

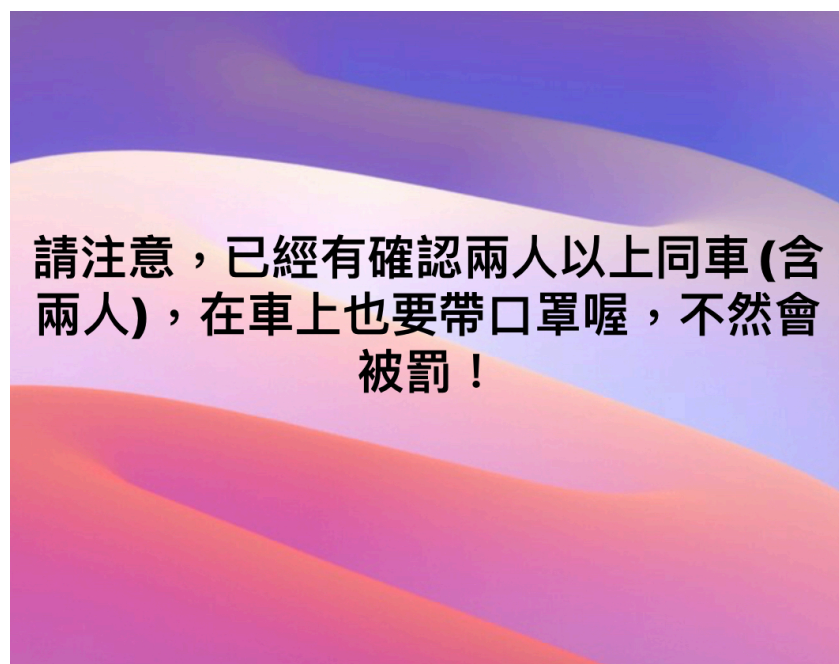
Rule 7 — Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)

We have all heard things like it before: do not be left behind when the perk is there. Nothing expresses it better than the Cantonese — 執輸行頭慘過敗家 (I refer to the modern Hong Kong version, not the original Chinese saying, which tells us to be neither the last nor the first). Why do anything the hard way when you see a faster, easier path? For that tough exam, ask the teacher for a narrowed down syllabus. Better still, find a way to memorise just 20 questions for the entire subject! I hope no teachers in Wah Yan still actively give ‘tips’ for their own exam papers: I’ve had a lot of that in both my student and teaching days.

That really sounds very enticing: a lot less energy for something that seems to have no point in the first place. It comes with many justifications, too: so many other subjects or hobbies I prefer and want to excel at, I am so busy with activities outside the classroom, I need to spend more time with my family and loved ones (‘family’ being the less important for most teenage boys and hence the more obvious excuse, so ‘loved one’ might be more appropriate here). And just like that, something one does not want to put effort into is easily and conveniently explained away.

This phenomenon was very rampant with Chinese Language in my student days: almost every teacher would tell us which dozen or half dozen questions to study and which other sixty to ignore, never mind actually understanding every Classical Chinese text in the syllabus. It did work and the average score for Chinese was very presentable, too — until the public exams, of course.

Worse still, one still has not learned how to write and develop a good taste for reading Chinese, nor has one any appreciation for old Chinese wisdom or even any iota of interest in Chinese ethics. Even worse, when one becomes a notable personage in adult life one might end up posting ‘Chinese’ like this on social media:



No, it isn't by anyone I know. It is, however, by a Taiwanese professional with race cars. Is it harsh to criticise someone just racing with cars? Perhaps. Is it harsh on one whose native language is Chinese and a 'key opinion leader' to boot? Not really.

Peterson discussed the expedient against the meaningful in much more serious terms. He explained how sacrificing the present for the future is a very human trait and suits civilisation like a perfect glove. My Ethics or Religious Studies teachers in the past had talked about the significance of Bible stories, though I was too young to understand and many of us spent ample time arguing with them over the existence of God and we ended up ignoring the meaning of stories like Cain and Abel. On p. 166, Peterson suggested that '*the future is a judgemental father*' and did not dwell on the existence of God. I consider this a great way to think about it.

From that Bible story, two questions came:

1. 'What must be sacrificed?' — 'Adapting to the necessary discipline of medical school' will interfere with the sex life and love life of university undergraduates but becoming a good doctor can help with income problems for the whole family for decades!
2. 'What would be the largest, most effective — most pleasing — of all possible sacrifices?' How greatly can sacrifices help us in this life?

Now we know how *Cain and Abel* makes sense. But still, we know Cain made sacrifices, too, and God is still unhappy. Why?

Sometimes things do not go well. (p. 170)

Fact of life and stark reality in our faces, indeed. Feels tough seeing this? Now we know more about how Cain felt.

What matters now is how we face failure. Do we dwell on misfortune and make sure other people feel our pain, too? The pain of hard work not paying off? Let's inflict it on other hardworking people. That was the choice of Cain when he murdered Abel.

Another quote on the same page informs me deeply about our common reality in Hong Kong:

'The world is revealed, to an indeterminate degree, through the template of your values... If the world you are seeing is not the world you want, therefore, it is time to examine your values. It's time to rid yourself of your current presuppositions. It's time to let go. It might even be time to sacrifice what you love best, so that you might become who you might become, instead of staying who you are.' (p. 170)

This is where I extol the virtues of 'unity in plurality' — can we get out of the mindset of confrontation — even if the other side in power would not? What's the use of stopping floods with walls without bringing the floodwater somewhere?

That guides us on one more thing — beware people and words that manipulate us through **our own ego!** How many media agents actually do that — asking provoking questions for the sake of provocation? They don't really do things for that: the established media is practical when facing the

internet age and independent, self-made reporters — they provoke you to stay in the same victim mindset so they can constantly rip profits out of your loyal subscriptions. I shall not comment on any individual ones — they are both obvious and we Wahyanites can discern well on our own.

Peterson illustrates well how these evil agents trap us — like catching a monkey with a jar full of cookies. Read the paragraph crossing p. 170 and p. 171 for the fun.

Let's look at an answer to question 2 above — in two different approaches. The first is the religious approach, as in Michelangelo's the *Pietà*:



La Pietà — Michelangelo, 1500. In St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican.

The mother here is deep in thought while holding her dead son, just taken down from crucifixion. By giving birth, she has let him into this world and in turn given him up to face Life and Being,

ending in his own sacrifice. Mary did that anyway — an act of supreme courage easily ignored by the world.

The second approach is philosophical — the death of Socrates. This answer also tells us that not only God or the Son of God can sacrifice and that when mortals do that, they approximate divinity:



The Death of Socrates — Jacques-Louis David, 1787. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

It is immediately obvious which figure Socrates is — the brightest and most upright one facing his death sentence by drinking hemlock without fear. An old man of 71, he had a choice of fleeing Athens from trumped-up charges and escaping the trial of a grand jury full of his haters. But that way it would mean the fabricators were right and, worse, that *might is right*! He defended truth by attending the unfair trial and allowing the fabricators to sentence him to death. He defended truth to the end.

At this point I must reiterate that Socrates's action was not just well-considered but also had no relevance to his own ego. We, however, must consider how to make ourselves useful to the world through decades pursuing a meaningful path and letting go of expediency/convenience. In fact, even Socrates sacrificed himself after a long lifetime of such devotion and considered how to spend his final years before his ultimate decision. The trial process is in Plato's *Apology*.

Peterson then segues into the topic of evil. Being self-conscious in the harshness of human society and nature callously dishing out disasters already incurs suffering, but tragedy of Being is not all there is. We must think of Cain and others suffering in misfortune — they then vow to inflict more suffering upon others! In this sense human beings have the gift of genius indeed: in making others suffer. Who knows better about natural human vulnerability than... people? We know that many of

our weaknesses are not unique to one or two individuals but apply to most others as well. Now put your shoes into Cain's: he worked but God was not pleased. (Here one usually asks why this was so — Cain offered second-rate goods and had no faith in his own offering but he *expected* a reward; whereas Abel offered his best sheep and was sincere in his. The Bible commentaries here is endless, looking up Genesis 4:7.) He lost **both the present and the future**. Now if an idea comes to you about making others feel your pain and in that process you get a bit of pleasure, not many people can resist that kind of temptation!

To me, Cain's biggest problem is that he was not reflective of his own part but expecting others to do their parts for him. This is very common in every one of us. We should constantly look ourselves in the mirror to reflect on that. Reflection is where Jesuit education strongly harmonises with Confucian thinking.

Life itself is already full of suffering but evil — our ability and will to inflict suffering upon others — makes it exponentially worse. This makes a crucial question about a virtuous life obvious: 'how to sacrifice to diminish suffering *and evil — the conscious and voluntary and vengeful source of the worst suffering*' (p. 177)? The Bible tells us evil is worse than tragedy of Being, too: Abel could please God and overcome suffering in life but not the evil of Cain.

While Cain gave in to his own malice and vengeful side, Jesus took the responsibility of all humanity upon himself. This, to a non-Christian, is symbolism for taking one's responsibility for the problem one faces. While the Roman playwright Terence said that nothing human is alien to him, the great psychoanalyst Carl Jung went further:

No tree can grow to Heaven unless its roots reach down to Hell.

An extreme statement. Examine our dark side and confront our own evil, so that we can overcome them. Some are less fortunate to be able to reflect on just evil thoughts: ex-soldiers had post-traumatic stress were not suffering from what they *saw* but from what they *did* — raping women and massacring children in obscure Vietnamese towns and then seeing Vietnam turn into yet another totalitarian regime capable of further evil. How can a common farm-boy cope and reconcile with that side and also the fact of having done the raping and killing?

No wonder people take to expediency — it is such an easy escape. If I were Jesus and Satan told me I could 'jump off the building and tell God's angels to save you' I might just try it just to make sure God is on my side.

A little bit later we see Peterson using a quote from the *Tao Te Ching* to illustrate the importance of following a life of meaning. This invites some discussion as to what the text is about. Verse 64 is quoted on page 184 as thus:

*He who contrives, defeats his purpose;
and he who is grasping, loses.
The sage does not contrive to win,
and therefore is not defeated;
he is not grasping, so does not lose.*

The original text of Verse 64:

為者敗之，
執者失之。
是以聖人無為故無敗，
無執故無失。

So far so good, until Peterson interprets it:

‘That was the privileged position of the eye that could or perhaps chose to soar freely above the fray; that chose not to dominate any specific group or cause but instead to somehow simultaneously transcend all. That was attention, itself, pure and untrammelled: detached, alert watchful attention, waiting to act when the time was right and the place had been established.’ (p. 184)

A few lines before in Verse 64, however, shows:

為之於未有，治之於未亂。
合抱之木，生於毫末。
九層之臺，起於累土。
千里之行，始於足下。

All these lines tell us the same thing: any great or compelling situation starts with very minute (adj.) detail, even negligible things. It is much easier to look at small hints and pacify tiny issues before they brew or fester into huge scandals. Much easier to pick up a small shoot consisting two leaves than to uproot a thousand-year-old ancient tree sheltering half the village.

Peterson uses this quote by *Lao Tsz* to describe Jesus’s third temptation of great power but the verse itself is about how to seemingly do almost nothing but actually quelling great riots by nipping them in the bud. Peterson’s juxtaposition here is rather irregular.

Of course, Chinese culture is very profound and Taoism can be downright confusing. Sometimes there might not even be a right interpretation. Also, Peterson’s point still stands: to acquire a good life one must take responsibility upon oneself and reject immediate gratification, such as *not* nipping it in the bud when one sees it.

For the next section, Peterson explains that Christianity failed to solve some big problems because it already had solved many bigger problems from Pagan society: owning slaves and even feeding them to lampreys for breaking glasses during a party (You won’t be disappointed looking this one up!), feeding early Christians to lions for sport at the Colosseum, infanticide, prostitution, the idea that men are ‘worth’ more than women spiritually, or even taking away human rights from anyone for political crimes. All these were fine before Christianity became dominant in Europe.

Most importantly, it was Christianity that separated church from state:

And he said unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's,
and unto God the things which be God's. (Luke 20:26, King James Version)

Pay your taxes but do not worship the government like a god, Jesus said. The material is separated from the spiritual. The fruition of such a concept, though, was to be seen in the founding of the USA, where Christian values were important for the morality of the new country but there was no state religion.

To muse, we see problems of cars polluting the air after we solved the problem of not having cars at all. We see CO2 levels rising and becoming an issue only because there are machines for farming and starvation is no longer a general phenomenon.

Of course, that does not mean Christianity is perfect and we have Nietzsche and Dostoevsky telling us why.

Nietzsche: our sense of truth, developed by Christian values, made us question whether the world was really created in six days as illustrated in the Book of Genesis. Also Nietzsche: St. Paul and Martin Luther made Christ's sacrifice free us from our moral obligations: since all sins were 'forgiven', people could say that Jesus already paid the price in their stead. Christians stopped doing what Christ told them, since 'justification by faith' alone was enough. Many churches even today still quote Romans 3:28 and 10:9 as supporting evidence that believing in Jesus is enough. I shall use the modern New Jerusalem Version to make the meaning clear:

'since, as we see it, a person is justified by faith and not by doing what the Law tells him to do.' (Romans 3:28)

'that if you declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and if you believe with your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved.' (10:9)

Nietzsche maintained that these two verses, overly upheld, would make it unnecessary to even be a good person as long as one had faith, doing good things was just the icing on the cake.

This reminded me of a short discussion with Fr. Chow, our Supervisor, over a decade ago. When I raised doubts on the 'justification by faith' claim, his short reply was 'The Devil believes Jesus is Lord, too. Does that make him "justified by faith"?' I think Nietzsche would have wanted to hear this.

As for Dostoevsky's criticism on institutional Christianity, I will not dwell on the details of 'The Grand Inquisitor' on p. 190 but these commentaries on p. 191 are most important:

'Nietzsche, for all his brilliance, allows himself anger, but does not perhaps sufficiently temper it with judgement... The Russian writer's Inquisitor... is an opportunistic, cynical, manipulative and cruel interrogator... But Dostoevsky has Christ, the archetypal perfect man, kiss him anyway. Equally importantly... the Grand Inquisitor leaves the door ajar so Christ can escape his pending execution.'

'Dostoevsky saw that the great, corrupt edifice of Christianity still managed to make room for the spirit of its Founder. That's the gratitude of a wise and profound soul for the enduring wisdom of the West, despite its faults.'

Both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky agreed that the 'unfreedom' of dogmatic Christianity was *necessary* for the disciplined but free modern mind to emerge. This sounds self-contradicting but freedom requires constraint, otherwise what we get is not freedom but total chaos and lawless anarchy. If a

father does not discipline his son with rules, the latter will turn out to be a boy forever, which is morally unacceptable.

After Nietzsche killed Christian dogma in Europe, there emerged something worse: '*nihilism, as well as an equally dangerous susceptibility to new, totalising utopian ideas*' (p. 193). Indeed, Communism and Fascism came along in the 20th century and its effects need no introduction. These utopian ideas do not work because '*we cannot invent our own values, because we cannot merely impose what we believe on our souls*' (p. 193). We can only learn about our own nature through time and experience before we can even make peace with ourselves and accept ourselves for what we are. *Then* we have some hope of changing ourselves.

How did Peterson go in his spiritual journey beyond Christian dogma then? In short: outgrowing Christian dogma and briefly into the shallow promises of socialism, simultaneously tormented by horrors of the Cold War — the threat of mutual assured destruction with nuclear bombs. When it seemed to him that nobody was sane, only the reality of suffering remained: 'Suffering is real, and the artful infliction of suffering on another, for its own sake, is wrong' (p. 197). His remaining question was: what to do about it?

Aim up, he responded. And make sure we do not inflict suffering upon others just for the fun of it. We can reflect on ourselves before we accuse others. 'And above all, don't lie' (p. 198), as it was the lies of the Communist and Nazi governments, great and small, that killed tens of millions of people.

The alternative to ultimate evil is *alleviating unnecessary suffering and pain*. I strongly recommend perusing pages 198 to 201 and tasting every sentence there, for the prose is very beautifully written. Choosing between the meaningful and the expedient is:

'A choice between two opposing personalities. It's Sherlock Holmes or Moriarty. It's Batman or the Joker. It's Superman or Lex Luther, Charles Francis Xavier or Magneto, and Thor or Loki. It's Abel or Cain — and it's Christ or Satan.' (p. 199)

In the context of the meaningful, 'What should I do today?' means 'How could I use my time to make things better, instead of worse?'

Indeed, to us it means 'How could I be a man for and with others today?'