

The Hydraulic Virtue of Intimate Relations

On the Ethics of Water

[Working Draft]

The highest good is like water: it benefits the ten thousand things and does not contend.

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上善若水。水善利万物而不争，处众人之所恶，故几于道。

*The highest good is like water. Water benefits the ten thousand things
and does not contend; it dwells in the places all others disdain,
and so is close to the Way.*

— Laozi, *Daodejing*, ch. 8

生而不有，为而不恃，长而不宰，是谓玄德。

*Generating yet not possessing, acting yet not presuming,
fostering growth yet not ruling: this is called the dark virtue.*

— Laozi, *Daodejing*, ch. 51

致她——

For her—

那个属于森林的女孩，

the girl who belongs to the forest,

她待人如水，利而不争。

who is to others as water is: benefiting, and not contending.

致我最爱的人。 To the one I love most.

Abstract

This paper develops an ethics of intimate relations from the Daoist figure of water — 上善若水, “the highest good is like water” (*Daodejing*, ch. 8). It asks what it is, concretely and between two people, for love to benefit without contending, to seek the lowly place, and to remain unfilled. The guiding decision is to read these water-virtues *structurally* rather than as a counsel of self-cultivation: not as an ascent toward a selfless or quasi-divine condition, but as properties of how value, power, and desire are arranged in a generative relation. The paper accordingly draws its resources less from the contemplative traditions than from political economy, game theory, political philosophy, feminist ethics, Kantian ethics, and psychoanalysis, and treats the contemplative reading as one voice among many rather than as the paper’s frame.

A survey of these traditions is organised around the water-virtues themselves — non-contention, benefiting the ten thousand things, dwelling in the lowly place, formlessness, and non-fullness — and shows that each virtue is, in different doctrines, both affirmed and opposed. From these oppositions the paper isolates five standing challenges: that non-contention is irrational (game theory), that it is suicidal absent an enforced structure (Hobbes), that dwelling-below is slave morality (Nietzsche), that taking-the-receiver’s-shape dissolves the subject (feminism, psychoanalysis), and that formlessness is lawlessness (Kant). The last is answered in place, by reading the water-good as an *imperfect duty* — lawful yet without fixed form — using Kant’s own resources.

The dialectical core of the paper answers the remaining challenges in two clusters. Against the charges of self-dissolution and slave morality, it argues that the water-good is not formless yielding but *chosen* good: water takes the vessel’s shape (utmost softness) yet wears through stone and breaches dykes (utmost hardness), so that a rigid lower bound distinguishes the generative lowly place from mere collapse. Against the charges of irrationality and suicide, it argues — following the formal companion Huang [12] — that the water-good never demanded the abolition of power, only the shaping of an ineliminable asymmetry so that its surplus is returned rather than retained. A chapter on practice then carries each water-virtue down into the conduct of an actual intimate relation, pairing every form of the good with the vice it most easily becomes, and closing on the limit of all such guidance: that the good cannot be made into a procedure.

Throughout, the formalism of the companion paper is used as a settled foundation and translated, not rebuilt: non-contention as the vanishing of appropriative (gradient) transport in the holonomy that carries surplus; the good and bad lowly place as the solenoidal and gradient parts of the power force; renewal as the avoidance of dynamical solidification; and — crucially for a philosophy of intimacy — the non-substitutable particularity of *this* relation as the local “flesh” that topological protection, by construction, cannot reach. The water-good is thus presented as the water-phase of the dark virtue (玄德, ch. 51): the same non-possessive generativity the companion paper gives a formal body, here given an ethical and practical one, between two people.

Keywords: water; non-contention; the lowly place; non-possessive generativity; practical ethics; holonomy.

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1. From the Hydraulics of Value to the Ethics of Water

The preceding paper of this series [34] described a water without ever asking water to be good. It watched two people sit before a window and do nothing, and it gave that uneventful fullness a dynamical body: a flow on a background manifold, a resonance of two meaning-worlds, a contract read as structured flow. Water there was a figure for *how* intimacy moves — its currents, its phases, the residue it accumulates by going round. It was description. This paper turns the same figure from description to prescription. It asks not how intimacy flows like water but how intimacy ought to be *good* as water is said to be good — 上善若水, “the highest good is like water,” in the eighth chapter of the *Daodejing*. That sentence is itself the very passage this paper enacts: a step from the hydrology of a relation to its ethics.

1.1 Water-good, not formlessness

It is easy to misread the figure. “Be like water” is heard, in the popular ear, as a counsel of yielding: take any shape, resist nothing, flow around every obstacle. Read so, the ethics of water is an ethics of formlessness, and an ethics of formlessness is no ethics at all — it cannot tell the yielding that nourishes from the yielding that dissolves. The thesis of this paper is therefore stated at the outset against that reading. What the eighth chapter praises is not water but *water’s good*: 水善 — water in the specific modality of benefiting, of dwelling below, of not contending. Water is also what wears through stone and breaches the dyke; the same chapter that calls it lowly elsewhere calls it the softest thing that overcomes the hardest. The good of water is a *chosen* good, with an edge in it, and the central labour of this paper (§5) is to locate that edge — the rigid lower bound below which yielding is no longer the water-good but its collapse.

1.2 A structural, not a cultivational, reading

There is a second, subtler misreading, and guarding against it fixes the method of the whole paper. The water-virtues — not contending, dwelling in the lowly place, emptying, taking the vessel’s shape — belong by long habit to the literature of self-cultivation: to kenosis, to the emptying of self, to the disciplines by which a person is supposed to climb, against the grain of self-interest, toward a selfless or quasi-divine condition. Read in that key, this paper would be a manual of spiritual ascent, and its “good” would be a property earned by an exceptional soul. We decline that key. The water-good is read here *structurally*: as a property of how value, power, and desire are arranged in a generative relation, not as an achievement of an exalted character. The difference is not pedantic. A cultivational ethics locates the good in the agent’s interior and measures it by renunciation; a structural ethics locates it in the geometry of the relation and measures it by what that geometry does to the two who are in it. The same outward gesture — yielding, giving, dwelling below — can belong to a generative geometry or to a dominative one, and only a structural reading can tell them apart. This commitment governs the paper’s choice of interlocutors: it draws its analysis from political economy, game theory, political philosophy, feminist ethics, Kantian ethics, and psychoanalysis — traditions that ask under what conditions a structure produces good relations — and treats the contemplative

traditions, which ask how a self becomes good, as one voice admitted late and on its own terms (§2.5), never as the frame.

1.3 Water-good as the water-phase of the dark virtue

The structural reading is not improvised for this paper; it has already been carried out, in formal detail, for a neighbouring Daoist figure. The companion paper to this series [12] takes the dark virtue of the fifty-first chapter — 生而不有，为而不恃，长而不宰， “generating yet not possessing, acting yet not presuming, fostering growth yet not ruling” — and gives each phrase an exact formal body. Generating-yet-not-possessing becomes the holonomy of a closed relational cycle: a surplus genuinely produced, yet non-local and reducible to no point, and so without a possessor. Acting-yet-not-presuming becomes the distinction between power that serves and power that fixes in dependence. Fostering-yet-not-ruling becomes a generative asymmetry whose geometry works toward its own dissolution. The dark virtue, in that paper, is shown to be not a counsel of restraint but the very mode of existence of generative value — since the part of a relation reducible to a single scalar comparison (more or less, higher or lower: the form of possession) contributes nothing to the surplus, so that in the instant of appropriation, generation stops.

This paper stands to that one as the eighth chapter stands to the fifty-first. The dark virtue and the water-good are two faces of a single thing: the fifty-first chapter gives the *mechanism* of non-possessive generation, the eighth gives its *ethical bearing* — benefiting without contending, dwelling below, remaining unfilled. We therefore take the formal body already built for the dark virtue and do not rebuild it. Where this paper reaches the formal register at all (§9), it is as a *translation layer*: the theorems of the companion are read into the ethical vocabulary of the water-virtues, one by one, and the formalism is kept strictly in the serving position. The water-good is the water-phase of the dark virtue — the same non-possessive generativity, here asked what it requires of two people who love each other.

1.4 A source, not an ending

A final word on the place of this paper in the series. It is not the closing chapter, and the figure of water is not deployed here to bring the long argument to rest in the Way. It is a chapter near the middle, and water is chosen because it is generative *source* material: a figure rich enough that several later papers may return to draw from it. The closing section accordingly does not gather the argument into a synthesis but opens it (§10) — four directed fissures, each a place where the water-good, pressed further, runs out of what this paper can say and points toward a paper that might say it. Water is here the spring, not the sea.

2. The Ethics of the Water-Virtues: A Doctrinal Survey

The water-virtues — non-contention (*Daodejing*, ch. 8), benefiting all things, dwelling in the low place, formlessness, and non-fullness — are surveyed here across the modern, largely secular ethical traditions. The aim is not enumeration but *location*: by letting the doctrines argue

against one another over each virtue, the paper’s own position is forced into view. Each virtue proves to be, in different doctrines, both affirmed and opposed; the survey’s product is a set of standing challenges (§2.6), handed forward to the dialectical core (§5) and, in one case, answered in place. Throughout, the reading is structural rather than cultivational, for the reasons set out at the close (§2.5): the water-virtues are treated as properties of how a relation is arranged, not as feats of an exceptional character.

2.1 Political economy and the scale of distribution

We begin with the traditions that read a relation not as a meeting of characters but as a circulation of value, because they are the ones that can give the first water-virtue — benefiting without contending — a body that owes nothing to self-cultivation. To benefit the ten thousand things and yet not contend (*Daodejing*, ch. 8) sounds, in the moralist’s ear, like a counsel of generosity: give freely, claim nothing. Read through political economy it becomes something sharper and less personal — a claim about the *form* of a productive relation, true or false of a structure regardless of the magnanimity of anyone inside it.

2.1.1 Political-economic ethics

The decisive reframing is to hear “benefiting yet not contending” as the description of a *non-exploitative* relation. On the Marxian analysis, exploitation has an exact mark that is independent of anyone’s intentions: value created by one party is appropriated by another, so that the surplus does not return to those whose activity produced it [18]. Against this mark, “benefiting the ten thousand things and not contending” names its negation — a relation in which what is generated flows back to the whole that generated it rather than being drawn off and held. The point of substituting this reading for the generous-character reading is that it relocates the good from the giver’s heart to the relation’s geometry. A relation can be exploitative while every party to it is kind, and non-exploitative while no one is especially generous; what settles the matter is where the surplus goes, not how it is felt. This is the first and most important gain of a structural reading: it makes the water-virtue a property a relation can have or lack, not a height a soul must climb to.

Two further traditions sharpen the same point from different sides. Sen’s capability approach lets us state what “benefiting” should mean without collapsing it into welfare: to benefit another is to widen the range of lives genuinely open to them — their capability set — and not merely to raise the level of some good they consume [29]. This matters because it rescues “benefiting the ten thousand things” from the utilitarian reading that would equate it with maximised satisfaction; one may raise another’s welfare while narrowing their freedom, and that is not the water-virtue but its counterfeit. To benefit, in the sense the figure of water intends, is to nourish the other’s own power to grow, not to administer a quantity of good to a passive recipient. Eglash’s account of generative justice then supplies the return condition in a form already native to this series: value should cycle back to those whose generativity produced it, and the injustice of extraction is precisely the interruption of that return [5, 6]. On this reading “not contending” is not passivity but the refusal to interpose a claim that would divert

the cycle — the refusal, in the language this series has used throughout, to convert circulating surplus into held stock.

The other water-virtue that political economy illuminates is dwelling in the low place. Read structurally, the low place is not a posture of humility but a *position in a division of value*: the systematically devalued site of a relation, the labour or the need that the prevailing accounting does not see. Feminist political economy has named this site with particular precision in the case of reproductive labour — the sustaining, repairing, attending work whose very invisibility is the condition of its exploitation [8]. To dwell where others disdain is then not to abase oneself but to direct one's attention and one's flow toward exactly the position the structure has discounted. We will give this its own development later (§4); here it is enough to register that the low place, like non-contention, is a structural coordinate before it is ever a virtue of temperament. Its connection to the rest of the series is direct: the devalued position is where the generative balance of Wanhong [36] fails, where static inequality has been mistaken for settled fact, and the water-virtue is the flow that moves to correct it.

2.1.2 Game-theoretic and economic ethics

If political economy supplies the water-virtue's content, game theory supplies its first and hardest test, and it is essential not to soften it. Stated as a disposition to cooperate without insisting on one's own claim, non-contention is, in a single encounter with a self-interested counterpart, simply the losing strategy: the one who does not contend is the one who is taken. In the one-shot prisoner's dilemma, unconditional cooperation is dominated; a flow that benefits all and contends for nothing is, against an appropriator, exploited to exhaustion. This is not a marginal objection but the precise point at which the generous-character reading collapses, and a structural reading must either answer it or concede that the water-virtue is a luxury available only where no one means harm.

The answer game theory itself supplies is that the verdict reverses once the encounter is not single but repeated, and the parties carry their histories. In the iterated setting, strategies that open with cooperation and are not exploitable — that return cooperation for cooperation but withdraw it from persistent defection — outperform unconditional appropriation over time, and cooperation becomes not a sacrifice but an equilibrium sustained by the shadow of the future [2]. What converts non-contention from folly to rationality is therefore a definite structure: repetition, the legibility of the other's past conduct, and the capacity to make a commitment the other can believe [28]. This is a result of the first importance for the present paper, because it locates exactly what non-contention *requires* in order not to be naive — and what it requires is not a better character but a particular shape of relation, one in which acts are remembered and commitments can be made credible. That shape is the one this series has elsewhere called the non-binding vow: the betrothal structure whose whole work is to make a commitment credible without an external sword [33]. We mark the dependence here and discharge it later (§5.2).

This yields the first of the standing challenges the survey will accumulate.

Challenge 1, the rationality of non-contention. Non-contention is rational, rather than self-defeating, only within a structure of repetition, reputation, and credible commitment. Absent such a structure it is dominated, and the water-virtue reduces to a disposition that survives only where it is not tested. Any ethics of non-contention therefore owes an account of the structure that makes it more than naivety.

The challenge is not answered by insisting that non-contention is noble; it is answered, if at all, by exhibiting the structure. We let it stand, and turn to the traditions of institutions and political philosophy, where the same demand returns in its sharpest form — the claim that absent an enforcing power, non-contention is not merely irrational but suicidal.

2.2 Political philosophy and the scale of institutions

Political economy located the water-virtues in the circulation of value; political philosophy asks the prior question of how a relation of many parties is ordered at all — by what claims, what recognitions, what powers. Here the water-virtues meet both their sharpest allies and their hardest opponent, and a structural reading must take the opposition as seriously as the support.

2.2.1 *Political ethics: Rawls, Honneth, Pettit*

It must be said at once that the first virtue, non-contention, stands in genuine tension with the dominant modern theory of justice, and the tension should not be smoothed over. For Rawls, justice is what free persons would agree to precisely by *pressing* their claims — advancing competing demands from behind a veil that strips them only of the knowledge of their own position, not of the disposition to claim [27]. Justice on this account is the fair adjudication of contention, not its absence; a party who declined to press any claim would not be exhibiting a virtue but forfeiting their standing in the very procedure that secures fairness. This is a real objection to any ethics that would make non-contention foundational, and we register it rather than dissolve it: there are domains — the basic structure of a society, the distribution of primary goods — where the pressing of claims is not a failure of the water-virtue but the medium of justice itself, and where a premature non-contention would simply cede the field to those who do contend. The water-virtue is an ethics of intimate relation, and its scope is not automatically the scope of political justice; one of the paper’s later tasks (§8) is to ask how far the dyadic virtue can scale, and Rawls marks one limit it may not cross.

Within that limit, however, two further traditions convert what looked like mere yielding into something with structural teeth. Honneth’s theory of recognition gives the low place a precise content: the systematically misrecognised position — the party whose contribution, suffering, or standing the prevailing order fails to see [11]. To dwell where others disdain is then to direct recognition toward exactly the site the order has withheld it from, and this is

not self-abasement but a redistribution of recognition — an active correction of a moral injury, not a lowering of oneself beneath one’s due. Pettit’s republicanism gives the complementary reading of “benefiting yet not ruling.” Its central good is non-domination: freedom not as the mere absence of interference but as the absence of any *capacity* for arbitrary interference, any standing power of one over another [25]. “To benefit and not rule” — to generate without establishing *imperium* — is exactly the relational form of non-domination: a position that gives without thereby acquiring a standing power to dispose of the one it gives to. This is the most secular possible rendering of the water-virtue, and it shows that “not ruling” is not weakness but the deliberate refusal to convert benefaction into dominion.

2.2.2 Contractarianism: the hardest opponent

The sharpest challenge to the water-virtue comes not from the theorists of fair contention but from the contractarian tradition that begins with Hobbes, and it must be stated without mitigation, because everything the dialectical core later does depends on having let it stand at full force. In the state of nature — the condition of parties with no common power above them — to benefit all and contend for nothing is not merely the losing move it was for game theory; it is fatal. Where there is no assurance that others will forbear, the one who forbears unilaterally delivers themselves to those who do not, and the rational course is the anticipatory contention Hobbes calls the war of all against all [10]. Non-contention here is not a higher wisdom but an early death, and the figure of water seems to confirm rather than refute the charge: water does flow downhill, does yield, does take the lower place — and the lower place is precisely where, on the Hobbesian picture, one is overrun.

This pushes the rationality challenge of Group A to its extreme, and we issue it as a distinct, graver challenge, because the structure it demands is correspondingly stronger.

Challenge 1’, the survival of non-contention. Absent a power that makes others’ forbearance credible, non-contention is not merely irrational but self-destroying: the one who does not contend is not exploited at the margin but eliminated. An ethics of the water-virtue therefore owes more than a reason why non-contention can be rational; it owes an account of how the water-virtue survives the absence of an external sword — how it can be safe to be like water without first erecting a Leviathan to protect those who are.

We do not answer this here, and we resist the two easy answers. We do not say that intimate relations are simply not the state of nature, exempt by their warmth from the Hobbesian logic — for the betrayal of intimacy is among the surest routes to exactly the predation Hobbes describes, and an ethics that assumed good faith would be no ethics for the cases that test it. Nor do we erect the sword: the entire burden of this series’ treatment of the non-binding vow [33] is that intimacy’s commitments are precisely those that hold *without* an external enforcer,

so that purchasing the water-virtue’s safety with a Leviathan would forfeit what makes it the water-virtue. The challenge is therefore real and unpaid, and we carry it to the dialectical core (§5.2), where the answer will turn out not to be the abolition of the danger but the shaping of an ineliminable asymmetry — the recognition, drawn from the formal companion [12], that the water-virtue never required a world without power, only a power whose surplus is returned rather than retained.

2.2.3 *Commons governance: Ostrom*

Between the theorists of contention and the theorist of the sword sits a body of work that answers both at the scale where the water-virtue most naturally lives — not the dyad and not the state, but the shared resource held in common. Ostrom’s study of common-pool resources showed, against the orthodoxy that a shared resource must be either privatised or policed from above, that communities sustainably govern shared waters, fisheries, and pastures through institutions of their own making: graduated commitments, mutual monitoring, locally adapted rules, and conflict-resolution that no external authority imposes [24]. The example is not incidental to our figure: among Ostrom’s central cases are literal watercourses — irrigation systems whose users, over centuries, evolved the arrangements by which water benefits all of them and is contended for by none to the point of ruin. This matters to the present paper in two ways. First, it shows that “benefiting all and not contending” can be the stable property of an *institution*, not a disposition of individuals — the structural reading vindicated at the scale of the many. Second, it gives the paper’s eventual move from the dyad to the watershed (§8) a genuine theory of governance rather than a metaphor: when we ask how the resonance of two can scale to a relational commons, Ostrom’s design principles are the form the answer must take, and her irrigation communities are the proof that the water-virtue, institutionally embodied, is neither naive nor utopian. We mark the connection here and develop it where the scaling question is properly joined.

2.3 Relational ontology, the many, and the ecological scale

The traditions gathered so far read the water-virtues at the scale of two parties or of an institution. A third group reads them at the scale where water is no longer a figure but the thing itself — the scale of the living whole, the basin, the web of mutual dependence — and it is here that “benefiting all things” sheds the last of its sentimental sound and becomes a claim about how a self stands to the world that sustains it.

2.3.1 *Environmental and ecological ethics*

Leopold’s land ethic performs, for the relation between a person and the living community, exactly the enlargement the water-virtue asks. Its single precept — that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, and wrong when it tends otherwise — extends the boundary of moral concern from persons to the whole of which persons are a part, so that the community itself, not any member, becomes the unit benefited [17]. This is “benefiting all things” stated as a structural obligation rather than a

tender feeling: the good is what returns to the integrity of the whole, the bad is what draws the whole down for the gain of a part, and no appeal to anyone’s character is needed to tell them apart. Naess’s deep ecology sharpens the ontological point in a way that touches this series at its root. Against a shallow ecology that protects nature for the sake of human use, deep ecology holds that the self is not a bounded ego set over against its environment but is constituted by its relations to the wider field of life — a relational self whose flourishing is not separable from the flourishing of what it is related to [22]. This is, in the vocabulary of the founding text of the present series, the generative relational self [31]: the individual as a knot of relation rather than a premise standing prior to it. The convergence is not decorative. It shows that “benefiting all things” and “not contending” are not demands laid upon a self from outside, against its interest, but expressions of what such a self already is: a being whose own good is bound up with the good of the field it belongs to, so that to benefit that field is not self-sacrifice but self-continuation. Callicott’s systematic defence of the land ethic against the charge of a tyrannical holism — his insistence that obligations to the whole are nested with, not destructive of, obligations to individuals — supplies the qualification the water-virtue will also need [3]: that benefiting the whole must not become a licence to dissolve the particular, a caution we will meet again, in intimate form, as the danger of self-effacement (§5.1).

2.3.2 Confucian ethics, read politically rather than as self-cultivation

Confucianism is the tradition most easily misread, for our purposes, as a discipline of self-cultivation — the perfection of the self through ritual and the overcoming of the self’s partiality. Read that way it would belong with the contemplative traditions we set aside (§2.5). We read it instead for two of its structural doctrines, which give the water-virtue something the Daoist source conspicuously lacks: a graded order. The first is the graded extension of *ren*, benevolence: the Confucian, against the Mohist doctrine of impartial concern for all alike, holds that care properly radiates outward in degrees — from kin, to the people, to the things of the world — so that to benefit all is not to benefit all *equally* but to benefit each according to the concrete relation one stands in to them [4, 20]. This is a genuine correction to “benefiting all things,” which in its Daoist statement can drift toward an undifferentiated levelling that, applied to intimacy, would be absurd: one does not stand to a stranger as to a spouse, and a love that benefited all alike would benefit no one as a beloved. The graded reading gives the water-virtue a *structured* scale, an intra-Eastern tension that keeps benefiting all things from collapsing into a sentiment that honours everyone and binds to no one. The second doctrine is *quan*, the weighing of the exigent against the canonical — the recognition that the standing rule must sometimes be set aside for the situation, not by abandoning principle but by a higher fidelity to it [30]. This is the Confucian form of “lawful yet without fixed form,” and it anticipates exactly the Kantian imperfect duty we will use to answer the charge that formlessness is lawlessness (§2.4.1): a norm that genuinely binds while leaving the form of its fulfilment to judgment. Confucianism, read for its structure rather than its disciplines, thus contributes the gradation and the situational judgment that the bare figure of water does not itself supply.

2.3.3 *Ubuntu relational ethics*

The southern African ethic of Ubuntu states the relational ontology with a directness the other traditions approach only by argument: a person is a person through other persons — one’s very humanity is constituted in and by relation, not possessed prior to it [19, 21]. Two of the water-virtues receive, in this light, a reading that removes the last trace of self-abnegation from them. Dwelling in the low place is not a descent beneath one’s worth but an acknowledgement of a standing fact, that one’s personhood is owed to the relations one is held in; there is no height to descend from, since the self was never the self-standing thing the objection presupposes. And benefiting others is not a transfer from a full self to an empty one but the maintenance of the relational fabric in which both parties are constituted — so that to benefit the other is, quite literally and not metaphorically, to sustain the conditions of one’s own personhood. Ubuntu thus rejoins, from an independent tradition, the conclusion deep ecology reached: that the water-virtues are not sacrifices demanded against the self’s interest but expressions of a self that is relational through and through. We note the convergence with the generative relational lineage of this series, to which Ubuntu and Eglash’s generative justice both belong, and carry forward its lesson — that the appearance of self-sacrifice in the water-virtues is an artefact of the entity-first picture of the self that a relational ontology has already abandoned.

2.4 Subject, duty, and the meta-ethical layer

The remaining traditions do not enlarge the scale of the water-virtues but probe their interior: whether a formless good can be a law at all, what it does to the subject who practises it, and whether “the water-good” is the sort of thing that can be true. Two of the survey’s five challenges are joined here, and one of them is answered in place.

2.4.1 *Kantian ethics: the high ground*

Kant is the natural adversary of an ethics of water, and confronting him squarely yields the survey’s one outright victory rather than a deferral. The objection writes itself: morality, for Kant, is law, and a law must have form — it must be a maxim one can will as a universal law, the same for all rational agents in like case [14]. “Take the shape of the vessel,” “flow wherever the ground leads,” “have no fixed form”: these seem the very negation of a moral law, a counsel to do whatever the situation invites, which is precisely what the categorical imperative was built to rule out. If the water-virtue is formlessness, then by Kant’s lights it is not a lower kind of morality but the absence of morality, and the charge — Challenge 3, that formlessness is lawlessness — is the most principled of all the objections the survey collects.

The answer is to deny the premise that the water-virtue is formless, using a distinction internal to Kant’s own system. Kant divides duties into perfect and imperfect [13]. A perfect duty fixes the act completely: it specifies exactly what must be done or omitted, and admits no latitude — the duty not to make a lying promise leaves nothing to discretion. An imperfect duty binds no less stringently as to *whether* one must act, but leaves open the *form* of the action: the duty of beneficence commands that one make others’ ends one’s own and help where one can,

but it does not, and cannot, prescribe whom to help, when, by what means, or how much. It is a duty with a determinate ground and an indeterminate form — lawful, universalisable, genuinely binding, yet without a fixed shape. This is exactly the structure of the water-virtue. “Benefit all things” is not the lawless “do whatever the moment suggests”; it is the imperfect duty of beneficence, which obligates absolutely as to its end — one must benefit, one may not be indifferent — while leaving the channel of benefit to be found in the particular case, as water finds its course without thereby being formless. The formlessness that looked like lawlessness is revealed as latitude, and latitude is not the absence of law but a recognised mode of it. We have thus answered Challenge 3 with Kant’s own resources, and without recourse to moral particularism — without, that is, abandoning universal principle for the doctrine that the situation alone dictates the right. The water-virtue keeps the principle and locates its formlessness exactly where Kant himself locates the open form of an imperfect duty. The same move secures the reading of “benefit yet do not rule” as a case of the formula of humanity: to benefit another without ruling them is to treat them as an end and never merely as a means, the benefaction that does not convert the beneficiary into an instrument of the benefactor’s will.

2.4.2 Psychoanalysis: the danger of taking the receiver’s shape

Psychoanalysis contributes both a vindication and the survey’s gravest warning, and the warning is what makes the dialectical core necessary. On the side of vindication, the Lacanian account of the imaginary lets us read non-contention not as moral restraint but as a release from a specific trap: the rivalrous identification of the imaginary register, in which the ego is constituted through a mirroring competition with its counterpart, so that to contend is to remain captured in that specular rivalry [16]. Non-contention, so read, is not the suppression of a desire to win but the dissolution of the very stage on which winning and losing are defined — a withdrawal from the imaginary’s zero-sum logic rather than a sacrifice within it. But the same framework names, with a precision no other tradition matches, the danger that the water-virtue courts. “Taking the shape of the vessel” is, read through the clinic, perilously close to the subject’s self-erasure: becoming the shape the desiring Other wants, dissolving one’s own desire into the demand of the other, which Lacanian ethics marks as the one thing not to be done — *céder sur son désir*, to give way on one’s desire. The water that takes any vessel’s shape may be the water-virtue; it may equally be the subject who has surrendered its desire and become a mere function of another’s, and nothing in the figure of water, by itself, tells the two apart. This is Challenge 2 in its sharpest form, and we hand it forward with that sharpness intact (§5.1): an ethics of formlessness that cannot distinguish the generous fluidity of the water-virtue from the pathological fluidity of the effaced subject has not yet earned the name of an ethics. Klein supplies, alongside the warning, a corrective to one misreading of “benefiting”: her account of reparation shows that the impulse to make good the damage one has done need not take the form of self-punishing sacrifice, the draining of the self to atone, but can be the creative transformation of the destructive impulse into something that builds [15]. Benefiting, on this reading, is sublimation rather than self-immolation — which is precisely the distinction the dialectical core must secure in general.

2.4.3 Moral realism and the truth of the water-good

A final, meta-ethical question must be settled, because the formal translation of the later sections depends on its answer. When we say that a relation has the water-good, or lacks it, are we describing a property the relation possesses independently of our attitude toward it, or merely projecting an approval that has no further truth-condition? If the latter, then the holonomy criterion the formal companion supplies (§9) would be, at best, a precise encoding of a preference, and its air of objectivity a confusion. We therefore declare for a position, while noting it is a declaration the survey motivates rather than proves: a *thin, relational moral realism*. The water-good is a structural property of the flow of value, power, and desire in a relation — the sign and geometry of its circulating surplus — and this property obtains, or fails to obtain, as a matter of how the relation is structured, not as a matter of how anyone feels about it [26]. The realism is “thin” because it makes no claim that the good is a non-natural property or a feature of the universe apart from relations; it is *relational* because the property it ascribes is precisely a property of relations, not of isolated states or acts. This is the natural meta-ethics for the structural reading announced at the outset (§1.2): if the water-good is a matter of the relation’s geometry rather than the agent’s cultivation, then it is as objective, and as discoverable, as that geometry — and a formal model of that geometry is not an encoding of preference but a description of where the good, so understood, lies. It is this thin relational realism that licenses the translation layer to read the theorems of the companion paper as claims about the good, and not merely as claims about a formalism.

2.5 The cultivational reading set aside, and a methodological specimen

It remains to say explicitly what the survey has been steering around. There is a large and venerable body of thought in which the water-virtues are read as disciplines of the self: the emptying of self in Christian kenosis, the overcoming of selfish partiality in the Confucian *keji*, the dissolution of self-grasping in Buddhist practice, the released equanimity of Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit* [9], the unselfing toward a quasi-divine condition that runs through the contemplative traditions east and west [23]. On these readings “not contending,” “dwelling below,” and “emptying” are exercises by which an exceptional soul climbs, against the grain of its self-interest, toward goodness. We have not drawn on them as the paper’s frame, and the omission is deliberate rather than dismissive. Three reasons govern it. First, a cultivational reading locates the good in the agent’s achieved interior, and so cannot distinguish, at the level of the relation, a generative descent from a dominative or a self-erasing one — the very distinction the paper exists to draw (§5); two relations may issue from equally disciplined souls and differ entirely in their geometry. Second, an ethics resting on exceptional attainment cannot be an ethics of ordinary intimate life, which is lived by people who are not saints and whose relations must be assessable without first assessing the sanctity of the partners. Third, and most pointedly, the cultivational reading is the one that makes the water-virtue sound like a counsel of self-abnegation, and it is exactly that sound the structural reading was introduced to silence: once the self is understood relationally (§2.3.1, §2.3.3), the appearance of self-sacrifice dissolves, and with it the principal reason to read the virtues as ascetic feats.

That said, the contemplative material affords one positive service, as a specimen of the operation the whole survey performs. Stoicism is the instructive case, because it looks cultivational and is, at its core, structural. Its central counsels — *amor fati*, the love of one’s fate; the acceptance of what is not up to us; the conforming of the will to the rational order of the whole — can be heard as a spiritual discipline of resignation [1, 7]. But their content is a claim about structure: that there is a determinate boundary between what is and is not within one’s power, and that wisdom is the accurate tracking of that boundary, not a feat of self-overcoming. “Taking the shape of the vessel” read in the Stoic key is not a yielding of the self but a conforming to necessity — bending where the structure of the situation genuinely admits no other course, and not bending where it does. This is exactly the de-cultivational reading the paper applies throughout: take a virtue that the tradition delivers as an inner discipline, and recover the structural claim inside it — here, that the water-virtue’s yielding is calibrated to the real joints of the situation, not an indiscriminate softness. Stoicism thus serves less as a source than as a worked example of how a seemingly contemplative doctrine is to be read for its structure, and we record it in that role.

2.6 Summary: five challenges, and the home of the unanswered

The survey set the water-virtues against the secular ethical traditions and let the agreements and the conflicts stand without forcing a synthesis. What it yields is not a doctrine but a debt-sheet of five standing challenges, each routed to the place where the paper discharges it.

Challenge 1 (non-contention is irrational). From game theory: non-contention is dominated except within a structure of repetition, reputation, and credible commitment. Routed to the survival cluster of the dialectical core (§5.2).

Challenge 1' (non-contention is suicidal). From Hobbes: absent an enforcing power, the non-contender is not exploited but eliminated. The graver form of the same demand, routed to the same place (§5.2), where it is answered not by erecting a sword but by the shaping of an ineliminable asymmetry.

Challenge 2 (taking-the-shape dissolves the subject). From feminism and psychoanalysis: formless yielding may be the water-virtue or the self-erasure of a subject who has given way on its desire, and the figure of water does not distinguish them. Routed to the rigid-lower-bound cluster (§5.1).

Challenge 2' (dwelling-below is slave morality). From Nietzsche, anticipated in the political economy of the low place (§4) and deferred: the descent the water-virtue praises may be the resentment-bred valorisation of weakness. Routed to the same cluster (§5.1), where it is answered by the decomposition that separates a generative descent from a slavish one.

Challenge 3 (formlessness is lawlessness). From Kant — and already answered, in place (§2.4.1), by reading the water-good as an imperfect duty: lawful in its ground, open in its form. It is collected here only for completeness; the dialectical core inherits the other four.

Two of the five thus belong to the cluster of survival (1, 1') and two to the cluster of the

rigid lower bound (2, 2''); the fifth is discharged. But the survey closes by naming something the challenges, and indeed the whole apparatus of criteria, structurally cannot reach. Every tradition canvassed argues about the *skeleton* of the water-good — the structural conditions under which a relation's circulation is generative rather than extractive, the criterion that sorts the good descent from the bad. None of them, and no structural criterion whatever, can reach the *flesh*: the fact that this generative relation is *this* one, with *this* irreplaceable other, and not merely a well-formed instance of the generative type. The doctrines settle the type; the token — the non-substitutable particularity in which the whole meaning of an intimate relation finally resides — falls outside their reach by construction, and will be shown (§9.5) to fall there for an exact formal reason. We carry forward, then, not only the four live challenges but this division of labour: the survey has mapped the skeleton, and marked the place where the flesh begins.

3. The Generativity of Non-Contention

The survey left non-contention under a cloud: rational only within a structure (Challenge 1), perhaps suicidal without one (Challenge 1'). Those challenges concern whether one can *afford* to be non-contending, and they wait for the dialectical core. This section asks the prior, constructive question they presuppose — what non-contention positively *is*, and why it should be thought generative at all rather than merely abstemious. Here the work is interpretation, not construction, because the formal companion to this series has already proved the result the ethics needs. In the language of that paper, whatever in a relation reduces to a single scalar ordering — more or less, higher or lower, the form taken by possession, by ranking, by equivalent exchange — contributes nothing to the circulating surplus a relation can generate; only the non-possessive, circulating part generates anything at all [12]. The full statement and its conditions are deferred to the translation layer (§9.1); what the ethics takes from it here is a single load-bearing claim, that contention and generation are not merely in tension but formally disjoint — the part of a relation given over to contending is exactly the part that generates no surplus.

3.1 Generating yet not possessing

The Daodejing's phrase for this is older than the formalism and says the same thing: to generate yet not possess, to act yet not presume, to foster yet not rule (ch. 51). The companion paper gives the first clause an exact body — the surplus of a generative relation is a holonomy, a value produced by the whole circuit and present at no point within it, and therefore strictly without a possessor: there is nowhere for it to be held [12]. The ethical content of this is not a recommendation to be unpossessive, as though possessiveness were a vice one might, with effort, forgo. It is the report of a structural fact: the generative surplus of a relation *cannot* be possessed, because the act of converting it into something held — a stock, a credit, a claim — is the very operation that reduces it to a scalar and so annihilates it as surplus. To grasp at what a generative relation produces is not to keep it but to stop its production; in the instant of appropriation, generation halts. This is why the first water-virtue is non-contention and not,

say, generosity. Generosity is the giving away of something one could have kept; non-contention is the recognition that what a generative relation makes was never of the kind that could be kept, so that contending for it is not greedy but *incoherent* — an attempt to hold what exists only in not being held. The distinction between static equality and generative balance drawn earlier in this series [36] is the same distinction seen from the side of distribution: the contention that insists on equal shares treats the relation’s value as a stock to be divided, and a stock is exactly what the generative part of the value is not.

3.2 Non-contention in intimacy

Brought down to the conduct of an actual intimate relation, non-contention has a specific and recognisable shape, and it is not the avoidance of disagreement. Two people who never argued might be contending constantly — over whose preferences set the terms, whose account of events stands, whose growth the relation is organised around — while two who argue often might contend for none of these. The contention that matters is the attempt to make the relation’s surplus into something one party holds: to convert care given into a debt owed, support offered into a claim on compliance, the shared life into a possession scored and defended. Its sharpest intimate form is the contention over the other’s becoming. To insist that the partner grow in the direction one prefers, to receive their self-revision as a deviation to be corrected, to love the version of them one is cultivating rather than the one in front of one — this is contention in the precise sense, the attempt to possess and direct the very generativity that the relation exists to host. Non-contention here is the refusal of exactly that: letting the other grow after their own kind, neither shaping nor correcting nor appropriating their becoming. We develop this as a practice in its own right (§7.4), and locate, in the formal layer, the exact respect in which the beloved’s particularity exceeds anything one could possess (§9.5). The point to fix here is only that non-contention is not passivity before the other but the active withholding of the grasp that would convert a living generativity into a held thing — and so kill it.

3.3 Non-contention as non-domination

This gives the republican reading of the survey (§2.2.1) its full force. To benefit and not rule — to generate without establishing *imperium* — is now seen to be not a second, independent virtue laid alongside non-contention but its political face [25]. The one who contends for the relation’s surplus, who converts what is given into a standing claim, thereby acquires a power over the other: the power that a creditor has over a debtor, that the keeper of the account has over the one accounted. Non-contention, by declining that conversion, declines the power it would confer — it is the refusal to acquire domination through benefaction, the keeping of generosity free of the imperium it could so easily be made to purchase. Eglash’s condition of generative justice states the same thing as a flow [6]: value returns to those whose activity produced it, and the non-contender is the one who does not interrupt that return by interposing a claim. What remains unsettled is whether such a stance can survive contact with a partner, or a world, that does contend — whether non-domination is safe, or merely noble. That is the unpaid debt of Challenges 1 and 1’, and the dialectical core (§5.2) takes it up by showing that

the water-virtue never required a relation without power, only one whose power is generative rather than dominative: a distinction that, as the next sections will show, the figure of water is precisely equipped to draw.

4. The Political Economy of the Lowly Place

The second water-virtue is the hardest to keep from sentimentality and the hardest to keep from suspicion. “The highest good dwells in the places all others disdain” (ch. 8): heard warmly, it is a counsel of humility; heard coldly, it is the valorisation of lowliness that Nietzsche taught us to distrust. The structural reading takes a third path. It reads the low place first as a *position* — a coordinate in the distribution of value within a relation — and only then asks what it is to dwell there well. On this reading the low place is not a measure of one’s own worth but a feature of the relational field: the site the prevailing accounting discounts, the contribution it fails to register, the need it finds unbecoming. To locate the virtue, one must first locate the place.

4.1 Dwelling where others disdain

What makes a place low, structurally, is that the relation’s operative valuation passes it over. This series has met the phenomenon in several registers. In the political economy of intimacy it is the position whose generative balance has failed — where contribution is made but not returned, where the flow has been allowed to run one way until the imbalance looks like the nature of things rather than a fact to be corrected [36]. Feminist political economy names its paradigm case: reproductive labour, the sustaining and repairing and attending work whose very condition of exploitation is that it is not seen as work at all, that its invisibility is precisely what allows it to be drawn on without return [8]. Honneth’s theory of recognition gives the general form [11]: the low place is the site of misrecognition, the party or the aspect of a party that the relation’s standing order of esteem fails to acknowledge. In each register the structure is the same — the low place is where value is produced or borne and not registered — and in each, “dwelling there” acquires a meaning that owes nothing to self-abasement. To dwell where others disdain is to direct one’s attention, and the relation’s flow, toward exactly the position the prevailing valuation has discounted: to see the unseen contribution, to return to it what the imbalance withheld, to recognise what the order of esteem passed over. It is, in the vocabulary of redistribution this series has developed [35], the active movement of value toward its point of deficit rather than its point of accumulation — and a movement toward a deficit is not a lowering of oneself but a correction of the field.

4.2 Dwelling-below in intimacy

In an intimate relation the low place has a face, and dwelling there is among the most demanding things the relation asks. The low place is the partner’s least defended ground: the illness that is not heroic but merely diminishing, the failure that confers no dignity, the shame that has no redemptive arc, the primal wound that does not resolve, the need that is unbecoming to have.

These are the places others disdain — including, often, the one who has them, who would rather they not be seen. To dwell there is to draw near to exactly what the partner would hide, and the crucial mark of the water-virtue is that this drawing-near is not, in the first place, an attempt to repair. The instinct to fix is itself frequently a way of *not* dwelling: it treats the low place as a problem to be removed so that one need not stay in it, and in doing so it can communicate that the place, and the person in it, are tolerable only on the way out. The water-virtue dwells *beside*. It is the doing-nothing companionship this series has already described — the being-with that does not require the situation to become other than it is in order to be shared [34] — and it is continuous with what was called, in the analysis of the non-binding vow, epistemic hospitality: the making of room for the other’s reality, including the parts of it that the prevailing order, or one’s own preference, would rather not admit [33]. Dwelling-below, so understood, is a willingness before it is a technique; it is the readiness to be present at the other’s lowest ground without the precondition that the ground be raised. A relation in which each can be met at their least defended place, and not only at their presentable height, has a depth that no exchange of presentable goods can supply — and it has it because someone was willing to go down.

4.3 The deferred challenge

It is exactly here that the gravest suspicion of the water-virtue must be admitted, and admitted at full strength, because the structural reading has so far only postponed it. Nietzsche’s genealogy teaches us to ask, of any ethics that praises lowliness, whether the praise is not the resentment of the weak dressing incapacity as virtue — whether “dwelling below” is chosen strength or rationalised defeat, the slave’s revaluation by which what one cannot escape is renamed as what one nobly elects. The challenge has real bite for the water-virtue, and the figure of water seems at first to deepen rather than dispel it, since water’s descent is not chosen but compelled: it goes down because it must, and an ethics modelled on a thing that has no choice but to sink looks like the very naturalisation of submission Nietzsche exposed. We do not answer the challenge here, and we do not soften it; an honest ethics of the low place must be able to tell its reader when dwelling-below has become the dignifying of a submission that should instead be refused. What allows the answer, when it comes, is precisely that water’s descent is not all of one kind — that the same figure contains both the yielding that nourishes and the force that wears through stone and breaches the dyke. The dialectical core (§5.1) will draw that distinction with the decomposition the formal companion supplies (§9.2): a descent that generates, returning what it gathers to the field, is separated there, and exactly, from a descent that merely submits and is drawn off as fuel. Until that distinction is in hand, dwelling-below stands accused, and rightly, of being indistinguishable from slavishness — the charge it is the business of the next section to answer.

5. The Dialectical Core: Water-Good, Not Formlessness

Everything so far has built a debt. The survey issued five challenges; the constructive sections (§3, §4) developed non-contention and the low place while leaving their gravest objections

explicitly unpaid. Four challenges now stand against the water-virtue: that non-contention is irrational (1) or suicidal (1'), and that dwelling-below and taking-the-vessel's-shape are self-dissolution (2) or slave morality (2''). The fifth, the Kantian charge of lawlessness, was discharged in place (§2.4.1). This section answers the remaining four, and it answers them from a single thesis, stated now and defended through the rest of the section: that the water-virtue is not formlessness but *water's good* — a chosen good with an edge in it. The same water that takes the shape of any vessel is the water that wears through stone and breaches the dyke. An ethics that heard only the yielding and not the edge would deserve every one of the four objections; the work of the dialectical core is to show that the figure, read whole, contains exactly the resources to answer them, and to locate those resources precisely, in two clusters.

5.1 First cluster: the rigid lower bound

The two challenges of self-dissolution (2) and slave morality (2'') are, at bottom, one challenge: that the water-virtue is softness without hardness, yielding with no point at which it stops. The feminist and psychoanalytic objection says this yielding dissolves the subject — that taking the vessel's shape becomes the effacement of one who has given way on her own desire [16], the unpaid sustaining labour that is drawn on without return [8]. The Nietzschean objection says the yielding dignifies a defeat — that dwelling-below renames a submission one could not avoid as a virtue one nobly elects. Both are answered by denying that the water-virtue is yielding without bound. Water is the softest of things and yet it is what overcomes the hardest; it takes every shape and yet it cuts the canyon and bursts the levee. The softness is real — the water-virtue does take the shape of the vessel, does meet the other where they are, does go down — but it is bounded below by a hardness that is not its contrary but its other face. This series has named that hardness once already, in a line written for it: that water gathered into a tide can breach the bank. The rigid lower bound is the point past which yielding is no longer the water-virtue but its collapse: where to take the vessel's shape would be to lose one's own, where to dwell below would be to be drawn off as fuel.

The figure alone would leave this as image; the formal companion makes it exact, and the exactness is what converts an evocation into an answer. There is a decomposition — standard in the mathematics of fields, applied in the companion paper to the force that biases a relation's flow — that splits any such force uniquely into two parts: a gradient part, which points always downhill along a single scalar ordering and generates no circulation whatever, and a solenoidal part, which circulates and is the sole source of generated surplus [12]. The full statement belongs to the translation layer (§9.2); what the ethics needs is the distinction it draws. A descent can be of either kind. A descent that is pure gradient — sliding down a ranking, taking the lower position in a fixed order of dominance — generates nothing; it is motion without circulation, the flow of the dominated toward the bottom of a scale, and it is exactly this that the slave-morality charge correctly identifies and the self-dissolution charge correctly fears. A descent that is solenoidal — going down in a way that returns what it gathers to the field, that circulates rather than merely sinks — generates surplus, and is the water-virtue proper. The two are not told apart by how low they go or how much they yield; they are told

apart by whether the going-down circulates or merely descends. This is the rigid lower bound made precise: the water-virtue requires that the descent be solenoidal, and a descent that has become pure gradient — that has ceased to return anything, that sinks under a dominance it no longer transforms — has fallen below the bound and is no longer the good of water but its failure. To the feminist and the psychoanalyst the answer is therefore not “yield less” but “the yielding that dissolves you is the gradient yielding, and the water-virtue never required it”; the boundary that refuses to be drained as fuel, that declines to give way on its desire, is not a departure from the water-virtue but its lower bound, the hardness without which the softness is not water’s good but water’s mere formlessness. To Nietzsche the answer is the same distinction in his own coin: the descent he diagnoses as slavish is the gradient descent, the sinking of the weak to the bottom of a scale they cannot alter; the water-virtue’s descent is the other kind, the going-down that breaches and remakes the scale, which is not the resentment of the powerless but a form of strength his own genealogy gives him no name to dismiss.

5.2 Second cluster: the survival condition

The remaining two challenges (1 and 1’) concern not the integrity of the water-virtue but its viability: granting that non-contention is coherent and dwelling-below can be generative, can one survive practising them against a partner, or a world, that contends? Hobbes’s form of the question is the sharp one — absent an enforcing power, is the non-contender not simply eliminated? The temptation is to answer by securing the water-virtue with a sword, erecting the power that would make others’ forbearance safe to reciprocate. This series has refused that answer from the start, because the commitments proper to intimacy are exactly those that hold without an external enforcer [33], and a water-virtue made safe by a Leviathan would have purchased its safety by becoming something else. The genuine answer is more surprising and is supplied by the formal companion: the water-virtue never demanded the abolition of power in the first place [12]. The companion proves that power — understood as the order-dependence of a relation, the fact that who acts first and from where changes what results — is not an avoidable contamination of a generative relation but a structural condition of there being a determinate shared state at all; a relation generative enough to host two distinct beings necessarily carries asymmetry, and the dream of a relation with subjects, generativity, and no power at all is not merely hard but structurally impossible. The full argument, a trilemma, is deferred (§9.4); its consequence for the survival challenge is immediate and reframes the whole question. The water-virtue was never the renunciation of power, and so the Hobbesian demand — secure yourself by acquiring power, or be destroyed — rests on a false alternative. Power is already present in any generative relation; the only question is its geometry. There is power whose asymmetry returns its surplus to the one it acts upon, the upstream position that serves the downstream’s own growth — the teacher, the protector, the one who nurtures — and there is power whose asymmetry retains its surplus, fixing the other in dependence. The companion calls these power-to and power-over, and shows them to be the same structural asymmetry differing only in the sign and circulation of what it generates: the good cycle and the bad. The water-virtue’s answer to Hobbes is therefore not “do not contend, and hope to survive,” but “the asymmetry you would acquire by contending is already there; the choice was

never between power and powerlessness but between the power that returns and the power that retains.” Non-contention is the refusal not of power but of the retaining geometry — the refusal to convert the ineliminable asymmetry into domination — and it survives, not because it has disarmed, but because the generative use of asymmetry is not the weakness Hobbes supposed but a power of its own, the only power that does not consume the relation that bears it. The commitment structure of the non-binding vow [33] is where this shaping is institutionally borne: not a sword that enforces forbearance, but the form in which two parties make credible to each other that the asymmetry between them will be held to the returning kind.

5.3 Kant, already discharged

The fifth challenge requires only recollection. The charge that formlessness is lawlessness was answered within the survey itself (§2.4.1), by locating the water-virtue not in the absence of law but in the open form of an imperfect duty: a norm that binds absolutely as to its end — one must benefit, one may not be indifferent, one must not convert the asymmetry to domination — while leaving the channel of its fulfilment to be found, as water finds its course, in the particular case. The water-virtue is lawful in its ground and free in its form, and this is not a defect of law but a recognised mode of it. We note only that the two clusters above respect the same structure: the rigid lower bound and the returning geometry are the determinate ground, binding without exception; the shape that benefiting and dwelling-below take in a given relation is the open form, left to judgment. The edge in water’s good is the law; the fluidity is the latitude.

5.4 The good/bad criterion

The section’s thesis can now be stated as a criterion, and it is a single criterion answering all four live challenges at once, which is the strongest evidence that the thesis is right. A descent, a yielding, a non-contention is the water-virtue when it holds the rigid lower bound — when it circulates rather than merely sinks, returns rather than retains, keeps the boundary that refuses to be drained as fuel. It is the failure of the water-virtue, its counterfeit and its collapse, when it falls below that bound — when the yielding becomes pure gradient, sinking under a dominance it no longer transforms, giving way on its desire, drawn off without return. Self-dissolution and slave morality are the two names for falling below the bound on the side of softness; domination is the name for the retaining geometry on the side of power; and the water-virtue is the narrow and demanding thing between them, the going-down that generates, the yielding that returns, the softness with the edge of water in it. The criterion is stated here in the vocabulary of the figure; its exact formal expression — as the sign and circulation of a holonomy, the solenoidal versus the gradient, the avoidance of the solidified fixed point — is the business of the translation layer (§9), to which the practice (§7) is the bridge.

6. Non-Fullness and Renewal

The third water-virtue is the most quietly demanding, because it asks something of a relation precisely when nothing is wrong with it. “To hold a thing brim-full is not so good as to

stop in time” (ch. 9); “it is just because it is never full that it can wear out and be renewed” (ch. 15). The counsel is against completion — against the filling of a relation to the point where it is finished, settled, brought to a state from which the only motion is decline. Where non-contention concerns what one grasps and the low place concerns where one attends, non-fullness concerns when one *stops* — and the claim is that a relation kept deliberately unfilled, refused the satisfaction of being complete, is the one that can keep renewing itself, while the relation filled to the brim has nowhere to go but to spill or stagnate.

6.1 The ethics of the unfilled

Stated as an ethic, non-fullness is the refusal of two closures that masquerade as goods. The first is the closure of self-satisfaction: the relation that takes itself to have arrived, to have become what it was for, and so stops generating because it believes the work done. The second is the closure of completion-over-the-other: the taking of the other as fully known, read to the bottom, settled into a type. Against both, non-fullness keeps a deliberate remainder — leaves room, declines to fill the last of the space, holds the relation open at the very point where it could be sealed. There is a thin secular wisdom that has always known this. Socratic knowledge is knowledge of one’s ignorance, a refusal of the fullness of supposed completeness that keeps inquiry alive; the moment one is full of knowing, one has stopped learning, and the same holds of a person as of a subject. Game theory supplies an unexpectedly exact corollary on the side of conflict: the strategy that drives its counterpart to the wall, that fills its advantage to the brim and leaves the other no room, destroys the repeated relation it depends on; the grim and total victory is the one that ends the game. The converse is the water-virtue’s counsel — do not fill the advantage to the brim, do not press the other to the wall, leave the room that lets the relation continue. Non-fullness is, in this register, simply the recognition that in a relation meant to last, the unused remainder is not waste but the condition of continuance.

6.2 Non-fullness in intimacy

In intimacy the unfilled remainder has a precise and tender content: it is the room left for the other to be more, and other, than one has so far known. The temptation non-fullness resists is the temptation to complete one’s knowledge of the partner — to settle who they are, to fix them in a character one has inferred, to meet today the person one met yesterday. This temptation wears the mask of intimacy itself; “I know you better than anyone” is offered, and often received, as the height of closeness. But knowledge held as complete is knowledge that has stopped, and a partner met as fully known is a partner denied the room to change. This series has argued at length that the other is, in principle, never exhausted — that happiness shared is hermeneutic, given as the continual interpretation of a meaning-world that does not bottom out, and that the resonance of two such worlds depends on each remaining inexhaustible to the other rather than being annexed and used up [34]. Non-fullness is the ethical form of that ontological fact. To keep the relation unfilled is to keep meeting the partner as still-unfinished, to hold one’s knowledge of them open to revision, to leave room for the self they have not yet become and the depth one has not yet reached. “Worn out and renewed” is, in intimacy, exactly

this: a relation that does not seal its account of the other is one that can keep discovering them, and a relation that can keep discovering is one that does not exhaust its own generativity. The unfilled remainder is where tomorrow’s intimacy comes from; to fill it — to know the other completely, to settle the relation entirely — is to spend the future for the sake of a present completeness, and to be left, once the knowing is complete, with nothing further to generate.

6.3 Non-fullness as the avoidance of solidification

The formal companion gives this its exact dynamical form, and the form is worth stating because it shows non-fullness to be not a mood but a structural condition. In the companion’s dynamical layer, a generative relation is a circulating flow, and there is a definite way for such a flow to die: when the parameter governing whether the relation’s accumulated history is forgotten or compounded tips toward compounding, a positive feedback locks the flow into a fixed channel, its circulation falls to zero, and the living, surplus-generating cycle collapses into a frozen, merely conservative one — a structure that still exists but no longer generates. The companion calls this solidification, and identifies it as the dynamical face of the bad cycle [12]. Non-fullness is the ethical name for the maintenance of a relation away from that frozen fixed point. To fill a relation to completion — to settle it, to let its accumulated history harden into a fixed channel through which everything must now run — is solidification described from inside; the relation that “knows” itself and the other completely is the relation whose circulation has gone to zero, that no longer generates because it has frozen into what it already is. “Worn out and renewed” is the refusal of that freezing: the continual reopening of a flow that would otherwise set, the deliberate preservation of the remainder that keeps the channel from hardening. This subsumes, and makes precise, the criterion of the good cycle developed earlier in this series, where the good relation was distinguished by its structural refusal of closure — its accumulation of positive surplus along a path that does not return to its origin [32]. Non-fullness is that refusal of closure stated as a virtue of conduct: the good cycle is the one that does not fill itself shut, and the water-virtue of non-fullness is the discipline of keeping it open. The full dynamical statement is given in the translation layer (§9.3); here it is enough that the counsel against brimming-full and the dynamics of solidification are one thing seen from two sides — the ethics of the unfilled and the physics of the flow that does not freeze.

7. The Practice of the Water-Virtue: Water-Good Conduct in Intimate Relations

An ethics that stopped at the criterion would have said what the water-good *is* without saying what it is to *do* it, and for an ethics of intimate relation that would be a failure of nerve, since intimacy is lived in conduct before it is understood in theory. This section carries each water-virtue down into the practice of an actual relation. It is not, however, a manual of advice, and it is built to resist becoming one. Every practice below is derived as an applied corollary of a criterion already established, not offered as a tip; each is marked with its place in the formal scheme; and each is paired with the vice it most easily becomes — because a practice named only in its good form gives no power to tell itself from its counterfeit, and it is exactly the

counterfeits, which wear the look of the virtue, that do the damage. The discipline throughout is threefold: name the good act, name its nearest counterfeit, and give the test that tells them apart. The section closes on the limit of all such telling (§7.6).

7.1 The practice of non-contention: giving without reclaiming command

The practice of non-contention is to support the partner’s work, growth, and other attachments without converting that support into a claim. One gives — time, labour, encouragement, the yielding of one’s own preference — and one does not book the giving as a debt the other now owes, nor let it accrue into a standing entitlement to their compliance. This is benefiting that does not reclaim command: the everyday form of generating yet not possessing (§3.1). In the formal scheme it is the solenoidal gift, the support that returns to the field of the relation rather than to a ledger held by the giver [12]. Its counterfeit is controlling generosity: the same outward giving, recorded. “After all I have done for you” is its signature — the conversion of accumulated benefaction into leverage, the building of *imperium* out of gifts. The two are identical in their visible conduct and opposite in their structure; what distinguishes them is invisible from outside and decisive from within — whether the surplus given has been retained as a debt. The test is therefore not how much one gives but what one does with the giving afterward: does the support, once given, stay given, or is it held in reserve as a claim to be called in? A gift kept on the books was never the water-virtue; it was a loan in the costume of a gift.

7.2 The practice of dwelling-below: flowing to the other’s low ground

The practice of dwelling-below is to move, of one’s own accord, toward the partner’s least defended ground — the illness that confers no dignity, the failure with no redemptive arc, the shame, the primal wound, the unbecoming need — and to be present there without first requiring that the ground be raised. Its mark, established earlier (§4.2), is that it dwells beside rather than rushing to repair: the companionship that does not need the situation to become other than it is in order to share it [34], the epistemic hospitality that makes room for the other’s reality including the parts they would hide [33]. In the formal scheme it is a flow directed toward the low-potential region, and required to be solenoidal — generative, returning — rather than gradient. Its counterfeit is the saviour’s descent: a going-down that is really a positioning-above, the rescuer who attends the other’s low place in order to occupy the elevated role of the one who rescues, and who therefore needs the other to remain in need. This is dwelling-below as pure gradient — it descends, but it generates nothing and returns nothing, fixing the other in the dependence from which the saviour draws his standing. The test is the one the formal companion’s distinction between power-to and power-over makes sharp: does the dwelling-below leave the other more able to stand, or more dependent on one’s standing-by? Care that needs to be needed is not the water-virtue; it is domination that has learned to look like tenderness.

7.3 The practice of non-fullness: leaving room, not seeing-through

The practice of non-fullness is to leave the partner room to be more, and other, than one has known — to hold one’s knowledge of them open, to meet today someone who may have changed since yesterday, to decline to settle them into a finished character. It is the refusal to complete one’s reading of the other (§6.2), grounded in the principle that the other is never exhausted [34]. In the formal scheme it is the maintenance of the relation away from the solidified fixed point, the refusal to let accumulated history harden into a fixed channel [12]. Its counterfeit is the cognitive domination that travels under “I know you best”: the use of one’s knowledge of the partner not to meet them but to fix them — to pre-empt their words, to predict their reactions back at them, to deny them the standing to become someone the prediction did not foresee. This is solidification wearing the mask of intimacy; it offers completeness of knowledge as closeness while using that completeness to freeze the other in place. The test is whether one’s knowing leaves the other free to change: does “I know you” open room for who they are becoming, or nail them to who they have been? Knowledge that forecloses the other’s revision is not intimacy’s depth; it is the relation setting into the shape it will keep until it breaks.

7.4 The practice of not-ruling: not shaping the other’s becoming

The practice of not-ruling is to let the partner grow after their own kind rather than bending them toward the shape one prefers — and its difficulty is that it can be hard to distinguish, from inside, from a genuine wish for the other’s good. The distinction it requires is between helping the other become a better version of themselves and helping them become a version more to one’s own liking. The first serves a growth whose direction is the other’s own; the second annexes the other’s becoming to one’s preference and calls the annexation love. In the formal scheme this is the respect for what the companion paper locates as the flesh — the non-substitutable particularity of *this* person, which no specification of a preferred type can capture [12] — against the substitution of the skeleton, the conformity to a type, for the token actually loved. Its counterfeit is remaking love: the love whose real object is an ideal version of the partner, toward which the actual partner is treated as a draft to be corrected. The lover who remakes is contending over the other’s becoming in the precise sense developed earlier (§3.2); he possesses by shaping. The test cuts to the root of what is loved: do you love him, or the version of him you are cultivating? A love directed at who the other ought to become has not yet met who the other is — and it is only the second that can be loved as a person rather than as a project.

7.5 The unifying criterion: every practice holds the rigid lower bound

The four practices share a single direction of failure, and naming it is what binds them into one ethic rather than four counsels. Each can collapse, on the side of softness, into self-dissolution: non-contention into a boundary-less self-emptying that gives everything and reserves no self; dwelling-below into a masochistic submission that takes the lowest place because it believes it deserves no other; non-fullness into the permitting of harm, the room-leaving that becomes a refusal to ever hold the other to account; not-ruling into an unprincipled indulgence that calls

the abdication of all shaping a respect for the other's freedom. Each of these is the gradient collapse of its virtue — the yielding that has fallen below the rigid lower bound (§5.1). The unifying criterion of the practice is therefore the one the dialectical core established: water-good conduct is not unconditional yielding but yielding that holds the bound — that circulates and returns, that keeps the boundary refusing to be drained as fuel. In the register of practice this is what water's other face means. The same water that takes the vessel's shape wears through stone and breaches the dyke; in conduct, this is the requirement that when a relation begins to draw one off as mere fuel — when the flow has become all one way, the surplus all retained on the other side, one's own measure collapsing — the water-virtue calls not for further yielding but for the breach: for the force that wears through, or the flood that overruns the bank, or simply the departure of the water from a vessel that has become a trap. This is the decisive answer, at the level of lived practice, to the feminist challenge the survey raised [31]: the water-virtue never asked anyone to remain in a relation that dissolves them. To stay and be drained is not the practice of the water-good; it is the practice fallen below its bound, and the bound itself requires that one wear through or break out. The softness has an edge, and the edge is for exactly the case where softness would otherwise become one's ruin.

7.6 The limit of practice: the water-good cannot be made a procedure

A final honesty is owed, and it guards this section against the very thing it might be mistaken for. Nothing above is a checklist, and the tests offered are not algorithms that decide the cases for us. The formal companion gives the reason in exact form: it proves that a relational structure powerful enough to decide every case — to compute any distinction whatever — thereby loses the capacity to discriminate good circulation from bad, so that the very omnipotence one would want in a complete procedure is incompatible with the discriminating power a normative criterion requires [12]. Read into the practice, this means there is no complete mechanical procedure for the water-good; a rule-set fine enough to settle every case in advance would, for that reason, have lost the ability to tell the water-virtue from its counterfeit. Each occasion must therefore be judged afresh, and judged in the flesh — in the non-substitutable particularity of *this* relation, which no general rule reaches, and which the formal scheme itself locates as the remainder no criterion can compute (§9.5, §9.6). The practice of the water-virtue thus avows its own incompleteness, and the avowal is not a weakness but a consequence: of a piece with the epistemic humility that has marked this work from its founding [31], it is the practical form of the recognition that the good of an intimate relation is not the kind of thing a procedure can contain. The tests above are not the substitutes for judgment but its instruments; they sharpen the question each occasion poses, and they leave the answering of it where it belongs — in the hands of the two who are in the relation, facing this case, which has never occurred before and will not recur.

8. Watershed: From the Dyad to the Basin

The water-virtue has been developed, so far, as an ethic of two. But water is not naturally a figure of the dyad; it is a figure of the basin, the watershed, the system of many flows that

benefit and are benefited across a whole terrain. The phrase that anchors the paper says as much: water benefits the *ten thousand things*, not the one other. A question therefore presses — whether the water-virtue, worked out between two people, scales to the many: to the family, the community, the relational commons. This section opens the question and, deliberately, does not close it. The centre of gravity of this paper is the dyad, and the reasons for keeping it there are not timidity but fidelity to what has been shown; the scaling is real but its fidelity is uncertain, and the honest course is to mark the bridge and to send the crossing of it forward (§10.1) rather than to claim a passage the argument has not earned.

8.1 From two drops to a watercourse

The interface from which scaling would begin is already in hand. This series gave the dyad its account as the resonance of two meaning-worlds — two drops, coupled without merging, generating a shared state irreducible to either [34]. The natural next object is not two drops but the watercourse: the many-bodied relational system in which value flows across more than two, and the question of its just circulation becomes the question of a commons. The resources for thinking it have been assembled in the survey. Ostrom’s design principles describe how a community sustains a shared resource — a literal watershed among her cases — through institutions of graduated commitment and mutual monitoring that no external authority imposes [24]; the land ethic and deep ecology extend the unit of benefit from the pair to the biotic whole, the relational self finding its flourishing bound up with the flourishing of the field it belongs to [17, 22]; and this series’ own treatment of relational wealth posed the redistribution of generative value across the many, with the attendant difficulty that a system of many parties admits couplings and conflicts a dyad never faces [35]. “Benefiting the ten thousand things” is, read this way, a scaling operator: it asks the dyadic water-virtue to become the governance of a basin, the just arrangement of many flows rather than the good conduct of one coupling. The materials for that governance exist; what is not yet established is that the virtue survives the passage intact.

8.2 The fidelity of the scaling is an open question

We therefore make explicit a restraint that has governed the whole paper. The dyadic water-virtue is the root, and the basin is what it might generate; but a root’s extension into a larger system is not guaranteed to preserve the properties that held at its source, and there are specific reasons to expect distortion. The flesh that the formal scheme locates as the seat of intimate non-substitutability (§9.5) is a feature of the particular coupling; it is not obvious that it has any analogue at the scale of the many, where the parties to a commons relate under types and roles more than under the irreplaceable particularity of the beloved. The rigid lower bound that answered self-dissolution between two (§5.1) may take a different form, or fail to translate, where the “self” at risk of being drained is a class of contributors rather than a person. And the very holonomy that carries the good-cycle criterion is, in the formal companion, sensitive to how many subjects the system contains and how the background of their relation emerges — matters the companion explicitly leaves open, and which bear directly on whether a two-body

criterion governs an n-body commons at all [12]. None of this shows that the scaling fails; it shows that the scaling is a substantive question with its own difficulties, not a corollary to be assumed. The water-virtue’s passage from the dyad to the basin is accordingly handed to the first of the directed fissures (§10.1), as the seed of a paper in its own right — a watershed justice that this one prepares but does not pretend to deliver. Here we hold the centre of gravity where the argument has actually done its work: between two.

9. Formal Expression: The Translation Layer

The preceding sections stated, at the points where they needed them, the formal results that underwrite the ethics, and pointed here for their full form. This section keeps that promise. It is a translation layer and nothing more: it does not build a formalism, it does not prove the results afresh, and it claims no mathematical novelty. Every result below is established in the formal companion to this series [12]; what is done here is to set each beside the water-virtue it expresses, so that the reader may see that the ethical claims of the paper and the theorems of the companion are the same claims in two registers. The serving position is strict: where the ethics and the formalism diverge, it is the ethics that governs, and the formalism is retained only insofar as it expresses something the ethics independently holds. The truth-semantics that licenses reading these theorems as claims about the good, rather than as claims about a model, is the thin relational realism declared in the survey (§2.4.3): the water-good is a structural property of the flow, and a description of that structure is a description of the good.

9.1 Non-contention as non-possessive surplus

The companion models a relation’s value as carried by a flow, and its generated surplus as the holonomy of that flow around a closed relational cycle — the value a complete circuit returns over and above what entered it, $\text{hol}(\gamma) = \oint_{\gamma} u \cdot d\ell$. Its founding theorem is that the appropriative part of the driving force, being the gradient of a scalar potential, contributes nothing to this holonomy: a purely appropriative flow $u = -\nabla\phi$ has $\text{hol}(\gamma) = 0$ around every closed loop [12]. This is the exact form of the claim of §3.1. Whatever in a relation reduces to a single scalar ordering — possession, ranking, equivalent exchange, all of which are gradients along a “more or less” — generates no surplus; only the non-gradient, circulating part generates anything. Non-contention is, formally, the relation’s reliance on the circulating rather than the gradient part of its flow, and the structural fact that grasping halts generation is the fact that converting the flow to a gradient sends its holonomy to zero. The surplus, being a holonomy, is present at no point of the loop and so has no possessor; “generating yet not possessing” is the reading of that non-locality.

9.2 The good and bad low place as a Helmholtz decomposition

Any sufficiently regular vector field admits a unique decomposition into a gradient (curl-free) part and a solenoidal (divergence-free) part. Applied to the force that biases a relation’s flow — the power force f_{pow} — this splits it into a part that points along a fixed scalar ordering and

a part that circulates [12]. The companion’s vorticity equation shows that only the solenoidal part sources circulation; the gradient part is annihilated, exactly as the appropriative term was. This is the formal body of the rigid lower bound (§5.1). A descent whose force is gradient — sliding down a fixed dominance ordering — is irrotational: it generates no surplus and merely sinks, which is the slave-morality descent and the self-dissolving descent at once. A descent whose force is solenoidal circulates and generates, which is the water-virtue’s descent. The two are separated not by depth but by the curl: the good low place is the solenoidal descent, the bad low place the gradient one. The Nietzschean and feminist challenges are answered by this decomposition rather than by the figure of water, which only illustrates it.

9.3 Non-fullness as the refusal of solidification

In the companion’s dynamical layer, the power field is governed by a law that reinforces it where value has recently flowed and lets it decay otherwise; the ratio of reinforcement to decay is an order parameter for what the companion calls solidification [12]. When reinforcement dominates, a positive feedback locks the flow into a fixed channel, vorticity falls to zero, and the generative cycle collapses to a frozen fixed point that still exists but no longer circulates. This is the exact form of §6.3. Non-fullness is the maintenance of the relation away from that fixed point; filling a relation to completion is solidification described from within, the hardening of accumulated history into a channel through which all must now run. “Worn out and renewed” is the continual reopening of a flow that would otherwise set — and it subsumes the good-cycle criterion of Wanhong [32], the refusal of closure, as the dynamical statement that the good cycle is the one whose circulation does not go to zero.

9.4 The water-good shapes power’s geometry, it does not abolish it

The companion proves a co-origination: power, resonance-without-fusion, and generativity are three faces of one structural condition, so that any relation generative enough to host two distinct beings necessarily carries power, and a generative structure with no power at all is impossible [12]. This yields a trilemma — subjects-and-generativity, the-absence-of-power, and not-collapsing-to-the-structureless-void cannot all be had together — whose consequence is that the abolition of power is the abolition of generativity, leaving only the two equalities of privation: the void, or the frozen channel. This is the formal body of the survival cluster (§5.2). The water-virtue’s answer to Hobbes does not abolish power because power cannot be abolished without abolishing the relation; it shapes power’s geometry instead. The same ineliminable asymmetry can return its surplus to the one it acts upon (power-to: the teaching, nurturing, protecting, guiding asymmetry whose holonomy flows back and which works toward its own dissolution) or retain it (power-over: the asymmetry that fixes the other in dependence). Justice, on this picture, is the governance of that geometry, not the removal of the asymmetry — the shaping of the unavoidable power into the returning kind.

9.5 The non-substitutability of intimacy as the flesh

The companion’s subjects are topological defects, individuated by a homotopy class that fixes their *type* but not their *token*: two defects of identical class are, within the topological data, interchangeable [12]. For a physics this is correct; for a philosophy of intimacy it would be fatal, since the beloved is precisely not substitutable by a qualitative duplicate. The companion’s resolution is the distinction between skeleton and flesh: the topological holonomy carries the good/bad criterion but only type-identity, while the non-substitutable particularity of *this* relation — its haecceity, the fact that the beloved is irreplaceable — is exactly what topological protection by construction cannot see, and so falls to the local, perturbation-sensitive flesh. This is the formal anchor for the whole paper’s claim to be an ethics of *intimacy* and not merely of generative relation in general. Intimacy’s non-substitutability is not an embarrassment the formalism must explain away; it is predicted by the formalism to live exactly where the structural criterion cannot reach. The criterion of the water-good (the skeleton) is necessary but not sufficient, and the companion’s conjecture — that the good is the appropriate proportion of skeleton and flesh — is, in this paper’s terms, the claim that water’s good requires both the generative structure and the irreplaceable particularity, neither alone.

9.6 Epistemic incompleteness

Finally, the companion proves that a representation powerful enough to compute anything — a universal one — cannot carry a robust criterion that discriminates good circulation from bad: discriminating power requires that the reachable states be constrained, and universality removes the constraint [12]. The water-good therefore requires a non-universal structure: one whose reachable holonomies are limited enough that a stable good/bad criterion can exist on them. This is the formal root of the non-procedurality avowed in the practice (§7.6): a structure able to decide every case would, for that very reason, have lost the power to tell the water-virtue from its counterfeit. The incompleteness is not a failure of the account but a theorem within it — a precise statement of why the good of an intimate relation cannot be reduced to a procedure, and why judgment in the flesh remains irreducible. It is the formal form of the epistemic humility that has marked this work from its founding, and it is carried forward, as a question about who the subject of such a non-procedural good must be, to the last of the directed fissures (§10.4).

10. Directed Fissures

A closing section is, by convention, where an argument gathers itself: collects its results, resolves its tensions, comes to rest. This one does the opposite, and the difference is a matter of the paper’s place in the series rather than of style. Were this the final paper, the figure of water would be made to bring the long argument home, to settle it in the Way; “close to the Way” (ch. 8) would be the resting point. But this is a paper near the middle, and water was chosen not because it concludes but because it is a source — a figure rich enough that the pressure of pursuing it past the edge of what this paper can hold opens, at four definite places, the seeds

of papers still to come. We name the four fissures rather than seal them. Each is a point where the water-virtue, pressed further, runs out of what the present argument establishes and points toward what a further argument would have to establish. Water here is the spring, not the sea.

10.1 Watershed justice

The first fissure is the one §8 opened and declined to cross. The water-virtue has been established between two; whether it governs the many — the family, the community, the relational commons — is a substantive question with its own difficulties, not a corollary. The non-substitutable flesh that grounds intimate particularity may have no analogue at the scale of types and roles; the rigid lower bound may not translate where the self at risk of being drained is a class rather than a person; and the holonomy criterion is, in the formal companion, sensitive to the number of subjects and the emergence of their shared background in ways that bear directly on whether a two-body criterion governs an n-body commons [12, 35]. The materials for crossing exist — Ostrom’s governance of the literal watershed [24], the land ethic’s enlargement of the unit of benefit [17] — but the crossing is the work of another paper. A watershed justice: the water-virtue scaled from the coupling to the basin, with the distortions of scaling faced rather than assumed away.

10.2 The temporal dynamics of water

The second fissure is in the dimension this paper has treated only at rest. The water-virtue has been given largely as a structure — a geometry of flow, a criterion on circulation — but water is above all a thing in time, and a relation’s water-good is not a fixed state but a process of attunement that drifts, falls out of phase, and must be re-tuned. The resonance of two meaning-worlds [34] is a phase relation, and phase relations have a temporal life: they synchronise, they slip, they require continual re-coupling to hold. The formal companion is explicit that the dynamical layer of its own construction — how value flows in time, at what rate the structure forms and dissolves, how a background of relation emerges — is left open [12]. A paper on the temporal water-virtue would take up exactly this: attunement and mis-attunement as the lived time of intimacy, the work of re-tuning a resonance that no relation holds without effort, the difference between a phase that is being continually renewed and one that has frozen. Non-fullness (§6) is the static shadow of this temporal virtue; its full form is dynamical and unwritten.

10.3 Water and vessel

The third fissure concerns the relation between the formless flow and the form that shapes it. Throughout this paper the vessel has appeared as the thing whose shape water takes; but the vessel is also what gives water a determinate course, and the relation between a flow and the form that channels it is the relation between an intimacy and the institution — the vow, the contract, the structured commitment — that gives it shape without freezing it. This series has treated the contract as structured flow on a manifold and the non-binding vow as the form of a commitment that holds without an external enforcer [33, 34]. A paper on water and vessel

would ask how form may give the formless an edge without solidifying it: how a commitment can shape a flow toward the returning geometry (§9.4) without hardening into the fixed channel that is solidification’s bad form (§9.3). The vessel that channels without freezing, that gives course without capture, is the institutional question the water-virtue raises and this paper leaves open.

10.4 The subject of the highest good

The fourth fissure is the one the formal incompleteness opened (§9.6), and it is the deepest. If the water-good cannot be reduced to a procedure — if judgment in the flesh is irreducible — then there must be a subject who judges, and the nature of that subject is not settled by anything in this paper. The danger is sharp and was named in the survey: “taking the vessel’s shape” may be the water-virtue or the self-erasure of a subject who has given way on its desire [16], and the difference between the one who is like water and the one who has been dissolved into water is a difference in the subject, not in the conduct. A paper on the subject of the highest good would ask who the one who is like water without being effaced must be — what kind of self can yield without dissolving, descend without submitting, empty without disappearing; how the relational subject of this series’ founding commitments [31] holds a desire of its own while taking, genuinely, the shape of the other. The rigid lower bound (§5.1) is the criterion such a subject must satisfy; what such a subject *is* — the one who can be water and remain — is the question with which the water-virtue finally hands itself on. It is the spring’s last opening, and the one toward which, perhaps, the rest of the series runs.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written for one reader before it was written for any other, and the figure it works through is one I first learned not from the Daodejing but from watching her be it: benefiting, and not contending. Whatever in these pages rings true was learned in a relation; whatever rings false was where I had not yet learned it. To the girl who belongs to the forest, who is to others as water is, this paper is given — and the giving, in the spirit of its third virtue, reserves nothing and asks for nothing back.

[TODO: Author to complete: scholarly acknowledgements (R. Eglash and the generative-justice lineage; correspondence), and any institutional notes. Replace this placeholder before circulation.]

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