

Put Yourself in that Place and Give a Thought to What It Would Feel Like': Empathy, Enslavement, and Moral Logic in Seneca Epistle 47 and Yan Maoyou's *Dijilu* 迪吉錄.

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(All translations my own unless otherwise noted)

1. Early-Modern China

1.1 “On the Karmic Retribution in Store for Those Who Run Their Households in a Cruel and Abusive Manner” 家政酷虐之報, *Diji lu* 迪吉錄 (Record of Attaining Blessedness), 1632, vol. 18, pg. 90a-b, Gest Library, Princeton University.

The heads of wealthy and powerful households are like the officials in charge of prefectures and counties. When they abuse indentured servants, male and female, the suffering of the servants deserves pity. **Moreover, the servants are also somebody's children** [亦人子]—**the only thing they have less of than I do is money** [or “the only difference between them and me is money”]. Because of poverty, when they are just seven or eight years old, they leave their parents and are put under the authority of a master. Being incessantly ordered around, doing whatever I tell them to: this is already their lot. Then to add on top of it treating them with brutality and working them cruelly: this is more punishment than one can bear. Then to feed them poorly and give them insufficient clothing, to keep them locked in at home, and cause them to cry bitterly from their poverty and sorrow, and yet have no place to turn to tell what they have experienced: **if I were to be in their position, what would it be like?** [使我身當此, 將如何] One often sees women abuse their maidservants. They punish them with branding and the thumbscrew. This often stems from envy. Who is it who causes this in the first place?¹ Who lets the women of the household get away with this kind of behavior? The man of the house can't escape his share of responsibility [for this cruelty]. Then there are those wealthy and arrogant young fellows, and families with power who throw their weight around. Both groups do nothing but treat others in an inhumane fashion. Even their wives and concubines can hardly endure it. The poor are put in an awkward spot by debt. As soon as men and women find themselves [with debts], they may seek escape, but it is impossible. They may wish to come back in a different life with better conditions, but there is no road open. We call it “entering hell while still alive.” Ah! How true this is! How true this is! **Why don't you give it a think over** [不思]: **in general when people come into the world, I get one lot, someone else gets another lot. What karmic debt, or what chain of causes and linkages**

¹ The assumption seems to be that the mistress of the house is jealous of young female servants who have been coerced into having sex by the paterfamilias.

could prevent me from facing this kind of hardship were I to be incarnated in the body of a poor person? Put yourself in the others' place and give a try at enduring their life.

2. Seneca

2.1 Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 47.²

I was glad to learn from those who have come over from you that you live on familiar terms with your slaves. This befits your good sense and learning. “They are slaves.” Say rather “human beings.” “They are slaves.” Say rather “companions.” “They are slaves.” Say rather “humble friends.” “They are slaves.” Say rather “fellow slaves,” if you are aware that fortune has the same hold over you both [si cogitaveris tantumdem in utrosque licere fortuna]. This is why I laugh at those who think it improper to dine with their slaves. Why would they think this, if it weren't for that most arrogant custom that calls for a crowd of slaves to stand around the master as he eats? He eats more than he can hold, and with a great appetite burdens down his stomach, overstretched such that it becomes unable to perform its duties; the master then finds it more necessary to discharge all the food than stuff himself with it. But the unfortunate slaves are not even permitted to open their mouths to speak. By the rod all sound is curbed, and not even accidental noises like a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup are exempted from blows. Any interruption of the silence is severely punished. The slaves stand there in place the whole night, hungry and mute. It happens then that those who are not permitted to speak in front of the master end up talking about him [behind his back]. However, those slaves who talked not just in front of their masters but in fact with them, slaves whose mouths were not sewn up, were ready to present their necks [to the sword] on their masters' behalf, or divert onto themselves some looming danger. They would talk when around the table but were silent under torture.

There is a saying in the same arrogant vein that gets often thrown around, to the effect that “we have as many enemies as we have slaves.” We don't have them as enemies [from the beginning]—we make them our enemies. I pass over other cruel and inhumane forms of punishment, since we would not abuse beasts of burden in these ways, let alone human beings. When we lie down to eat, one slave wipes away vomit, while another, stationed under the couch, collects up what the drunks at the table leave behind. One slave slices up expensive fowl. He strikes in vain, driving on his skilled hand with well-aimed cuts through the chest and haunches of the birds. Unlucky man that he is, he lives for this one thing, cutting up fattened fowl properly—unless it is the case that one is more wretched teaching something for the sake of pleasure than learning it because of necessity. Yet another slave, the wine server decked up in feminine fashion, wrestles with his age. He is not able to escape from boyhood--he is perpetually held back there--and now in military garb, smooth, with his hairs either cut short or else fully removed he keeps watch the whole night, which he divides up between the drunkenness and lust of his master, and in the bedroom is a man, in the banquet hall a boy. Another slave, deputed to be censor of the feast, stands at his post and, unhappy man, waits for those whom fawning and intemperance—of appetite or tongue—invites back for the next day's festivities. Add to this the slaves tasked with buying foods, who have a precise knowledge of their master's palate, who know what delicacies will excite him, what sorts of appearance of food will please him, what kind of novelty will be able to catch his attention, gorged and jaded as he is. They know what he shrinks from in disgust because he has had too much of it, and what that day he craves. The master cannot bear to eat with all these slaves; he thinks it a

² The translation below is made consulting the commentary of C. Edwards, *Seneca: Selected Letters* (Cambridge, 2019), with reference to the translation of R.M Gummere, LCL 75.

slight to his dignity to come to the same table as they do. Gods above! How many of his slaves in fact are his masters! I saw Callistus' master stand in front of Callistus' door, and be shut out although others were going in—the very man who had put a sale placard on Callistus' neck, and put him out for sale with the useless. His slave paid him back the favor, the one who got put in the first lot at auction, the group on which the herald practices his cries. They two men took turns rejecting each other, and each thinking the other not worthy of his house. It was the master who sold Callistus: but how much has Callistus cost his master!

You ought to ponder [*vis tu cogitare*] the fact that the fellow whom you call your slave has sprung from the same seed [as you], enjoys the same sky above, breathes just as much as you do, lives just as you do, and will die just as you do! **Then you should be able to see him as a freeman as much as he can see you as a slave.** [*Tam tu illum videre ingenuum potes quam ille te servum.*] By all sorts of deaths in war has fortune struck down many men of the finest birth, set for a senatorial path through military service. Others of these men fortune has made shepherds, others the owners of small huts. **Despise now the person whose lot you are able to endure while you condemn him.**

I don't wish to get myself into a bottomless pit of argument, by debating about the ways in which slaves are employed, slaves toward whom we are most arrogant, cruel, and abusive. This, however, is the summary of my teachings on the matter: live the same way with those below you as you wish those above you to live with you. As often as it comes into your mind how much authority you have over your slaves, **let it come also into your mind** [*veniat in mentem*] that your master has that same amount of authority over you. “But,” you say, “I have no master.” It is a good time in your life; perhaps you will have one. Do you not know at what age Hecuba was enslaved, at what age Croesus, at what age the mother of Darius, at what age Plato, at what age Diogenes? Live graciously with your slaves, live even on friendly terms with them, and allow them into your conversations, and councils, and dinners.

At this point the whole crowd of the fastidious will call out at me that “there is nothing more low than this, nothing more base.” These same men I will catch kissing the hands of other people's slaves. Do you all not see even this, that our ancestors took away all ill will from the masters, and all abuse directed towards slaves? They called the master the “father of the family,” and the slaves, “family members,” a custom which continues to this day in comic theatre. They established a festival day on which it was certain that masters would dine with their slaves, although they would dine with them at other times as well. They permitted the slaves to carry out honorable duties in the household, and granted them the right to speak their mind, and they judged the house to be a small [model of] the state. “What then, shall I move all my slaves to my dinner table?” Not any more so than all my children.

You get me wrong if you think that I would despise certain kinds of slaves for having rather more lowly occupations, such as, for example, the mule driver and herdsman. I will not form my opinion of them from their duties, but rather from their *mores*. Each human being gives himself *mores*—it is fate that assigns duties. Certain people dine with you because they are the right sort, certain others so that they may become the right sort. If there is anything slavish about them that has arisen from their [day-to-day] interactions of a lower-class sort, the company of the better bred will strike it out. It is not the case, my good Lucilius, that you should only seek for friends in the forum and the Senate House. If you pay careful attention, you will find them at home as well. Often good material languishes if there is no craftsman to shape it. Give the slaves a chance; test the waters [and see what you find]. The one who judges a human being on the basis of his clothes (at very least the clothes which have been given to him) or station in life is tremendously foolish,

just as he is foolish who, buying a horse, doesn't examine the horse itself but rather its saddle and bridle. "He is a slave." But perhaps free in spirit. "He is a slave." Will this do him any harm? Show me someone who isn't: one is enslaved to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, all of us to hope, all of us to fear. I will give you examples: a man of consular rank enslaved by an old granny,³ a rich man enslaved to his little maidservant; I shall show you young men of the highest social station who are the property of [in the thrall of] mime actors. No state of slavery is more morally toxic than that which we choose for ourselves. This is why there is no reason for those fastidious persons to stop you from presenting yourself as a cheerful person to your slaves, and not in a proud manner as someone superior. Let them cherish you rather than fear you.

Someone will now say that I am advocating for the emancipation of slaves and am casting down masters from their position of privilege, since I have said "Let them cherish their master rather than fear him." "So," this person says, "do you really mean it? Shall the slaves cherish their masters as though the masters were their clients, or their visitors?" He who says this forgets that what is enough for a god is not insufficient for masters. The one who is cherished is also loved: it is impossible for love to be mixed with fear. I thus judge you to be acting in the very finest fashion, since you do not wish to be feared by your slaves, since you use the reproof of words only. Animals are to be admonished by blows. [Doing these things] doesn't vex us or hurt us in any way; rather it is pleasures that drive on to raving frenzy such that anything that doesn't fit our pleasure calls up anger in us. We assume the mental state of kings; for they, forgetting both their own vices and the weakness of other people, seethe and rage as though they have been hurt in some way, when in fact the scale of their good fortune keeps them very safe from such a thing. Nor are they unaware of this fact, but they still take the chance to harm others through their complaining. They have received injury to end up inflicting it.

I don't wish to keep you any longer; you have no need of further exhortations from me. Good habits have this thing to their credit, among many others: they please themselves, they remain over the long run. Spite is transient: it often changes, not for the better, but into something else bad. Farewell.

3. Blurry Boundaries

3.1 ἤδη γάρ ποτ' ἐγὼ γενόμεν κούρος τε κόρη τε
θάμνος τ' οἰωνός τε καὶ ἔξαλος ἔμπορος ἰχθύς.

For as for me, once I was already both a youth and a girl,
A bush and a bird, and a sea-leaping, voyaging fish.
----Empedocles, LM D13 (trans. LM, LCL)

3.2 Śāriputra said: "Why don't you then change yourself out of a woman's body?" The goddess replied: "For these twelve years I've sought after what the phenomenal form of a woman means,⁴ and have attained absolutely nothing. For example, if a magician were to turn himself into a

³ Presumably currying favor with her to win her inheritance.

⁴ Or perhaps "what it means to be woman."

phantasmal woman, and then somebody were to ask him ‘Why don’t you change yourself out of a woman’s body?’ would this person be asking a proper question?” Śāriputra replied: “Of course not. Phantasms don’t have a fixed physical form. What actual ‘changing’ would there be to do?” The goddess said to him: “All of the various dharmas are like this: they have no fixed physical form. What are you saying then, when you ask me why I don’t change myself out of a woman’s body?”

The goddess thereupon used her divine powers to change Śāriputra, causing him to become like herself. She, meanwhile, transformed her own self, to be like Śāriputra, and then asked: “Why don’t you then change yourself out of a woman’s body?” Śāriputra, in the shape of the goddess, replied: “As things stand I have no idea how it is that I have changed into a woman’s body.” The goddess said: “Śāriputra, if you could change yourself out of this woman’s body, then all women could do likewise. You, Śāriputra, are not a woman, and yet now you present yourself in a woman’s body. All women are in the same situation. Although they present themselves in a woman’s body, they are in fact not women. Thus one can see that all the dharmas preached by the Buddha are neither male nor female [in their orientation].” The goddess then used her powers to restore Śāriputra to his former condition.

The goddess asked Śāriputra: “That phenomenal form of a woman’s body—where is it now?” Śāriputra replied: “The phenomenal form of a woman’s body is neither present, nor is it not present.” The goddess said: “All the various dharmas are like this. They are neither present nor are they not present. That which is neither present nor not present is what the Buddha is talking about.”

---- *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (Chinese: *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經, translated into Chinese in 406 CE from lost Sanskrit original), Chapter 7.

3.3 Give it some further thought [from a different angle]: every living thing has a numinous consciousness. If it has a numinous consciousness, then it is in fact one body with me. [又思血氣之屬，皆含靈知，既有靈知，皆我一體。]

-----Yuan Huang 袁黃, “On Changing Sinful Habits,” discussing the merits of not killing or harming animals for food; late sixteenth century.