

Chapter Twenty-One

THE VASE AND THE FACES

Monday 1st May

Chapel Hill

‘So sorry to put this on you at such short notice, Julie,’ said James as he and Mary unloaded the fish and chips on the table, which was already set for four people with a plate of salad in the centre.

‘That’s OK. You brought the main meal. It didn’t take long to get the salad ready. The twins have been fed and put to bed so we’re all ready to eat.’ Julie dried her hands on her apron. ‘You ready Kevin?’

Kevin entered the room. ‘I’m already here dear. Hullo Mary. How do you put up with ‘last minute Harry’ here?’

Mary looked at James and laughed. ‘With great difficulty, but you know how it is.’

‘Yes I do, with James.’ Kevin sat and looked around. ‘Let’s say grace. Your turn Julie.’ Julie gave thanks for the food and they all took a share of the fish and chips and salad. They ate in companionable silence for a while until Kevin could stand it no longer. ‘James, listen. I told you we would help you any time we could, but I’m curious. Why the great urgency? Are we going to revolt tonight?’

James laughed. ‘No, nothing so dramatic. It’s just my job on the line.’

‘Oh James. Don’t you be so melodramatic.’ Mary bumped him with her elbow.

James smiled at Mary and then looked at Kevin. 'But it is serious. I rashly told the boss I would show him tomorrow how to switch back and forward in his mind between the two world-views - linear time and vertical time.'

'Is that a problem for you, James?' Julie frowned as she leant forward slightly.

'Yes, it is.' James stopped eating with a chip on the end of his fork. 'I've no idea what to tell him.'

'You don't know how to do it?' exclaimed Kevin incredulously.

'Oh! I can do it myself but I don't know how to explain it.'

Kevin pointed his fork at him. 'And you want us to help you work it out?'

'That's why I called you together - my trusty support group.'

'He's trying to get in good with us now, Mary.' Kevin winked knowingly at her and then looked back at James. 'Hey, why is your boss so interested in all this?'

James spread his hands. 'I wish I knew.' He continued eating.

'I know why,' said Julie quietly without looking up.

James and the others stopped eating and looked at her in astonishment.

'Come on, dear,' said Kevin. 'Don't keep us all in suspenders.'

'Well.' Julie looked up and smiled smugly. 'I was talking to a woman at the supermarket today who goes to the Anglican Church and knows both Peter Preston and his wife, Stephanie. She said that Stephanie has been going to the Buddhist Temple on the north side for the last three months. He still attends worship on his own but, apparently, he's not too happy about it.'

James' face lit up. 'Ah. Well. That explains a lot of things. He gave me the assignment two and a half months ago. Thanks Julie.' He thought back over the chief's sudden interest in Buddhism, and in the validity of the mystical world-view.

'All right, James. Now you know. You'd better be careful what you tell him.' Kevin wiped his face with his serviette. 'Now, what can we do to help you?'

‘Before we get into that,’ interrupted Julie. ‘I believe congratulations are in order, to James - on finding a solution?’

James waved his hand deprecatingly. ‘Developing a theory, Julie, just a theory. Others will have to decide whether it’s really a solution.’

‘Oh, you are too modest.’ Julie pushed her plate away and sat back. ‘You must feel very happy about it?’

James smiled back at her. ‘Yes, pretty happy.’

‘I believe you got the idea during a delirious sleep in front of a Star Trek video?’

James’ eyebrows rose sharply. ‘Not ‘off with the pixies’ Julie?’

‘No.’ Julie frowned at Kevin. ‘That would be Kevin’s interpretation.’

Kevin kept his head down but grinned just the same.

James sat back and explained his dream to Julie as much as he could remember of it, including Kevin’s part in it, to their collective amusement. Then, at her suggestion, he gave them all an update on his Dual Paradigm Theory, giving the credit to Kevin for giving him the idea for the name.

‘So this is your theory?’ said Julie. ‘Ultimate Reality’s the same Reality seen from different angles and we have to live with two conflicting views?’

‘Yes. You’ve got it in one’ He marvelled at how she was always able to put things so succinctly. ‘According to my theory, the personal God’s a valid perception for those who have spiritual experiences in linear time and the Impersonal Absolute’s a valid perception for those who have mystical experiences in vertical time.’

‘ So, if we can’t take either of the descriptions as the whole truth, then what is Ultimate Reality really like?’ Julie raised her eyebrows.

James compressed his mouth and shook his head slowly. 'I don't think we have direct access to this ultimate truth behind the two perceptions, and even if we could it would surely be 'ineffable' as the mystics say.'

Julie leaned forward. 'But can't you say something using your reflections model?'

James pointed at Julie. 'Now you're challenging me, Julie. OK. The reflections model tells us that both 'personal' and 'impersonal' are inadequate descriptions of Ultimate Reality which is somehow beyond both.'

Julie spread her hands. 'Then what's left?'

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James thought for a moment. The others remained silent while he tore off the side of the cardboard fish and chips box, made a cylinder and illustrated the dilemma using the two different aspects as he did with his editor but this time by using the light from a stand up lamp to cast shadows on the wall. 'OK. If you are an ant on the wall and you can't imagine three dimensional solids, what would you think I'm holding just from looking at the shadows?' James looked from Julie to Kevin and back, waiting for an answer as he kept turning the cylinder.

'Either a circle or a rectangle,' suggested Kevin eventually.

'Correct. But you know those answers are both partly wrong and neither is good enough on its own to describe a three dimensional cylinder.'

'Are you saying that we can't possibly know what Ultimate Reality is really like?' Julie persisted.

'I suppose I am.' Then shook his head sadly. 'Sorry but I can't see how we can combine the images of personal and impersonal any more than the ant can combine the circle and the rectangle.'

‘So we’re stuck with two completely contradictory images?’ Mary asked sadly.

But feisty Julie could not accept that conclusion. ‘Surely not.’ She looked pointedly at James. ‘Come on James, can’t you say anything using your reflections model?’

He smiled at her persistence. ‘Well, I suppose they’re not completely contradictory...’

Julie smiled as she sat back. ‘Now you’re talking.’

James continued as if she hadn’t spoken, ‘...because I have a suspicion that the gap between ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ is not as great as it first appears.’

‘You devil James.’ Mary turned to look at him directly. ‘Why didn’t you say that before?’

James lifted his hands palm upwards. ‘Because I didn’t think of it before. I’m working it out as I go along.’

‘Go on James,’ interrupted Julie. ‘Keep working it out.’

‘OK.’ He leant forward and put his elbows on the table. ‘Take the personal aspect first. It’s usually acknowledged that ‘God’ is not a person in the way we understand the word.’

‘He doesn’t have a body,’ contributed Kevin.

‘Or a gender,’ Mary raised a finger as she reminded them.

‘Nor can we describe His - or Her -’ James looked sideways at Mary, ‘personality except in terms of an incarnation like Jesus of Nazareth.’

‘OK.’ Julie laid her hand flat on the table as she looked at James. ‘The personal God may not be quite as personal as we thought, but surely the impersonal Absolute is totally impersonal?’

James thought for a minute and then pointed a finger at her. 'Not completely. As you reminded me earlier, the term 'impersonal' must surely be a reflection also. The impersonal understanding of Mysticism is not entirely devoid of personal attributes. Remember the movement of the 'One' towards the mystic?'

James shifted position in his chair and looked at Kevin. 'And I've just thought of another reason. It comes in three steps.' He started to count on his fingers. 'Firstly, the mystics say that we are one with the One, the Absolute or whatever they refer to as 'It'. Secondly, we know ourselves to be a person - someone with consciousness and personality. Therefore, three, if we are personal then logically the One cannot be entirely impersonal.'

Kevin laughed and pointed at James. 'You've just pinched that argument from science haven't you James? 'If we're one with the universe and we're conscious, then the universe must be conscious'.'

James put his hands up in surrender. 'I can't get much past you Kevin.'

Julie shook her head at their antics and then looked at James. 'So alright, maybe the gap between the two understandings isn't as great as it first appears, but we still can't combine the two images completely, can we?'

He shook his head sadly. 'Well, I can't and I don't know of any scholar who's tried very hard, let alone succeeded. But maybe we can learn to combine linear time and vertical time by switching.'

'Well, that's what we're here for but before we go into that I think we should clear the table and adjourn to the lounge for coffee.' Julie got to her feet and started to gather the dishes.

'I'll get the coffee,' offered Kevin.

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'Now, James. How can we help you? What do you need for your boss tomorrow?' asked Kevin as he sipped his coffee.

James put his mug down. 'I told him it was possible to 'switch' from one world-view to the other and back again. I hope I haven't bitten off more than I can chew.'

'But, how is it possible to 'switch' unless you've had a mystical experience yourself?' asked Julie as she sat down with her coffee.

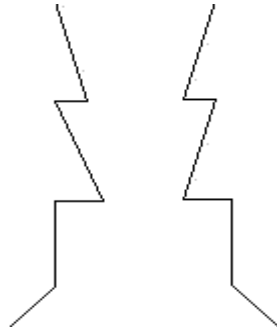
James replied, 'You don't need a mystical experience in order to adopt the 'vertical' time assumption any more than you need a theistic experience to adopt the linear time assumption.'

'Well that last part's certainly true. Most people in the west have a linear time world-view whether they've had an experience of the personal God or not.' Julie put down her mug and looked at James. 'But how can you hold both assumptions in your mind at once?'

He smiled at her. 'You don't have to. Switching only requires you to imagine them consecutively. Do any of you know the picture of the vase and the faces?'

Kevin looked at James while holding his mug in both hands. 'You mean the one which looks like two faces looking inwards or a vase depending on how you look at it?'

'That's the one.' James drew a rough picture on a page from his notebook and passed it round. 'This dual picture is now being used in medical science to diagnose people with a bi-polar disorder because they have difficulty switching back and forth.'



The others nodded as, one by one, they found they were able to alternate between the two images. Kevin said with a grin, ‘Thank God, none of us has bi-polar disorder.’

James picked up his coffee and sat back. ‘Similarly, once we’ve undergone the paradigm shift - thanks for that term Kevin.’ Kevin bowed his head slightly. James continued. ‘Once we’ve undergone the paradigm shift regarding time, we can change our world-view from ‘linear’ time to ‘vertical time’ and back again.’

Kevin leaned forward and placed his empty mug on the coffee table. ‘And why would you want to change your world-view back and forward anyway?’

James looked across at Kevin in surprise, until he realised it was a ‘Dorothy Dix’ question. ‘As you well know Kevin, it would be in order to expand our horizons, to find a wider understanding of Ultimate Reality.’ He then looked around at the others. ‘Also some of us might like to look at Christian theology from a different point of view, as Kevin and I were doing last Thursday.’

‘OK. That’s the ‘why’.’ Julie raised a hand in acknowledgment. ‘But I’m more interested in the ‘how’. How can we see what our Christian doctrines look like in ‘vertical’ time? It sounds a bit like mental gymnastics to me.’

James laughed at her phraseology. ‘It’s not that hard and we may not want to do it that often. It depends whether or not we’re the sort of person who likes to resolve

contradictions and see the big picture. Some may be content to just live with contradictions.'

'Could you ministers ever be content to live with contradictions?' asked Mary.

'I couldn't, but some can. A minister friend of mine once told me that his theology leaked like a sieve.' James looked at Kevin who smiled in acknowledgment.

'Well, I'd like to learn this technique for switching back and forth. So teach us,' said Julie sitting up and smiling around the group.

'Julie, that's my problem. I don't know how to teach you.'

'Then for goodness sake, give us an example of how you've done it,' remonstrated the ever-practical Julie.

Suitably rebuked, James lifted his hand in surrender. 'OK. Fair enough. Let's start with one that Kevin and I've already discussed. What happens to us after death? There are two answers and they contradict each other. Does the soul leave the body at death and go to heaven to be with God or does the body rise from the dead at the 'Resurrection' in the 'last days'? The resurrection idea is compatible with the biblical idea of time. The soul leaving the body is more compatible with the vertical time view. Each makes reasonable sense in its own time-frame but they are contradictory when compared.'

'I see,' said Julie. 'The ideas are contradictory but we can 'switch' from one to the other.'

'That's right,' said James.

'And you would say that both ideas are merely reflections of truth?'

'Right. Metaphors only. Paradigms.'

'So what is the truth underlying the two statements in this case?' Julie persisted.

James glanced at Kevin. 'As Kevin and I agreed, the important thing is that something of our real essence survives beyond the grave - somehow, some time. That's all we can say as long as we are confined to this world of time and space.'

'Well, that's something anyway. So, in 'vertical' time, the 'real person' leaves the body at the moment of death; in 'linear' time, the 'real person' comes alive again in the future.'

James applauded Julie. 'Well put.'

'That one wasn't so hard. Let's do another one.' Julie suggested eagerly.

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'Wait a minute,' interrupted Mary. 'I think I need a little more explanation of 'vertical' time.'

'I confess,' said Kevin, putting up his hand to support Mary. 'If we are going to learn to switch between the two, then I also need to understand 'vertical' time a bit better. I'm still a bit vague myself.'

'OK. Let me give you a comparison of the two.' James used his two hands to illustrate. 'Those using 'vertical' time tend to see reality as a vertical structure with the spiritual, eternal realm 'above' this material time-bound order.'

'Like the ladder of neo-Platonism ascending to the one?' suggested Mary.

James nodded at Mary. 'That's a classic example – a vertical line which we see as intersecting with horizontal linear time.'

'Intersecting linear time in the present?' asked Kevin. 'We talk about the here and now as the eternal moment don't we?'

'That's right. That's more vertical than linear. But the biblical, linear view of time tends to see reality more as a process with the spiritual, eternal world in the future – in the 'age' to come.'

‘So we sometimes use ‘vertical’ time ourselves, without realising it?’ asked Mary.

‘True. I think most of us today think of God and heaven as being metaphorically ‘up there’, especially when we lose a loved one. Even in parts of the New Testament heaven is above the world in a three-decker universe. Jesus ‘ascended’ to heaven. Paul longed to be ‘absent from the body and together with the Lord.’

‘So,’ said Kevin, ‘as I said to you the other day, both ideas have been in the Church from the very beginning?’

‘Exactly, and you can’t just write the vertical off as a heretical Greek insertion as the lecturers tended to do in College. Most of us are ambivalent. We sometimes think of heaven is ‘situated’ above us and at another time, as a future, ‘eschatological’ event associated with the coming of the Kingdom of God into this world.’

‘Just like the soul ascending to heaven and the body rising again at the last days?’ said Julie.

‘Exactly. You seem to have got the hang of it.’

‘Well,’ Kevin chimed in. ‘Are we ready now to apply the technique to theistic and mystical ideas?’

‘Hold it,’ said Julie, before James could answer. ‘I think this is going to need all our concentration so we better have a break first. More coffee anyone?’

All three put up their hands with James’s being the first one up.

While waiting for coffee, Kevin sat back in a more relaxed position and said to James, ‘I don’t know what use all this has been to you. You’ve still got to work out how you do it for your boss tomorrow.’

James smiled mysteriously at Kevin. ‘I’ve already got my answer. Julie gave it to me a while ago.’

'I did?' Julie called out from the servery where she was getting the coffee.
'How?'

'Yes, you did. You said, 'For goodness sake, stop mucking around and give us an example of how you apply it.''

'Oh James. She didn't say that,' objected Mary.

'Well, that's what she meant. I got the body language. Anyway, I have my answer. I won't try and tell him how to do it. I'll just give him examples of how I do it and let him figure it out himself, as I did for you tonight. Thanks Julie.' He gave her a wave.

'You're welcome, kind Sir.' Julie gave a dainty little curtsy behind the servery. James smiled broadly at her gesture but was unaware of the look that Mary gave him.

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