

FINDING OUR SEA-LEGS

FINDING OUR SEA-LEGS

ETHICS, EXPERIENCE AND THE OCEAN OF
STORIES

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Typeset with Vellum

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*For my parents,
and for storytellers everywhere...*

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PREFACE TO THE UPDATED EDITION

As the Canadian poet, Erin Mouré once said, books are emigrants: they belong where they end up. It is ten years since *Finding Our Sea-Legs* cast off from its moorings, thanks to the navigational skill of Kingston University Press. When I first launched this book, it was my hope that it might at least prove to be seaworthy, and that it might stand the test of time—or at the very least, that it might not sink the moment it left port. Back then, as it listed towards the horizon, I was under no illusions about what a deeply peculiar thing it was. This bundle of tales of talking fish, drunken Indonesian gods and philosophical woodpeckers didn't look much like the sleek philosophical craft that plied the waters of academic philosophy. It had none of their clean, aerodynamic lines. It was more cobbled-together than it was engineered. But the ramshackle construction of the book was not just accidental, a simple oversight on my own part; it was also essential to my own philosophical project. I see more clearly now in retrospect that the exuberance of the storytelling in the book was a revolt against philosophical boringness. The refusal to separate out from each other things that should properly be kept apart was a part of my hunch that, in

experience, things do not come in tidy compartments. And the light-heartedness of tone, the love of digression and the frequent jokes were a protest against high seriousness as a way of seeing and understanding the world.

Over the past decade, *Sea-Legs* has continued to find its way into the hands of readers (*who are they?*). From time to time it has found itself on academic reading lists. It has had a particular appeal, it seems, to sceptical not-quite-Buddhist readers. And after ten years—like one of those clapped-out and apparently unseaworthy vessels that makes you ask *how can it still be afloat?*—it still seems somehow to be holding up. So—after a decade of quiet, modest journeys—this seems a good time to reissue the text in a new, revised edition.



For this second edition, I have as much as possible resisted the temptation to tinker with the text. I have corrected a number of glaring and sometimes embarrassing errors and made a number of small tweaks for style. Otherwise, as I remain broadly in agreement with the arguments set out here, I have left the main body of the text as it was when first published ten years ago. I have, however, added a brief afterword, which gives an idea of where I stand now; still nowhere near sight of solid ground.

The first edition never made it into an ebook edition. I have taken the opportunity to rectify this, and the book is now available both in reissued paperback and in all major ebook formats.

It is also, perhaps, worth mentioning the convention I have adopted in this new edition for diacritical marks when drawing upon resources from other traditions. In the original version of this book, I kept what is now the standard Romanised spelling for terms such as ‘Buddha’ and ‘nirvana’ that are more or less

accepted parts of the standard lexicon, but when it came to less familiar terms, I preserved the diacritics. In this revised edition, at the risk of offending the purists, I have gone back on my earlier intention and removed the diacritics.

Otherwise, things are more or less where they stood a decade ago.

PREFACE

This book is an attempt to use the resources of both philosophy and storytelling to throw some light on how it might be possible to think through ethics. The argument of the book—or, at the very least, the story that I am telling—is one that cuts between texts, traditions and cultures. This is, in part, a necessary consequence of the subject-matter. Stories are by nature unruly beasts. Robert Irwin writes, in his perceptive study of the *Arabian Nights*, that good stories pay little attention to frontiers, whether these be cultural or linguistic (Irwin 1995). Because of this tendency of stories to go beyond the limits that many might think proper, as the book progresses, I will be moving freely between the rainforests of Papua New Guinea, twelfth century Kashmiri scriptures written entirely in the form of stories, fish that prophesy in Hebrew in the fish-markets of New York and the abstruse philosophical reflections of the likes of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Husserl. Such a method is suggested, if not dictated, by the demands of storytelling itself.

This is not a book that attempts to put forward a theory of ethics, a set of principles or rules by which we might know what is to be done and what is to be avoided. Instead, it is an

attempt to move towards a deeper attentiveness to ethical *experience*. Ethics, in this view, is not only a matter of reflection from the comfort of one's armchair, but rather a living responsiveness to the demands, responsibilities and possibilities that are presented to us, moment by moment, as we go about our lives.

The book begins by using storytelling as a way of looking at the experience of ethics, and introduces the idea first put forward by Aristotle—that ethics is like navigation, that is to say, that ethics is not so much about finding a point of absolute certainty, as it is a matter of finding our way through the many uncertainties and perplexities of our existence. Chapter two then draws upon parables and stories from both East and West to suggest, philosophy having failed to deliver us to a safe harbour, that without taking leave of philosophy altogether, storytelling may provide a way of thinking that can help us better understand the wind and the tides. The third chapter then casts off upon the sea of stories with two tales—a story from the southern reaches of Papua New Guinea, and a Roma tale—to explore what kind of thinking goes on in the relating of stories. This question is explored further in chapter four with the help of Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig's reflections upon storytelling and experience. Stories, it will become apparent, are not only reflections upon experience, but they are themselves also experiences; and in this way they can act as a kind of phenomenology, a reflection upon appearances, upon the way that that world seems to manifest itself to us. Chapter five then considers the powerful stories that are told about ethics by the philosopher and phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas. In this chapter, the philosophical waters are perhaps a little more treacherous than elsewhere, and so here we will have to move with some care and with a degree of patience. However, Levinas's work, for all its difficulty, will provide us with three things that we need to proceed smoothly on our way: firstly, the suggestion that ethical reflection needs a

closer attention to experience itself; secondly, the insight that ethics is bound up with our nature as temporal beings, as beings who are born, who live and who all eventually die; and thirdly, the idea that ethics concerns our relationships with otherness, with the different kinds of difference that we encounter in the world. These three thoughts will then be recast in the three chapters that follow, using storytelling as a kind of phenomenological method. Chapter six explores what kind of a phenomenological method storytelling might be, by means of telling stories about the telling of stories. In chapter seven, this method is put to further use through telling tales that throw light on the curious fluidity and complexity of the times and spaces of experience in general, and of ethical experience in particular. Chapter eight then explores questions of otherness and difference, by means of tales of desert crossings, of talking fish and of sages from both East and West. The last chapter puts this all together to ask how it might be possible to attend more deeply to ethics once we have put all dreams of certainty and dry land to one side.

It was the philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1999) who famously divided thinkers and writers—be they storytellers or theorists—into hedgehogs, who know one big thing, and foxes, who know many things. I always stand in admiration of hedgehogs, but I am a fox by nature, and I want to preserve a fox-like ability to move light-footed between different kinds of knowledge. It is a general rule that hedgehogs like to write for hedgehogs, and foxes like to write for foxes. I am no different in this respect, and so I have decided to consign certain of the more technical philosophical arguments and clarifications to the footnotes rather than including them in the main body of the text. Here, in the notes, while the foxes are long disappeared over the hill, following their noses and incapable of sticking to one thing, the hedgehogs may find at least something to satisfy them.

IN THE MARKETPLACE IN DARJEELING, EARLY ONE MORNING

We left the hotel in Darjeeling early, shouldering our bags and heading through the narrow streets to the bazaar where the jeep was waiting. The air was still a little chilly and the sun was low over the hills, but already the marketplace was crowded. As we hurried through the crowds, we heard the sound of wailing. There, to the side of the road by a flight of steps, was a man. He was seated on the ground amid the detritus of the market, sniffed at by mangy dogs. Nobody was paying him any attention. His clothes had slipped away from his upper body to reveal a hollow chest. His ribs stood out starkly in relief. Skinny arms protruded from his rags; he hugged himself with one arm while propping himself up with the other. But it was not his emaciated form that shocked me most. Instead, it was his face that I remember, an abyss of distress and misery. We faltered for a moment as he cried out, his face contorted in pain.

What would it have taken to have alleviated his suffering? Perhaps a universe, perhaps merely the touch of another human being's hands. Or perhaps he was beyond helping, if there is such a thing as being beyond helping. But we were tired

and ready for our journey to end. This man was a stranger, not our concern. So we turned away from his suffering. After all, suffering is—as certain Indian texts maintain—as inexhaustible as the ocean;¹ and often it seems that there is little, so very little, that we can do. Inevitably, there are times when we no longer try. In a moment—just long enough for the thought ‘there is nothing that we can do’ to take root in our minds—we had turned away.

The crowds closed behind us, and the man was gone. We headed down the hill to where the jeep was waiting, unloaded our heavy bags, climbed in, and before long we were on our way down the winding road that led to Siliguri, speeding past signs reading ‘Arrive home in peace, not in pieces (Public Works Dept.),’ and, ‘Don’t test your nerves on my curves.’

Only then, with Darjeeling behind us, as we wound our way down towards the River Teesta, did my friend speak.

‘We should have done something,’ she said.

Philosophy, Ethics and Stories

Over a decade on, the memory of that morning still stays with me. *We should have done something*. There is no getting around it, no way of easily evading this thought. And asking, *Ah, yes, but what?*, admitting that we knew nothing of his suffering and that we simply do not know how much we could have done, does nothing to absolve me of this sense of responsibility. When it comes down to it, it is quite simple: we knew enough to act, but we failed to do so.

I begin with this story because for me it says something about the perplexity that lies at the heart of our attempts to think through ethics. And if ethics has been the abiding obsession of philosophers since the very beginning, it is in part because these kind of perplexing experiences are so very far from being uncommon. Often we find ourselves, our world and

our values put into question in this way. Yet—and this is worth saying at the outset—frequently philosophy alone seems inadequate as a means of understanding such experiences. The philosophical language of rights and duties and consequences and virtues, a language that sometimes seems so necessary, is also one that often seems only obliquely related to actual ethical *experience*, to events such as those that took place in the marketplace in Darjeeling. Indeed, the moment that we confront urgent ethical questions in our everyday lives (or the moment these questions confront us) it often seems as if the abstractions provided by the philosophers are curiously ill-adapted to deal with them. This is the case, not least because—given that we live forwards, as Kierkegaard pointed out, but we reflect backwards²—the entire labour of philosophical ethics often seems to aim at a single judgement of acts that are already in the past: good or bad, yea or nay, condemn or commend.

And so, when thinking through with questions of ethics—by which I mean questions concerning how we relate to others and how we might be able to best conduct ourselves—even philosophers sometimes find themselves going beyond the precincts of philosophy proper. And when they do, it is often to stories that they turn.

Why stories? One reason is that, as Aristotle knew, when it comes to our activity in the world we are always dealing with particular circumstances rather than with generalities. He writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: ‘matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity.’ In the absence of such fixity, it is not so much a matter of subsuming particular circumstances under ‘any art or set of precepts,’ but rather, ‘the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation’ (*Ethics* 1104a). That is to say, the world of ethics is not a world of pure abstraction, of eternal

and immutable realities; instead it is this very world, where we find ourselves stumbling through the marketplace confronted first by this, then by that, where our knowledge is always partial and never absolute, where we never have enough time on our hands to come to a fully reasoned judgement, where the demands upon us always outstrip our ability to respond and we never fully know what the consequences of our actions will be. We grope our way towards understanding through the heart of uncertainty, and at no point can we be granted the luxury of being certain we are right, or discover the luxury of a rule that can deliver absolute results. Aristotle seems to be suggesting that, when it comes to conduct, we need a form of wisdom that allows us to act *amid* uncertainty, amid the jostling of the marketplace. And so, when I say that I do not know what I could have done to help the man in the bazaar in Darjeeling, this is not to divest myself of all responsibility; it is instead a straightforward admission of the uncertainty that makes this a situation that demands ethical reflection in the first place.

The Aristotelian idea that ethics is like navigation also suggests to us why it might be that stories are particularly well suited for the discussion of ethics. Stories, after all, do not deliver us certain truths in the form of propositions. They do not tell us unambiguously what is and what is not the case. More frequently than not, they do not so much do away with questions as multiply them. They do not deliver us to solid ground, but instead bring us face to face with the particularity, the uncertainty and liquidity of our existence. If ethics is a kind of navigation, then the territory upon which ethics is played out could be likened to a turbulent sea upon which, as one Buddhist text has it, beings bob and sink,³ their troubles endless. And if we are to learn to be good or at least passable navigators, avoiding the most treacherous reefs, it may be that we cannot do without stories.

The Trouble With Ethics

Stories, however, are troubling things; and the suggestion that we might usefully think through ethics by means of stories might seem to risk introducing all kinds of further uncertainties into what is already a clouded and confused business. For many philosophers, uncertainty has been seen as the enemy of ethics. *If I cannot be certain what is right*, the question is, *how can I do the right thing?* And if this is a problem, perhaps there is scant comfort to be drawn from the fact that this has been a problem ever since the days of Socrates.

In Plato's dialogue, the *Euthyphro* the Athenian philosopher, gadfly and trouble-maker Socrates is outside the law-courts of Athens, where he is being indicted under charges of impiety. Outside the courts, he meets with a fervent young man called Euthyphro, who is prosecuting his father on similar grounds. It appears his father was responsible for the death of a slave, and Euthyphro wishes to call him to account. While modern readers might side with Euthyphro, in ancient Greece the idea of taking one's father to court, however high-minded the motives, was a deeply troubling one. So Socrates and Euthyphro fall into conversation about the nature of impiety. After all, this is something that concerns them both intimately, and for Socrates clearing up the question of what impiety actually *is* might well be a matter of life and death.

Some way into their discussion, Socrates lays out the problem.

SOCRATES: What are the subjects of difference that cause hatred and anger? Let us look at it this way. If you and I were to differ about numbers as to which is the greater, would this difference make us enemies and angry with each other, or would we proceed to count and soon resolve our difference about this?

EUTHYPHRO: We would certainly do so.

SOCRATES: Again, if we differed about the larger and the smaller, we would turn to measurement and soon cease to differ.

EUTHYPHRO: That is so.

SOCRATES: And about the heavier and the lighter, we would resort to weighing and be reconciled.

EUTHYPHRO: Of course.

SOCRATES: What subject of difference would make us angry and hostile to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? Perhaps you do not have an answer ready, but examine as I tell you whether these subjects are the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?

(Euthyphro 7b-d)

The problem is clear: there is no yardstick by virtue of which we can agree on right and wrong, good and bad. It is not just that we have not yet reached common agreement in ethics, but that we don't even know the method we might use to get there. This problem is about as far from being an abstract philosophical problem as is possible. As Socrates makes clear, it is precisely when it comes to questions of ethics—questions of good and bad, just and unjust—that we find ourselves becoming angry and hostile to each other. These are the things that get us hot under the collar. Whether for better or worse, it seems that we care passionately about ethics. We are impossibly and irredeemably social creatures who love and hate, who snuggle and struggle, who build friendships and enmities, for whom not caring is not an option, even when we know that our caring is inconsistent and without foundation. But at the same time, we have no common measure by virtue of which we could

come to an ethical conclusion. If we happened to care passionately about the disputed molecular structure of some particular compound, we would hardly go to war over such a dispute, because we could resolve our differences by measuring or testing. But we do not have this advantage when it comes to ethics; and so, in the absence of this common measure, we face a situation of real and profound danger. Despite our best intentions—perhaps *because* of our best intentions—it is the conflicts between our ethical stances that are the major causes of human strife. Wars almost everywhere, even those we might judge to be the most profoundly unjust, are not launched on a whim, but on account of (real or imagined) harms and slights done to the party in question, or in pursuit of lofty dreams of a better world. Those who abuse make the ethical claim that those whom they abuse deserve this treatment. Everywhere there is human cruelty, everywhere there is barbarity, everywhere there is conflict, right at the heart of things you will find clamorous claims to ethical certainty, to truth, to right, to justice. We are accustomed, in short, to thinking of ethics as the solution; but it is also a large part of the problem. First we hear the ethical claims and counter-claims; next we hear the distant rumble of guns and the clanking of the ironsmiths' hammers as they fashion ploughshares into swords.

What, then, are we to do? At the end of the dialogue with Euthyphro, the young man confesses that he is baffled when it comes to a true understanding of the nature of piety and impiety. Socrates admits that he too is ignorant, and urges Euthyphro to keep on searching. With this, the two men part.

Under the circumstances, Socrates' advice to Euthyphro is not unreasonable. And yet, given that two and a half thousand years of searching have not delivered us the kinds of ethical certainties of which Socrates dreamed, it is also not unreasonable to wonder whether we might do better to take a rather different tack.

Navigating Ethics

Throughout the history of ethical thought, at least in the West, there have been repeated attempts to attain the kind of ethical certainty that might be able to meet Socrates's challenge head-on; and yet, to date, it seems that all have been unsuccessful. Certainly, many have *proclaimed* themselves successful; but to meet Socrates's criterion for success, it would be necessary not only to believe that one had attained this certainty, but also to establish a common measure that could be shared, so that we could mutually come to an eventual agreement. And this has never happened.

However, this is not sufficient reason for gloomy despair. After all, there may be something fearful lurking in the idea of moral certainty. When Immanuel Kant tells us that masturbation, selling one's hair to wig-makers and lying are always blameable acts,⁴ we might want to protest that these things are not always worthy of such harsh judgements. Indeed we may want to hold out the possibility that there may be circumstances in which it is positively a good thing to do any or all of these things, although not, perhaps, all at the same time. Ethics, if it is to avoid becoming monstrous ('Herr Kant, do you have the man that I desire to murder hiding in your house?' 'Indeed I do, Sir, for I cannot tell a lie'⁵) simply *must* pay attention to the particular.

Let us return to Aristotle. If, when it comes to ethics, what matters is a closer attention to the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, and if there is no fixity to be found in ethical matters, then it may be that this search for an immutable common foundation for ethics is *bound* to fail. And even if Aristotle is wrong, we have not yet reached this point: two and a half thousand years after Socrates, there is still no ethical agreement that would meet his exacting standards. Even if such agreement is not impossible *in principle* (although I

suspect that it is), prolonging the search for such agreement may not be particularly useful *in practice*. We do not have the Socratic luxury of simply confessing our own ignorance and then continuing on our way. We have to act, and we find ourselves having to account for our actions.

How, then, are we to navigate through these perplexities and uncertainties? What can we use to guide us, while we are at the mercy of the wind and the tides, our circumstances changing moment by moment? The philosophers may shudder, but most of us know that we simply have to act as best we are able, through what scant knowledge we can pick up, through hunches and intuitions and everyday know-how, and through a good dose of the luck that (as the ancient Greeks had the wisdom to recognise) plays a far greater role in ethics than we are comfortable to admit. At first glance, this feels like a disavowal of the challenge set by Socrates. It may, however, be almost the opposite. If we cannot ease our tendency towards hostility and mutual enmity by reaching agreement, perhaps we can go some way to alleviating this tendency by a frank admission that, when we talk about ethics, none of us stands on anything like solid ground. When we talk about ethics, perhaps we are all—all of us, all of the time—all at sea.

ALL AT SEA: A PHILOSOPHICAL PARABLE

The story begins with a dream of solid ground: like the dream of a sailor who has been a long time at sea and who feels a longing for the hard, unmoving rocks beneath his feet. Having lived his entire life on board ship, and knowing only the swell of the ocean, our sailor nevertheless still feels some kind of longing; from time to time, when he looks towards the shimmer of the horizon, he imagines cliffs, mountains, sandy beaches, low forests, atolls, islands and continents. How beautiful the dream is. Yet the dreaming sailor turns away from the horizon with a sigh. He knows that his imagination is lurid, and that the haze and the heat of the noonday sun are playing tricks upon him, that he does not have the courage of his convictions. He has read the history books. He has studied the ship's log. He has striven to learn as much as he can. And although the dream still moves him, he is no longer courageous or foolish enough to dream it with the conviction he once had.

Our sailor is not alone on the ship. With him there are many others, and amongst this motley bunch are some—we can call them philosophers, prophets or priests, it does not

matter which—who do not share his diffidence and his uncertainty. These prophets are a forbidding crowd: confident in their powers, they have clarified their vision by the force of long and difficult asceticism, disciplines of the body and of the soul and of the mind (although, alas, all too rarely of the heart). Most of the time, they sit in silence, cloistered in their cabins where they are not seen from one year to the next, locked in arcane conference in the canteen, or sitting on deck-chairs, staring at the unending sky and the roiling waves with looks of otherworldly puzzlement upon their faces. Most of the time, that is. For, on occasion, one amongst these curious prophets happens to lean over the guard-rail and glimpse (or claim to do so) a dark smudge where the sky meets the sea. *Land Ahoy!*¹

Suddenly there is commotion. Some rush to the prophet's side muttering, 'Yes, yes! I see it! I see it!' Others, more cautious, remove their spectacles, draw out a cloth to clean the lenses, return the spectacles to their noses, and squint uncertainly in the direction of the pointed finger. Inevitably, from certain deckchairs that are positioned so that they might be perpetually in the shade, it is possible to hear dissenting voices, protests muttered between teeth clenched around the stem of a pipe: 'Bunkum!' the killjoys mutter.

For our sailor, these two simple words—*Land Ahoy!*—never fail to bring tears to his eyes. How wonderful, he thinks, if it were true. But he is under no illusions. He has seen it all before. Sometimes the prophet is all but ignored, despite the shouting, and they skulk off to brood in their cabin or deckchair. Sometimes the prophet receives a few polite smiles, nothing more ('Ah,' people mutter, 'another one!'). Sometimes the prophet gathers together a few followers who jump up and down, an enthusiastic and clamorous band. And although it has not happened in the sailor's own lifetime, in the ship's log it is recorded that, on several occasions in the past, a prophet afflicted by noontide delirium has gained enough support to

seize the vessel. On occasions such as these, the ship's course has veered wildly and erratically for days, months, years even, as the increasingly fractious mutineers—for this is what they have become—point it first this way and then that, heading towards the dream of a port that was always out of reach. Yet for one reason or another, none of these prophets has ever succeeded in bringing the ship into a safe harbour. On the horizon, the dark smudges have perpetually receded into nothing at the approach of the boat; or they have vanished in the darkness of the night and failed to reappear in the dawn; or the prophet who has spoken so eloquently has disappeared overboard, never to be seen again.

How strange that we are still adrift. After all this time.

A Gnat's Fart

Western philosophy could be seen as one long dream of solid ground and of safe harbour. As the ship of philosophy has lurched across the oceans through the centuries—or perhaps it would be better to imagine a whole fleet of ships, with the attendant mutinies and piratical battles and exchanges of cannon fire, sinkings and drownings—this has been the most cherished, most fevered of the dreams that we have allowed ourselves to dream: that somewhere, just beyond the horizon, there might lie some solid ground. Yet nobody, to my knowledge, has found such a place. And if they have, they have never returned to tell us.²

That is not to say that two and a half thousand years of philosophical meditation have been in vain; it is only to say that the insights and results of philosophy have not yet saved us from the high seas where we all live and where we all, inevitably, must die. Because of this failure, it is easy to accuse philosophers of heady abstraction—like Socrates in Aristophanes's play, *The Clouds*, bobbing around in his curious sky-

borne gondola, without his feet ever touching the ground, speculating about the physiology of gnat farts and the jumping of fleas.³

And so, we might find ourselves wondering: what is philosophy good for? Nautical engineering is good for building boats, meteorology is good for predicting the movements of the elements, medical knowledge is good for curing ailments of the body, but *philosophy*? Some philosophers have claimed that philosophy leads to certainty, but even the most learned of them tend to disagree amongst themselves about the certainties to which philosophy has led them. Others have claimed that philosophical knowledge is good for curing ailments of the soul, but when one takes a good look not so much at philosophy as at *philosophers*, this seems implausible. Philosophers may be no more sick-of-soul than the rest of us, but at the very least they seem to be no more cured: for every philosopher who seems well-balanced and—dare it be said?—*happy*, one can cite the example of another who is frenzied, deranged, or in one way or another unhinged.

Or perhaps we could see philosophers as storytellers. As dreamers of strange and beautiful dreams. Or as gadflies, as provokers of impossible questions that we had—until they turned up with their quizzical glances—never even dreamed of asking. Or as inventors of new ideas that allow us to think about the world afresh. And the dreaming of strange and beautiful dreams, the asking of impossible questions and the invention of fresh ideas—all these amount to rather more than a gnat's fart. Strange dreams may alert us once again to the strange and dreamlike nature of our experience of the world, to the astonishment and wonder of being here at all. Impossible questions can often cast new light upon the world, can lead our thoughts beyond their habitual circularity. And when the old ideas fail to get us where we would like to be, perhaps new ones may have the power to move us. None of this has anything to do

with certainty, but it may give rise to the kinds of insights that we need to help us along our way.

For many of those who are not philosophers, such philosophical dreams of dry land seem neither particularly compelling nor particularly urgent. We live, most of us, day-to-day. We do as best we can, putting up with the kind of things that would drive philosophers to distraction. We get on with the business of living, our approach to ethics both slapdash and *ad hoc*, a philosopher's nightmare, a hodge-podge of reasoning and impulse and stories and fragments of stories, knowledge drawn from here and there. Most of us, if we are not philosophers—and even those of us who are philosophers, when we are off-duty or off-guard—do not govern our lives by means of well-grounded rational principles. Instead, we make our way uneasily, attentive to the winds and the tides, our thoughts inconsistent and jumbled, with little clarity and even less certainty. And, astonishingly enough for the moralists, we often find that this kind of approach to going about our lives is remarkably successful in bringing about conditions whereby kindness and compassion can flourish. Confused though we are, we get by, in the main.

However, by renouncing dreams of dry land, and admitting that if philosophy has not managed to resolve the questions that trouble us, it is possible to see that philosophy may still have a role in giving us the kinds of know-how that we need as we go about this tricky business of navigating our way through our lives. The sages may be misguided in promising to deliver us to a safe harbour, but they may nevertheless help us to ride out the elements, to find ways of living as best we are able when the ground beneath our feet is always shifting and when we never know where the tides and the winds are going to deliver us next. Through the questions that we hadn't thought to ask, through the ideas that we hadn't known how to formulate, and through the dreams that we hadn't known how to dream,

philosophy may enrich and deepen our sense of our situation, thereby easing the turbulence of our passage through the world. And if this is a less elevated goal than that dreamed of by our prophets, it is also arguably of more immediate and urgent importance.

A Sea of Stories

It is here that we see why, in our day to day lives, when we find ourselves talking about questions of ethics, we inevitably resort to the telling of stories, the spinning of yarns. Because if ethics is like navigation, then stories are like the sea. The latter simile may be less familiar than the former. It appears in the title of Somadeva's delightful collection of folk-tales, the *Kathasarit-sagara*, or 'Ocean of the Sea of Stories' (Somadeva, 1996), and recurs in the work of Salman Rushdie, who conjures up the image of this ocean with a storyteller's flair.

So Iff the Water Genie told Haroun about the Ocean of the Streams of Story, and even though he was full of a sense of hopelessness and failure, the magic of the Ocean began to have an effect on Haroun. He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity; and Iff explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. Different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up

with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive. (Rushdie 1990, 71)

Rushdie perfectly captures the fluidity and mutability of stories, the way that—as Robert Irwin writes—tales ‘evolve into other tales’ and ‘replicate, elaborate, invert, abridge, link and comment on their own structure in an endless play of transformation’, so that in the end we find ourselves ‘adrift on an endless ocean of stories, an ocean that is boundless, deep and ceaselessly in motion’ (Irwin 1995, 65). This is a metaphor that is by no means found exclusively within Indian thought. It also recurs in the literature of the West, as has been pointed out by Ernst Curtius in his monumental *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, where he dedicates several pages to nautical metaphors in Western approaches to poetic creation. Curtius cites everyone from the Roman poets Virgil and Horace to Saint Jerome, Dante and Spenser (Curtius 1991). When we are thinking about stories, it seems, we find ourselves drawn almost inexorably to thinking of the sea. And yet there is a difference between these Western texts and the Indian texts. In the former, the poet or the composer may be likened again and again to a navigator, but the journey is almost always ultimately considered as a passage from one shore to another. In the latter texts, on the other hand, it is no longer certain that there is any such thing as dry land: once we cast off on the ocean of stories, it seems that we may have to wave farewell to dry land for good.⁴

Armed with these propositions—that ethics is like navigation and stories are like the sea—it begins to become clear why it might be that, when it comes to making sense of the complex, shifting, sea-like nature of our existence, sometimes a story will get through where all of our philosophy, all of our analyses and

proofs, seem to fail us. ‘When experimentation doesn’t get you there,’ writes philosopher Michel Serres, ‘let the story go there, if it can; if meditation fails, why not try narrative?’ (Serres 1997, 165-6)

Or, to put it another way, if we are fated to live out our days adrift on the ocean, then hydrophobic dreams of dry land will do us no good. If we are to navigate with any degree of success, we cannot turn our backs upon the knowledge that is born from the changing winds and from the shifting of the tides. So let us cast off, then, upon these uncertain seas of stories; and let us see where we end up.

CASTING OFF

It is winter. Outside, sleet is spattering against the window. I am sitting in the armchair and I am tired. Tired and ill-tempered.

You look at me. 'Tell me a story,' you say.

I do not want to tell you a story. 'I am too tired,' I say.

'Tell me a story,' you repeat.

I try to tell you that a story requires effort, that I have had a hard day... But as I am explaining all this, I realise that you are not going to give up, and that it would be easier, all things considered, to get on with it and tell a story. 'What story do you want to hear?' I sigh.

You smile. 'Tell me about Kikori and Fly,' you suggest. And so I do.¹

Kikori and Fly

Kikori and Fly live in a cave. It is dark and unpleasant; and one day Kikori, tired of these conditions, has a thought: 'I will invent a house!' he says.

'What's a house?' asks Fly.

‘I don’t know,’ Kikori confesses, ‘I’ve not invented it yet.’

At this point, you smile and my exhaustion lifts a little.

Kikori goes into the forest. He cuts down some saplings, strips the trunks and makes poles. He takes some creepers and weaves them into strong ropes. Then he sets about building his house, binding the poles together with the ropes he has made.

Fly watches. ‘All that effort, Kikori!’ he says. ‘I’ll show you how to make a house.’ And he buzzes out of the cave and starts to build a house of his own, moulding mud until he has a cosy shelter. It takes all of an hour before it is completed, but it is several days before Kikori has finished his labours. Fly sits in his mud house and taunts Kikori. ‘You could copy me,’ he says, ‘if your pride did not prevent you.’

When at last Kikori’s house is finished, the two friends settle down to life outside the cave.



Here I think of Plato, because a philosopher must always think of Plato at the mention of a cave. It is the law. A thought crosses my mind: are Kikori and Fly now two philosophers, recently emerged into the sunlight? But then I remind myself that caves existed before Plato, and they will continue to exist after Plato is forgotten. Sometimes a cave is just a cave. Besides, you are looking at me strangely, wondering why I have paused. I continue with the story.



Then the rains begin. A single drop, then two, then three, then a regular pattering. ‘Come and stay with me,’ calls Kikori to Fly, ‘let us sit out the rainy season together.’ But Fly refuses.

The rain becomes heavier, and Fly feels something fall on

the top of his head. He looks up: a drip. ‘Kikori!’ he calls from his door. ‘Do you have a drip in your house?’

‘Not yet, Fly,’ Kikori replies.

There is another drip, then another. A damp patch is spreading through Fly’s roof. There is a rumble of thunder.

‘Friend Fly, come and spend the rains with me!’ Kikori shouts from his doorway.

‘No chance,’ Fly replies. But then something terrible and large and black descends upon him. For a moment he wonders whether he has died. He wriggles and kicks. He is suffocating. What witchcraft is this? Then his head pokes back up into the daylight, and he looks around. He has no house. There is only a pool of mud.

Kikori begins to laugh. Fly sits brooding on his pile of dirt. And there he remains until this day. Kikori has long since lost patience with him. Now, when Fly comes buzzing into the house of Kikori’s descendants, he is swatted away with an irritable hand.



The story is over. I sit back in my chair and fall silent. ‘Thank you,’ you say. ‘I like that one.’

I say nothing. It is tiring work telling a story, and often it is hard to know what to say or do next. So we sit in silence. You glance out of the window. I think of Kikori constructing his idyll out there in the forest somewhere.

‘Tell me another,’ you say.

Prince Red Peter

All right. A story. Once again. Is there ever any end to this game of telling stories? Probably not. As Tristram Shandy knew, there is neither an end nor a beginning.²

‘Which story do you want me to tell now?’ I ask.

‘Your choice,’ you say.

I wait for a story to come to me and pick up my mug of tea. The tea is cold. I take a sip anyway. ‘All right,’ I say. ‘How about Prince Red Peter?’³

You smile in agreement and close your eyes.



When Prince Red Peter was still a young man, his father offered him his inheritance. The prince, being prudent, buried the gold. Then he wished his father well and saddled his horse.

‘Where are you going?’ asked his father.

‘Here I will become old, as you are old,’ the prince replied. ‘I am going to find a place free of death.’

So the prince travelled west for seven years. At last, he came to a vast forest. Several days’ ride later, he heard a hammering and looked up to see a woodpecker clinging to the trunk of an old tree. ‘Who are you?’ Prince Red Peter asked.

‘I am the King of the Wood,’ the woodpecker replied. ‘Who are you?’

‘My name is Prince Red Peter. I am looking for a place beyond death.’

The woodpecker cocked his head. ‘Then stay,’ he said, ‘for nobody in my kingdom will die until the last twig is pecked away.’

Prince Red Peter shook his head. ‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘but that day will surely come.’ Tipping his hat, he rode onwards.

Seven years later he came to a great plain encircled by seven mountains. At the foot of the mountains was a copper palace. Prince Red Peter knocked on the door. A beautiful young woman answered. ‘Welcome,’ she said. ‘Please do come in.’

The prince spent the night in the copper palace. The girl

(who was, of course, a princess) fed him, gave him wine and chastely kissed him good night. The following day she asked him to stay. 'If you remain here and become my husband,' she said, 'you will not die until the mountains are worn away by the wind and the rain.'

But Prince Red Peter shook his head. 'That day too will come,' he said.

Seven years later he arrived at the edge of the world. His beard was already flecked with grey. Two mountains stood before him, the mountain on the left made of silver and the mountain on the right of gold. Between the two was a cave from out of which came a terrible howling. The prince dismounted from his horse, approached the cave and called out: 'Who's there?'

'Prince Red Peter! I am the West Wind! Welcome to the edge of the world. Why have you come this far?'

'I am looking for a place free of death,' the prince said.

And the West Wind replied, 'Then stay. Here you will neither age nor die. You may hunt on the golden mountain and you may hunt on the silver mountain and you will never grow old. But do not go into the Valley of Regret that lies in between.'

So Prince Red Peter made his home on the edge of the world. He drank from the fresh streams. His hair and beard turned jet-black again; his skin became like that of a lad still in his teenage years. One million years turned in their cycle. He hunted on the golden mountain. He hunted on the silver mountain. He did not go into the Valley of Regret.



I glance up. You are looking out of the window. The sleet continues to splatter against the panes, blurring the light from the street-lamps. I continue with the story.



One morning, he saw a stag on the mountainside, the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. He turned his horse and raised his bow. The stag dived into the trees and the prince gave chase.

The day was hot and the stag ran fast. The prince was so filled with the exhilaration of the hunt that he did not notice when the stag began to plunge down the steep slopes to the valley below. The prince followed for more than an hour before he heard the sound of trickling water. He hesitated. The stag crashed through the undergrowth and was gone.

Prince Red Peter looked down at the stream running by his feet. He could descend no more, for there was nowhere lower in the whole world. For the first time in one million years, he thought with a pang of longing of the princess in the copper palace. He remembered the woodpecker and wished that he could return to that wood. He recollected his city and thought that he would be truly happy if he could set eyes upon it again.

Taking leave of the wind, he made his way back east. After seven years, he came to an enormous plain in the middle of which was a weathered green hut. An old woman was seated outside. 'Old woman,' he said, 'what are you doing here?' 'Prince Red Peter?' the woman smiled. 'It is me, the princess. How quickly the years pass. Please, kiss me.'

Prince Red Peter leaned to kiss the old woman. His lips touched her cheek, she let out the lightest of sighs, and she fell dead at his feet.

He buried the princess and continued east for seven more years until he passed through a great wilderness almost devoid of life. There he heard a feeble tapping, like an old man walking with a cane, and he saw a small and shabby bird, almost featherless, wearily tapping at a stick with its beak. The bird looked up. 'Prince Red Peter! How soon the time goes...'

The King of the Wood pecked once more at the stick, and then he too fell down dead.

Prince Red Peter dug a second grave and continued on his journey.

After seven more years he came to a city he did not recognise, made of glass and steel. The air was foul to breathe. It was dusk, and the prince had nowhere else to go, so he took refuge in a park. As he was settling down to sleep on a bench, an old tramp came up to him. ‘That’s my bench.’

‘Sorry,’ mumbled the prince, and he stood up.

The tramp sat down and glowered. ‘Who are you, foreigner?’

‘My name is Prince Red Peter,’ replied the prince.

‘You’re taking the piss, mate,’ the tramp said. ‘My mother used to tell me that story when I was a kid. She said the palace was here, in this very park. Bugged if I believe it. Now piss off. I want a kip.’

Leaving the tramp, Prince Red Peter wandered through the park. As he walked he began to recognise the remnants of his home—a wall here, a stone there—until at last he found himself standing by the place where, so long before, he had buried his inheritance. The moon was rising. He took a flat stone from the flowerbed and started to dig. Before long, he struck something solid. He cleared the earth and saw an old chest. It was unlocked. He lifted the lid slowly.

Inside were two dark shapes. The leftmost rose up before him, an old woman dressed in black. ‘Peter,’ she said, ‘my name is Old Age. Come.’ She took his hand.

Prince Red Peter’s hair turned from black to grey to white. His skin shrivelled and his spine twisted. The old woman blurred into the night and Prince Red Peter’s sight faded.

Then the second shape arose, a vague shadow now. ‘Peter,’ she said, ‘my name is Death. Welcome. I’ve been waiting a long time.’ And when she took his hand, Prince Red Peter’s

body crumbled away until it was nothing but dust in the moonlight.



I finish the story. Looking out of the window at the city in winter, I notice the moon over the rooftops. You don't say a word.

I look down at my watch. 'Is that the time?' I ask.

You shrug. 'Yes,' you say. 'We should probably get some sleep...'

What are Stories Good For?

The tough-minded philosopher, etymologically the lover of wisdom, might be tempted to respond to stories such as these by saying: this is all very well, but this is hardly the kind of thing that befits a serious philosopher. Stories are for those who are not up to the difficult job of philosophy. They are for children in whom reason has yet to harden. Or they are for those in whom reason has curdled—lunatics, the insane and certain foolish lovers. Or else they are for those in whom, the philosophers judge, reason has no hope of hardening—savages and simpletons, women, foreigners. Or they are for those in whom reason has long softened—the old and senile, those dulled by the practice of religion, or by hard labour. *It is only a story*, the philosophers say, and stories are not for the likes of philosophers. In the same way that Bernard of Clairvaux admitted that carvings in churches might have some use in teaching the foolish and illiterate masses, but they had no place in the cloister,⁴ so the philosophers might permit some kind of subsidiary role for stories for those incapable of following the abstruse lines of real philosophical argument, but only as a concession to the feebleness of other minds.

Yet when we put to one side philosophical prejudices against such naïve means of reflection, and ask what actually goes on in the exchanging of tales such as these, we find that things become considerably more interesting. What are stories good for? Well, for a start, they can be remarkably productive of fresh knowledge. There is much to be discovered in a good story: more, sometimes, than can be found in endless piles of theory, or in whole shelves of abstruse philosophical analysis. For example, we know from the story of Kikori and Fly something of what it is like to invent, and what an extraordinary thing it is to bring something into being that did not exist before. We know that most worthwhile endeavours take considerable effort, and that shirking such effort may not be worth it in the long run. We know something about how to construct a shelter in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea, knowledge that may—who can say?—be of immeasurable value to us one day, that may even save our life or the lives of those we love. We know what it is like to be in a mudslide, and can perhaps from here infer something of what it is like to be in a landslide or an avalanche. The list could go on. None of this knowledge is certain, of course; but it is all, at least, *testable* against what we already know of the world, the kind of knowledge that, as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss once wrote, is ‘good to think with.’

Similarly, from the story of Prince Red Peter, we know a little more about what it is like to live always in the shadow of death. We know something of princesses and their ways. We may have gained a little more knowledge about woodpeckers. We know that eternity cannot satisfy and that those things for which we long are precisely the things that are mortal and subject to change. We know that some tramps are extremely territorial when it comes to their park benches and that they sometimes use language that appears vulgar when used in a work of philosophy. None of this knowledge is absolute or

certain. It is always subject to qualification and amendment. Some tramps might be generous in sharing their benches. Some tramps might even be philosophers, after the model of Diogenes. Not all princesses are alike. And so on. But this concern with absolute knowledge is the very thing that, in renouncing dreams of dry land, we must place to one side. Serres writes, 'We always assume that we don't know, or else that we know everything, yea or nay. Whereas commonly we know a bit, a meagre amount, enough, quite a bit' (Serres 1995, 5). Here, between absolute ignorance and absolute knowledge, in the place in-between where we all live and where we all die, stories speak to us.

However, we should not fall into thinking that, when it comes to the kind of knowledge we can glean from stories, absolutely anything goes. Some methods of building a shelter in the forests of Papua New Guinea, we now know, work well; others do not. There are some ways in which it is appropriate to address princesses, and other ways that are generally better avoided. To respond to a story wisely, we must see how the new knowledge gained takes its part within the greater framework of what knowledge—perhaps even what wisdom—we already possess, we must stitch and unstash, weaving new understandings into the fabric of the knowledge of our lives.

But because this process of weaving and unweaving is an active, unstable process, stories cannot be just reduced down to lists of things that are knowable. Stories are more than simply mnemonics or coded propositions about the world.⁵ Moralists everywhere love to relate stories and then to append morals to the end, as if the story was merely a colourful illustration of the moral. But as Kierkegaard—a philosopher who knew a thing or two about stories, and who knew enough to mistrust the moralists—once said, it is a supremely difficult thing to tell a story and to give the story its due.⁶

A story is not just the summing up of a moral, but it is also a

kind of *casting-off*. We find ourselves caught up in its eddies and currents; we journey on whether with reluctance, with fear, or in the spirit of high adventure; and along the way, if we remain attentive, something emerges out of the telling that could not have been anticipated, something—all you stern and fearful moralists beware!—absolutely unforeseeable.

Nevertheless, it might be protested that at least on the surface of it, the two tales related here—the tale of Kikori and Fly, and the tale of Prince Red Peter—do not seem to have much to do with *philosophy*. Looking more closely, it will appear that they deal with themes that—when abstracted and translated into philosophical jargon—are familiar from a reading of the philosophers. We could say, for example, that the story of Kikori and Fly is concerned with the separation of cultural and natural worlds, with questions of human labour, with themes of exposure, security and hospitality. We could claim that the tale of Prince Red Peter deals with our nature as temporal beings, with our human relationship with death, with the paradoxes occasioned by the human desire for immortality. But we would have to also confess that these stories also deal with subjects upon which the philosophers rarely dwell: woodpeckers, for example, do not feature strongly in the Western (or, as far as I know, any other) philosophical canon. If Plato (unlikely) or Aristotle (not quite as unlikely, but still improbable) ever wrote a treatise on woodpeckers, it has been lost to history.⁷

But when confronted with stories such as these, the temptation for the philosopher is always to reduce the story down to its ‘philosophical’ bare bones, stripping it of everything that seems superficially ‘unphilosophical.’ Along the way, the woodpeckers are evicted, and having pared the story back to what is assumed to be its philosophical core, the resulting philosophy finds itself merely repeating the dogmas that we have learned to repeat from our reading of the philosophical

texts. Such an approach fails to yield anything new. In our obsession with the abstract nouns of the philosophical lexicon, in our mania for generality that reduces ‘woodpecker’ down to the apparently more essential ‘bird’, ‘bird’ down to the apparently more essential ‘non-human other’, we end up losing all particularity, and learn nothing much new either about woodpeckers or about our philosophical categories. When this happens, everywhere we look, we find ourselves seeing the same thing. How, then, could our philosophy be wrong? But, on the other hand, how much have we missed—woodpeckers, flies squatting on piles of mud, tramps stretching out on park benches, princes, rainforests, mountains, cities, kingdoms—merely for the sake of being able to assert that our philosophy is right?

If we want to keep a place in the world—and in our thinking about morality—for woodpeckers and rainforests (and flies and tramps and cities and kingdoms and mountains), then perhaps we need to cast off from the philosophical obsession with absolute certainty, and to set out on the sea of stories. Through stories, through reflections upon stories, through stories about reflection, through stories about stories: by these means it may be possible to think about ethics in new ways.

It may be objected that this is not philosophy at all, that this is a rejection of philosophy altogether. It may be said that such an approach, in not giving us any dry ground to stand upon, leads to circularity. But when we have renounced our hopes of philosophical dry land, then there is nowhere to stand that is outside of circles such as these, and there never was. We can only hope that the circles are not vicious, or at the very least, that they are circles in which we can find ways of quelling our viciousness.⁸ And if charged to say why this still might merit the name ‘philosophy’, the best answer I can give is that, whatever else, it is an approach that maintains some kind of belief that wisdom—even a little wisdom, whatever wisdom may turn

out to be—might be a thing worth having, a thing worthy of our love and of our cherishing.



You look at me. ‘Tell me a story,’ you say.

I do not want to tell you a story. ‘I am too tired,’ I say.

‘Tell me a story,’ you repeat.

And so I begin.

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