must be true just using those ideas. That's like you do in maths when you work out a sum without having to count anything or relate it to real things. The right hemisphere, though, depends on the senses, and takes its ideas about what's true from what we actually see and hear and touch. For the left hemisphere, space and time are just ideas. You can chop them up as long as you want, and you just get a smaller and smaller number, regardless of whether you could actually see it or not. So for the left hemisphere, it makes sense to think that Achilles would never catch up with the tortoise. But for the right hemisphere that takes information from what actually happens, of course he would."

"Silly left hemisphere!"

"Well, it's not that silly. Remember you've got one too. In fact, half of you *is* the left hemisphere. It's only silly when it works things out for itself and just assumes it's got to be right, without consulting the right hemisphere. People get all sorts of silly beliefs that way. Like they think the world is going to end next week based on adding up the numbers of chapters in the Bible. Or they can't let go of a big plan they've put lots of time and money into even when it's clearly going to fail. Or they think sharks are going to come up out of the toilet and attack them because they've read about a shark attack in the sea."

"That's like serious silly!"



“Just keep consulting your right hemisphere as well as your left and you’ll be fine. Every time someone suggests a silly idea, give it a reality check.”

“So the tortoise didn’t really win the race?”

Dad shrugged. “Who knows? Apparently the race is still going on.”

## 9. The Information Controller

The information controller was a large, square-faced, clean-shaven man. He had the air of knowing exactly what was good for you.

“And what do you think gives you the right to spread these pernicious intellectual ideas amongst our young people?” he barked. “Are they really going to benefit the state and make the people happier?”

The philosopher felt awkward. He had a salaried position at the university to hold onto. Somehow he had to placate this man. “With all due respect,” he wittered, “These ideas are not pernicious, and precisely intended to benefit both the state and the people. Critical thinking helps people to make decisions for themselves, taking into account the evidence and avoiding fallacious thinking. That makes them more effective workers and citizens in an advanced society like ours. People cannot always be closely supervised or you need an excessive number of supervisors. Developing skills of autonomous thinking in the workforce is the only alternative to inefficient levels of supervision.”

There, he hoped he had put it in a utilitarian enough way for him, and connected it to his beliefs about economic prosperity. But the information controller still seemed doubtful. “Why should thinking for yourself in the workplace amount to *critical* thinking?” he asked pointedly. “To be able to make decisions about their particular job,

workers do not need to be able to *criticise*. Criticism of their managers, or of the government, is liable to lead to disorder and disruption, which will interfere with production rather than speeding it.”

“Well,” said the professor, “Imagine that a worker in a factory discovers a fault. If that fault is not reported, and brought to the supervisor’s attention, then the whole production line may be held up. But if the worker is not thinking about possible problems, and does not have the confidence to report it to the manager because he is just used to doing as he is told without question, then he will be too afraid to tell the manager about the fault.”

“That is about attention to work, not criticism. Criticism is dangerous. I suggest you go away and change your proposed educational course, before we can allow it to be broadcast. It should be called ‘Attention to work thinking’ rather than ‘Critical Thinking’, and it should not encourage criticism of figures of authority.”

The professor knew at that point that no further argument was possible – at least, if he wanted to avoid losing his job or ending up in prison. “Very well, sir” he said at last.

As he drove home in his large, comfortable car, the Information Controller wondered for a few moments whether he had been fair to the professor. Was there something to his claim that workers needed to think for themselves? But no, he had already made the decision. Why was he so indecisively reconsidering what had already been decided? And imagine if he had allowed the

professor's programmes to be broadcast and they had included criticism of the Great Leader? The consequences would be unthinkable.

He got home and had a shower. For a few moments he looked at himself naked in the full-length mirror in the bathroom. "Getting too fat" said a voice. He looked round. Surely his ex-wife had not let herself into the flat without him noticing? No, she no longer had a key. There was no identifiable source of the voice. "No, I am not getting too fat" he replied aloud, as though he was arguing back against the criticisms of his irritating ex-wife. "A certain substantiality of form is not out of keeping with the dignity of the office that I hold, after all." He almost expected the voice to argue back, but it didn't.

After cooking himself a good dinner, he sat down in front of the television. He had a good idea what would be on, of course, because he had himself approved most of it, at least in outline. The film and drama would all be in order, at least, and the documentaries, and the quiz programmes. It was the news where he did not exert quite such direct control. The Controller of News reported directly to the Great Leader rather than to him, and he had to be a capable man, to make appropriate decisions about the coverage of fast-moving new events. Occasionally, though, the Information Controller did have some input, or at least would offer fraternal comments on the appropriateness of the decisions made by the Controller of News, and he liked to think that they were well-received. But this evening he was so startled by an item on the

evening news, that he let the piece of carrot slide right off his fork halfway to his mouth.

“...A new appointment by the Great Leader: Nadia Tiree becomes the new Director of Home Affairs...”

Nadia Tiree was his ex-wife. This was *not* part of the plan. The Director of Home Affairs could overrule his decisions on permissible information! And that woman hated him, he knew. She could get him sacked, even, with the support of the Great Leader. How had she risen so fast without his knowledge?

He picked up the telephone to ring the Great Leader direct, but then changed his mind. If the Great Leader had made a decision, he could not presume to question it. But then perhaps he should at least talk to him, exert influence, before that woman gained his ear too much. But then she probably already had, being appointed to that position.

Then he suddenly realised something else. Nadia and the Professor he had spoken to that afternoon had been at university together. They might even (he was never quite sure) have been lovers.

Suddenly there was a sharp, authoritative knock at the door. “Open up – it’s the security police!” Baffled, and shaking, the Information Controller opened the door. He put on his best authoritative manner. “What’s the trouble, officer?”

“You are under arrest.”

“For what crime?”

“For treasonable anti-state activities.”

## 10. The Chinese Room

“Have you ever heard of John Searle’s Chinese Room analogy?”

The speaker was Valerian Blanket, philosophy lecturer at Herb University. The setting was a quiet and pleasant bar nearby, to which he and several keen undergraduates had retired after the end of the formal proceedings of the Philosophy Society. They had been talking about the problems of mind.

Nobody had heard of the Chinese Room analogy.

“Oh, I think it’s one of philosophy’s great and most telling thought experiments. Imagine that you are an English-speaking person, right, with no understanding of Chinese whatsoever. You are shut up in a room with a whole set of books with Chinese characters in them. You don’t understand the Chinese characters, but the books give you a set of equivalences, so that if you get one set of squiggles you know how to respond with another set of squiggles.”

“Sounds like the worst sort of phrase book” commented Matt, one of the undergraduates. “The sort where you look stuff up but really don’t know what you’re doing, and you end up saying the most ridiculous things that the native people kill themselves laughing at.”

“Well, it’s worse than that” said Valerian. “In a phrase book at least you know what you want to say, even if the equivalents are not very appropriate to the context. But here you don’t know what the input is either. You’re just turning one incomprehensible code into another.”

“OK, I see” said Matt.

“Anyway, Searle’s thought experiment goes on, that we should imagine there is a hatch into this room, and a Chinese person comes along and passes messages in Chinese through the hatch. The person inside looks up the messages, finds equivalent responses in equally incomprehensible Chinese, copies them, and hands back pieces of paper through the hatch with the responses. To the Chinese person, then, it seems like they’re having a conversation in messages to another person who understands Chinese on the other side of the hatch. For example, the Chinese person outside passes in a message saying the Chinese for ‘Hello, how are you?’ and gets a message back saying the Chinese for ‘I’m fine thanks, and how are you?’ But the person inside doesn’t understand this at all. Now Searle’s point is, that this is how a computer works, and this is why a computer doesn’t and can’t have a mind as we know it.”

“You mean, that the computer doesn’t understand anything?” asked Bella, one of the other students.

“That depends what you mean by ‘understand’. It can process one sign and come up with another sign according to a pre-programmed process, just like the man



in the Chinese Room can. However, it doesn't have any experience of the meaning of the sign. That's sometimes described as the distinction between semantics and syntax. The computer can manipulate signs according to a set of rules, which is the rules of syntax, but has no sense of the significance of those signs. If you say 'ice-cream' to a computer, for example, it won't recollect the taste of ice-cream, or remember eating it on a summer day. It doesn't have the organic bodies we have to relate to the meaning of such a term."

"So computers can't think" concluded Matt.

"That's what Searle seems to have shown pretty well, as long as thinking must involve a sense of the meaning of what we're thinking about. His whole idea of what 'thinking' involves stresses the organic nature of our experience, that we need to have bodies. In that sense he prefigures the Embodied Meaning theorists, like Lakoff and Johnson, who found ways of explaining how all meaning comes through our bodily experience, even the meanings of numbers or other completely abstract terms."

"But can humans think?" asked Rad. Rad was a student who usually sat in the corner and rarely said anything. However, when he did say something it was usually a very perceptive comment or a very salient question.

"That's a very good question, Rad" went on Valerian. "If we want to argue that computers can't think, then that's presumably contrasted with humans, who can. As I said, Searle thought that having a body was important for

thinking in a meaningful way, but you could ask whether we always experience ourselves as having bodies. That's where I think there's a very interesting twist to the Chinese Room analogy. Perhaps it's not just about computers, but also about us. Are there times when we are like the man in the Chinese Room, just processing without understanding what it is we're processing?"

"When I don't understand what you're on about in a Philosophy lecture," said Bella, "But I write it down anyway without understanding it."

"Good, yes" said Valerian coolly, not flustered by the possible dig at his lecturing skills. "Sometimes we go onto automatic pilot, or perhaps words seem meaningless even when we could perfectly well explain what they mean in terms of the dictionary."

"Thin' language?" suggested Matt.

"Yes, I'd imagine that's similar, when language seems very dry and abstract, and we sort of get it but don't really engage with it properly. Some psychologists have a possible explanation for this – they would say we are relating to the language through the left hemisphere of the brain but not the right. It's the right hemisphere that usually connects us to our senses and feelings, so it's the right hemisphere that connects ideas together and provides them with a sense of meaning. The left hemisphere, though, handles representational language that allows us to formulate and express our beliefs. So we can experience language in a very 'dry' or 'thin' way if it

only, or largely, comes through the left hemisphere, and in a very much more alive, significant way, when it involves the right.”

“So computers are like our left hemisphere?” asked Matt.

“Yes, but I think we pretty much designed them and programme them with our left hemispheres, too. They’re a kind of external extension of our left hemispheres.”

“Wow, that’s really interesting, Mr Blanket,” broke in Rad.  
“Why don’t you talk about that kind of thing in lectures?”

“It’s mixing up philosophy and psychology.” Valerian made a face. “My colleagues would disapprove, I fear.”