

THE SEVENTH BRIDGE:



A CONSCIENCE
CONCEIVED

It was drawing towards late afternoon and the air was still and hot. Rachel wondered why she wasn't grouchy. All the necessary ingredients for grouchiness were present. She was certainly exhausted from keeping company with the Imp and participating in all his escapades--or was it, after all, that he participated in all of hers? To her way of thinking she should be thoroughly demoralized about getting back home. None of the bridges she had been on- not even the Bridge of Choosing- had brought her home. The heat was intense if not quite unbearable. And the Imp was engaged pedantically in discourse on the subject of stages of moral reasoning. As if to illustrate his points they were passing by hillside paddies laid out for planting crops on terraces. He said the area was known as Kohlberg's Terraces and named after Lawrence Kohlberg, a pioneer in developmental moral psychology.²⁶ Kohlberg followed the lead of Jean Piaget in studying how children develop moral reasoning abilities.²⁷ In fact, the Imp informed her, they were in sight of Piaget's Peak a snow capped alpine mountaintop in the distance. The Imp said that Kohlberg believed that the stages of moral reasoning were hierarchical and invariant. He explained that like steps on a staircase, a person had to climb the stages of moral reasoning one at a time.

"Now myself, I'm a little too rebellious to accept hierarchies lock stock and barrel, and I'm a little too fond of spontaneity to accept invariance," said the Imp. "So I am glad to point out to you the other side of things."

They had by this time arrived at the crest of the terraced hill. As she looked where the Imp pointed down the far side of the hill, Rachel could still see paddies on terraced slopes. But they were not so much like steps on a staircase. Some of the terraces were almost parallel to one another but separated by gaps. There were several with switchback paths going from one to another. Others did not seem quite flat or horizontal. It was as if the hillside had told the terraces how they could be arranged and the terraces had told the hillside how it would behave.

"Pardon me, Mr. Imp. What's that you said?" Rachel had lost the drift of what the Imp was saying in the midst of her reveries.

"I was explaining how people used to talk about nature VERSUS nurture. The real questions are what part of human nature do we wish to nurture and what about the way we nurture one another becomes part of human nature? You see what I mean?"

"You know, Mr. Imp I think I do see what you mean."

Oddly enough, looking at the hillside and listening to the Imp, Rachel was reminded of how Cynthia had tried to explain the gravitational motion of celestial bodies in outer space: "Rachel, it's really very simple- space tells the bodies in it how to move,

and the bodies in space tell space how to be shaped.” At the time, Rachel figured Cynthia had been watching too many Nova’s on PBS. But now, looking at the hillside and listening to the Imp talk about stages of moral development, Rachel wondered if the way conscience formed and functioned in human beings wasn’t a little like how celestial bodies moved in space. Conscience needed the brain to tell it how to do its work but the brain was in some ways- certainly not all ways- shaped by conscience. Then again, looking at the paddies and the tender green stalks in them that lent the hillside a patchwork of pale green hues, Rachel thought about what it takes for something to grow. The seed with all its genetic blueprints and the soil with all its nutrients and the rain and the cultivation. Seeds. Rachel remembered the four hearts Mencius had said come in seed form: sympathy for other humans, an ability to feel shame, being apt to show respect and having a sense of right and wrong. When these seeds have developed and fully ripened, the four hearts are in harmony with the moral breath of the universe. The Imp had said the Conscience-bergians had been in a dispute about which domain should have the Gardens of Mencius. Rachel didn’t know which domain was most entitled. *Sympathy* or *empathy*-that sounded like something you would hear about in the Domain of Attachment with its Bridge of Connectedness. You might also hear about *trust* and *being trustworthy*, about *love* and *loyalty* and being obedient to elders or just getting along with others. You would probably hear about *gratitude* and once in awhile you would hear about heroic self-sacrifice. Ability to feel shame was just one of so many emotions that could become moral emotions. That was a lesson she learned in Kochanska. In the Domain of Moral Emotions she also learned of being emotionally responsive, of peace and *peace making*, of *caring* and *compassion*, of *reparation* and *reconciliation*, of *forgiveness* and of *courage*. In the Domain of Valuation with its three Bridges of Worth, Rachel learned of showing *respect* --for authority, for law, for tradition, for others, for property--and a good deal else as well: the virtue of being orderly, following rules and procedures, of being honest, helpful, generous, of taking turns and being fair and finding ways to resolve conflict and of maintaining a personal reputation. It was at the Bridge of Selfworth and later at the Bridge of Choosing that Rachel learned the importance of respecting and keeping her own life safe and sound, of having fun and finding leisure, of taking time to be with and evaluate herself in *solitude*, a kind of being alone without being lonely. Rachel thought that some of what she learned came from more than one domain: *tolerance* seemed to have something to do with connectedness but also with knowing that her self worth and the worth of others outweighed all their faults and mistakes put together. And **lovingkindness** fit into at least a few domains.

But Mencius also said all the hearts of human being would be in harmony with the ‘moral breath of the universe.’ Rachel didn’t know what to think about that.

She wasn’t sure how something deep down inside her could contribute even a small puff of air to the moral breath of the universe. The universe reached so far away, outside and beyond her. Its moral breath-- and its moral breadth too-- called for wonder and piety. Well maybe there would be more time for all that when she was older.

Right now the really interesting thing to Rachel was the network of ladders and slides that joined the separate terraces. “Like chutes and ladders,” she thought. Then she heard laughter, lots of laughter, like laughter coming from a crowded swimming pool--or maybe a water park with water slides!

“Just the thing for a hot afternoon,” said the Imp pointing to the umbrella kids climbing up a huge slide. “Want to join them, Rachel?”

“That would be wonderful, Mr. Imp but what about the seventh bridge?”

“Well that particular water slide is the seventh bridge, see how the river flows under it?”

Rachel studied the Seventh Bridge. Not only did the water flow under the bridge it flowed over it-- around it-- across it. In fact the water seemed itself to have become a bridge. A magnificently strange loop like a puzzler she had seen before--like a--

“Have you ever seen a one sided piece of paper, Rachel?”

“Yes. Yes. But I forget the name--”

“It’s called a Möbius loop.”

“Yes I tried to color one side of the loop red and the other side green--”

“And?”

“And the green ran into the red.”

“Why?”

“Because even though there looked like there might be an inside and an outside of the loop, there was really only one side after all.”

“Well the seventh bridge is like a Möbius loop.”

“A one-sided water slide? Cool.”

“Way cool. Why don’t you join the Umbrella Kids for a ride down? Or is it up? Whatever.”

“May I? May I go?” she asked. The Imp nodded ever so slightly. Rachel required no further urging. She ran towards the one-sided water slide. At its foot she turned excitedly towards the Imp and waved and then took her place in line for the ride.

The Imp waved back and said in a whisper, a little sadly, “Good-by, Rachel.”

Rachel climbed the ladder to a dizzying height and her excitement mounted with each step. She could see the Umbrella Kids racing down the incredible torrents of water. Like a wave in the air, like a waterfall that plunged up as well as down. Like a wet wonderful roller coaster. Now it was her turn. And Rachel decided the only way to go was headfirst. At first she was riding the crest of the wave that traveled the looping bridge. From that vantage point she could see all of Conscience-berg. Then she didn’t know how but she was traveling back along the river reversing the way she came. It all happened so fast: she passed under the Bridge of Choosing and through the fog investing the Bridge of Otherworth. She caught a glimpse of some new construction on the Bridge of Selfworth and she smiled. She saw the great canyon lands rise above her to be joined by the great bridge of Elderworth. In the next moment she was in a vortex. As she spun around the whirling water she saw a flood of rainbow color. Was that the image of Tov smiling and waving? If she had had any fears of drowning, his smile made them disappear. He raised his violin and played for her a few sweet notes before she was propelled on her way. She almost knew what would happen next. She felt the finny grasp on her foot and the firm tug of the Undertoad. As he pulled her under she could see the candy cane poles coming up fast. And who was that on the Bridge of Connectedness? A little girl! Too young to swim! But didn’t she know she would fall in the water if she didn’t have someone to help her cross? Rachel lost her breath in a burst of bubbles, closed her eyes but with a determined smile, held out a hand to touch the little girl above her. As the last of her awareness left her, Rachel felt something--a candy

cane pole? No. Something very unlike metal.... something quite different, something that she could hold onto, and something that could hold onto her right back. Like someone else's hand....

²⁶ Kohlberg, L: **The Philosophy of Moral Development**, New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

²⁷ Piaget, J: **The Moral Judgement of the Child**. New York: Free Press, 1965.