

THE THREE BRIDGES OF WORTH:



OTHER WORTH

“Not San Francisco and not Golden Gate,” the Imp said to Rachel

as they approached the great suspension bridge. “Golden Rule Bridge, yes--some call it that. Locals nickname it ‘The Bridge of Oughtworth’.”

“Yes, of course, that’s what the man from Valuation called it at Mrs. Keeper’s,” Rachel recalled. I thought he said ‘Otterworth’. I was hoping there would be otters.”

“Well there are otters from time to time and harbor seals and sea lions on nearby rocks, too. But the formal name of this bridge is ‘The Bridge of Otherworth’.”

“So why is it called so many different names?”

“Because each applies to it in some way. Before crossing this bridge, a person has to make a rule.”

“What kind of rule?”

“Well a rule about living, maybe, for example, about how persons ought to treat one another.”

“That’s how it was nicknamed ‘Oughtworth’, I suppose. Well that’s easy enough. I could just make a rule that everyone ought to do what I want when I want.”

“You could try something like that--in fact many who have crossed this bridge have made a rule like that. When this bridge was first put up, some ruled that they would be richer or more powerful than anyone else, or even adored by others. Nowadays people are subtler. They rule that they will be treated specially in some way because of something they already have or something distinctive about them.”

“Does that work?”

“Hmm. How’s the weather today?”

“Bright and beautiful, with clear blue skies.”

“O.K. Let’s have a snack and wait until someone is ready to cross.”

They hadn’t long to wait. Several people, arriving from different directions, came into view, one skate boarding, one rollerblading, one running at a rapid clip, and still another biking to the bridgehead. They stopped, eyeing each other coolly and assembled in a single file.

“The Umbrella Kids!” Rachel exclaimed. “Let’s go down and say ‘Hi’.”

“Later,” said the Imp. “For now let’s just watch. They’ve been having trouble with one another. It’s all about how the bridge is to be used. They all agree that no jaunty cars or carriages be allowed on the bridge. I don’t know that I like that idea. Now one of them is trying to exclude bikes. Another is trying to include skateboards and one wants only roller blades allowed on the bridge.”

“That’s Mahesh on the skateboard. He’s going to cross first.”

“He’ll have to stop at the turnstile first and state his rule.”

“Look the attendant is letting him through. Does that mean his rule is O.K.?”

“No, it just means he made a rule.... watch.”

They watched as Mahesh propelled his skateboard towards the other end of the bridge. He showed off some of tricks that made Rachel think of her sister’s friend Aaron

back home. Rachel was pretty impressed with his skill and was about to say something complimentary about his style when the Imp drew her attention to the horizon.

"Fog's rolling in," Rachel said. Then her jaw dropped. She had heard of fog banks moving into harbors very rapidly. But she had never imagined such a thick and roiling cloud of mist. "Thicker than pea soup," Rachel remembered her father had once said of the vapors clinging to the road and limiting his visibility. "So thick you could cut it with a knife," he had said and whistled under his breath. That was nothing compared to the misty blanket that now swallowed the entire middle section of the Bridge of Other worth. And there was Mahesh at its edge-- a figure rendered shadowy and indistinct before it was enveloped entirely.

"The Veil of Ignorance...."

"What? Is Mahesh going to be all right?" Rachel was alarmed.

"Yes... Well I think he will be. He's a good lad."

"What is happening to him?"

"Mahesh has entered The Veil of Ignorance. That's what the fog is called."

"Why?"

In answer, the Imp produced the guidebook out of thin air and levitated it into Rachel's hands. This is what she found:

The unusual properties of the fogbanks that typically invest the Bridge of Otherworth and its vicinity have led to its being dubbed the 'Veil of Ignorance'-- A term used by John Rawls in his work on Justice Theory (see appendix).

Rachel flipped to the appendix and read:

THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE

IMAGINE DECISION-MAKERS ARE SITUATED BEHIND A VEIL OF IGNORANCE. THEY ARE COMPLETELY SELF-INTERESTED. THEY ARE ENTIRELY RATIONAL. THEY HAVE FULL ACCESS TO GENERAL KNOWLEDGE.

BUT

THEY DO NOT HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF ANYTHING THAT MIGHT MAKE THEM DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS. THEY ARE IGNORANT OF THEIR OWN CLASS, SOCIAL STATUS, OR WEALTH, THEY

DON'T KNOW THEIR LEVEL OF INTELLIGENCE OR STRENGTH, THEIR AVERSION TO RISK, THEIR OPTIMISM OR PESSIMISM. THEY KNOW NOTHING OF THEIR OWN SOCIETY. THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW THE GENERATION TO WHICH THEY BELONG.

WHAT PRINCIPLES WILL THEY USE FOR DECISION -MAKING?²⁴

"Do they know if they are girls or boys?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Cool. Mom would love this."

It was not long before Mahesh emerged from the fog at the very spot where it first engulfed him. He was limping a little and his shirt was torn and he had smears of dirt and sweat on his cheek. As he made his way to the bridgehead, the Umbrella Kids crowded around him, offered him a drink of water and stroked his head, which he was shaking as if he were trying to get his bearings. Whether by some acoustical trick of the wind and terrain or by the Imp's magic, Rachel could hear the words that passed among them.

"What happened? Tell us-"

"Yes tell us everything-"

"Mahesh! Where's your skateboard?"

"What rule did you make, Mahesh?"

"Yes tell us the rule you made."

Mahesh answered, "I made a rule that only skateboarders were allowed on the bridge."

"So?"

"So then I found myself in the middle of the bridge with everyone buzzing around me doing their fancy tricks, only I couldn't join in the fun."

"Why?"

"Because I was in a leg cast and on crutches. I had a broken leg!"

"But people didn't stop or slow down for me, they whizzed right by and yelled at me: 'Don't you know you aren't supposed to be here if you aren't on skateboard?' I guess I didn't make a very good rule."

The children talked earnestly among themselves and then Xuan approached the turnstile, declared his rule and began to walk across the bridge. Xuan fared only a little better than Mahesh. An angry crowd chased him out of the fog. Some were throwing broken parts of roller blades and skateboards and even bicycles in his general direction. "I don't understand it," Xuan said in a daze. "I made a rule that anyone on roller blades or skateboards or bikes or even just on foot could use the bridge as they liked. But they all crashed into one another!"

Finally it was Ingrid who said "We need a whole set of rules that will allow people to use the bridge with roller blades, bikes, whatever--but so they won't hurt each other." There was much discussion among them about how this would be best accomplished. They had to take into account such things as relative velocities and risk of falling from different heights and ability to stop or slow down and what mode of conveyance was most popular. They had to decide whether people using different ways to travel should

have different times of day when only they could use the bridge, or whether there should be different lanes for each kind of mode of conveyance, or just for different speeds, no matter which mode of conveyance was chosen. Needless to say it took the kids several more trips into the fogbank to find rules that everyone could accept even if no one was altogether happy about them. And no doubt there will be several more trips into the fogbank when some new contraption for getting around is invented and becomes popular.

Later on, Rachel tried a few rules herself. Mostly having to do with who was entitled to what, for how long within her family. She tried rules that favored the youngest, the smartest, the hardest working, the cleverest and even the best-dressed sister in a family. Of course she had herself and Cynthia in mind. But in the fogbank she found herself in different family situations- not only ones in which she was the oldest instead of the youngest but also in single parent families with all boys except for one girl, for example. Or blended families with a step-parent and step-sisters, or ones in which she had been adopted, or sent to live as a foster child or in a group home. She found her liking of the “Youngest Rules, Oldest Drools” rule depended a lot on the circumstances. Taking different perspectives gave her a lot to think about.

“Does everyone make up rules that are most fair to herself and least fair to others?” she wondered.

²⁴ Kidder, R: **How Good People Make Tough Choices**. New York: Fireside/ Simon and Schuster. 1995, pp. 160-161. Also see:

Kymlicka, W: The social contract tradition. In **A Companion to Ethics**, P. Singer (ed.) Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1993, pp. 191ff.

Rawls, J: **A Theory of Justice**. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.