

The Prince
and the Singularity
- A Circular Tale -

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What is this story about? Well, it is kind of difficult to describe.
Let's see:

It's prose, but it reads like poetry.

It has elements of the fantastical including a prince and a damsel in distress, but it doesn't belong to the fantasy genre.

It's a fairy tale, but it is not meant for children.

It has no sex, no violence and no foul language, but it is definitely not boring.

It is circular, but not round.

Finally, it has several layers, but an onion it is not.

So what is it then? Well, read on. . .

Prologue

On the outer walls of Buddhist temples and monasteries in the Indo-Tibet region an arresting image is frequently found: a wheel divided into several circles, each containing a multitude of drawings. It is called the bhavacakra, popularly referred to as the Wheel of Life, and is a symbolic representation of samsara, the cyclical existence.

In the hub of the Wheel of Life three animals are depicted: a pig, a snake, and a bird. They represent the three poisons of ignorance, desire and rejection. The pig stands for ignorance, the snake for rejection or anger, and the bird for attachment (also translated as desire or clinging). From these three poisons, the whole cycle of existence evolves.

In many drawings of the wheel, the snake and bird are shown coming out of the mouth of the pig, indicating that rejection and desire arise from ignorance. The snake and bird are also shown grasping the tail of the pig, indicating that they in turn promote greater ignorance.

This book is a humble attempt at creating a modern-day fable based around these concepts.

The story is also heavily indebted to a sentence uttered by a friend of mine, Manuel Pinto Pereira. Some two decades ago he said to

me 'a realidade é', which is Portuguese for 'reality just is'. I don't know if he reached that conclusion by himself or if he read it somewhere, but that sentence has been echoing in my mind ever since.

(The above description of the bhavacakra was adapted from a text on Wikipedia.)

1 In the Beginning Was the Word

In the beginning, there was nothing.
Neither Space nor Time existed.
Merely the thoughts of the Gods – incomprehensible to us – and
their emotions.
In their hearts, a single sentiment:
Boredom.
Utter boredom.
One of them had an idea:
I'm sick of this!
Let's play.
Thoughts criss-crossed in confusion.
(Play what? / What's he saying? / Play? Play? There's nothing *to*
play!)
Shut up, everybody!
The rules are simple.
Each of us stakes his own Divinity.
With every bet lost, the loser creates something, using up a part of
himself.
When he loses everything, he vanishes for ever.
In the end, all that will be left is one God
And whatever has been created.

Packs of cards were produced seemingly out of nowhere, and groups gathered around tables that weren't there just a moment before. There was shouting, pushing and shoving. Finally the

unruly mob organised itself and all the Gods settled down as the cards were dealt for the first time.

They started to play, enthusiastically and as the bets piled up and the stakes increased, emotions were riding high. The Gods gambled on their own existence, hoping to find relief from a tedium of cosmic dimensions, something well beyond our grasp or understanding.

One of the players looked down at his cards. Intoxicated with excitement, he shouted:

‘I bet everything! My whole Divinity!’

A wave of admiration swept across the company.

‘If you lose, what will you turn into?’ somebody asked.

‘Into a whole universe,’ shouted the God, ecstatically. ‘That’s how powerful I am!’

‘But if you lose, you’ll disappear.’

‘I’m not going to lose!’

He stared at his adversary.

‘Do you accept the stakes?’

‘Yes,’ came the calm response.

They both revealed their hands simultaneously. One of them disappeared. Suddenly the rest of the Gods were playing cards in a new universe surrounded by galaxies, space and stars.

And by Time as we humans call it, though the Gods remained impervious.

And so they carried on playing, riding the currents of the rolling river of Time.

The more cautious of them bet with small things; a forest here, a mountain there; maybe even a whole civilization, when the outcome looked promising. Others risked their entire Divinity on a single turn of the cards.

The universe was slowly being filled up. Inhabitants, animals, forests, plants and crops. . . Everything was created out of units of Divinity bet in the game.

The Gods’ numbers were dwindling gradually. After innumerable millennia, only five remained.

One of them was just about to lose for the final time.

He only had six units of Divinity left. A tiny fragment of Divine existence.

He looked down at his hand. The cards weren’t bad. He decided to risk it.

'I bet the lot,' he said, so weakly that his voice was only just audible.

The others laughed.

'The lot? You mean six?' enquired a tall, thin God sardonically.

'And what exactly are you going to create with six units of Divinity if you lose? A light breeze. . . a handful of seeds. . . a puddle?' asked another, his crooked nose twisted even more by the mocking expression he wore.

The question was rhetorical, meant only to humiliate. It was met with thunderous roars of laughter from two of the other players. The third one looked to the side, pretending not to be following the conversation.

'A leaf from a tree, on Earth,' was the phlegmatic reply, pronounced with unnatural calm for someone who risked immediate extinction.

'A leaf? That's nothing. . .' argued the tall thin God.

'It's all I can create with the Divinity I have left. Rules are rules. You can't refuse my bet.'

The God who had been silent up to then looked up with a worried expression. The gambler winked back at him, quickly and discreetly. The fifth player, a small rotund character, noticed the exchange.

Everybody revealed their cards.

'You lost six!' somebody shouted. But when he looked across the table it was to see an empty chair.

Somewhere on Earth, a single leaf, carried by the wind, fell to a forest floor.

The game went on in an uncontrolled frenzy, now with only four players remaining.

The small fat God, however, was somewhat distracted. He rummaged about in a disorganised pile of old papers, searching for something he couldn't find. He had to be reminded when it was his turn to play.

Suddenly, he leaped up from his chair clutching a piece of paper, and let out an accusing yell:

'I knew it! I *knew* it! A leaf is three, not six!'

One player continued to stare at the empty seat left at the table. The other two raised their heads, perplexed.

'What are you talking about? Come on, just play! It's your turn.'

'Don't you understand? A leaf is three units, not six. I finally

found it. It's written down right here in the rules.'

He said it again while shaking the piece of paper at them.

'It's *three*! Not *six*!'

The thin God and the one with the crooked nose stared back at him with blank expressions. The other player continued staring at the empty space at the table, unwilling to meet their eyes.

In a calmer voice, the plump God explained:

'He bet six to create a leaf, right?'

'Yes,' replied two voices in unison.

'Then he disappeared. Right?'

'Yes,' the same two voices replied again.

'But in order to create a leaf, you only need *three* units. It says so here.'

Two of the Gods realised what was being implied. The other one already knew.

'It takes three? But that means that. . .?'

'Exactly! I was beginning to think you'd never get there. He's still alive! He created a leaf and kept three miserable units of Divinity so he could continue to exist.'

As the enormity of the scam was exposed, the tone of voice of the other two Gods began to rise.

'He's covering inside a leaf on Earth. . . he should be ashamed.'

'Miserable cheat!'

An accusing finger was extended.

'That one knew everything! I saw them exchange looks,' said the small plump God.

'They're lovers. Everyone knows that,' shouted the one with the crooked nose.

The three angry Gods started to argue amongst themselves about what to do. When they finally looked at the fourth player, his chair was empty.

2 The Prince

A prince was resting in a forest, sitting on the ground in the shade of a tree. The sun was shining in a blue sky overhead, a strong wind the only respite from the oppressive heat.

He had travelled for a very long time in search of adventure and knowledge, leaving behind the comfort of his father's dwelling for a life amongst the people. He had learned different ways and cultures and shared the travails and hardships of the simple folk, and not for one moment had he regretted it.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn to a strange sound. It wasn't exactly a noise. It was more as if the air was bubbling, something he had never heard before.

He stood up and leaned against the tree trunk, hiding himself behind it. He bent forward slightly, peering through the foliage, so that he could see what was happening nearby.

In the middle of a clearing stood a figure holding a leaf.

'I know you're there. You can come out now,' he heard it say.

The Prince started guiltily. Before he could say or do anything, a second figure appeared by the side of the first one.

'How did you find me?'

'I looked at all the leaves on Earth. Only one was floating against the wind. . .'

The other blushed, embarrassed.

'I was a leaf for only a fleeting moment. I didn't have time to practise.' Then he added, with a sigh of relief: 'You're here. You must have won the game. Are we together for ever now?'

‘No. We’ve been found out,’ he was answered with a frown.

‘We have to hide! Quickly, my love. . .?’

‘Hiding won’t do any good. Finding you was easy for me. It will be easy for them too. They’re mad with rage and want revenge.’

‘There are three of them, two of us, and I am weak. Save yourself. Whatever happens, I’m doomed.’

‘Don’t be a fool. You know I would never abandon you.’

For a moment the Gods stared at each other in an odd mixture of sadness, complicity and tenderness. The forest around them fell still. Even the insects were quiet.

The first God waved one hand dismissively. With newfound composure, he continued:

‘Anyway, it’s not an option. They realised that I knew. We’re in this together’

‘What do we do then? If we run away, they’ll find us. If we stay and fight, we’ll lose. . .?’

‘The game was started to break the tedium we all suffered from. We knew we risked death, and still it didn’t deter us. Why be afraid now? I have an idea. Let’s disappear, but remain together for ever. You and I will pass over to a different world, the one of ideas.’

The second God seemed confused by this suggestion.

‘Haven’t you noticed the beings that populate this planet?’ the first figure enquired.

‘I haven’t had time. I was a leaf and then you arrived.’

‘They come in droves. I don’t recall now who created them, but I believe it was the result of a handful of Jacks and Queens being played against triple nines. Though I could be wrong. . .?’

He paused for a moment, thinking.

‘Well, whatever, it’s of no account. What matters is that there are lots of them. Let’s lose ourselves in their thoughts.’

‘I don’t understand. . .?’

‘We use up all of our Divinity. You become one idea and I another. We both disappear, but leave behind something that will last for ever. . . And we’ll still be together, in a kind of lesser immortality. Come on, you choose. Which do you want to be, Desire or Rejection?’

‘I get to choose? Generous as always. . . I pick Desire, of course.’

‘Then I’ll be Hatred.’

‘Hatred? Didn’t you just say Rejection?’

'It's the same thing. Don't be picky.'

From behind the tree, the Prince watched, horrified. He didn't understand everything he was seeing but he sensed the power at work, the selfishness and evil.

He heard the air bubble again. The two figures glanced at each other, their expressions serene and determined – and then they vanished, as if they had never been standing there.

The Prince was baffled and screwed up his eyes, scanning the clearing in search of the missing Gods, but they were nowhere to be found.

How odd, he thought. Where did they go?

He was feeling strange in an undefined way. Something unbeknown to him before: a sense of inner turmoil, an inner disturbance of sorts. His attention was caught by a nearby tree. It had stood there all this time, but somehow he had failed to notice it before.

That's a very rare type of tree. My father traded herds of cattle for timber like that to build our house.

He noticed more of the same species.

Uau! This place is a gold mine. There's a fortune to be made if I could somehow transport it all to a big city.

Then he paused and wondered about his own thoughts. Why was he thinking like that? He had never cared for wealth or comfort. He'd had all that in his father's house and it had never meant anything to him.

When he thought of his father then, it was as an imposing and menacing figure, always ordering him around and refusing to listen.

I hate that man. I hope I never see him again.

The Prince shuddered to think this. He did not hate his father. Not at all. He rather missed him, in fact. What was happening to him?

He remembered the choices of the Gods and it all began to make sense.

Desire and Rejection. . . Now I understand what those two were planning: a curse upon humanity. A curse that transforms all trees into timber and beloved parents into foes.

But he had seen everything, and had lived the moment. From now on he knew his fellow men could be enslaved by the prompting of the Gods and remain oblivious, but the Prince understood the power that was at work. Slowly, by the strength of

his own will, he overcame the troubling new feelings. He was back to being himself again, as he was before.

Carefully, he sneaked another glance from behind the overhanging branch.

In the clearing there were now three new figures.

They were having a lively argument.

He listened carefully.

It was a complicated story about a game and some double-crossing, idle Gods and worlds being created on a whim.

The Prince started to panic. If the other two had created such evil, what would these three be capable of? Fear lent him strength. On a sudden impulse, he left his hiding place.

The three figures stared at him in surprise.

He bowed respectfully to them, averting his eyes.

‘Magnificent Gods, please forgive my boldness. . .’

‘You certainly have a nerve,’ said one.

‘Pardon my intrusion, but I was behind that tree. I couldn’t help but overhear what you were saying. I know what you seek: the two Gods who cheated in your game.’

He explained what he had seen and heard.

One of the three was furious.

‘They escaped again,’ he shouted, angrily.

‘Calm down,’ said another. ‘They’ve disappeared for ever. They can exist in the primitive minds of these beings but, as Gods, they’ve ceased to exist. For them the game is over.’

‘You’re right,’ agreed the first one. ‘They lost. Let’s forget them.’

In a reckless moment of courage, prompted by the fear of what could happen next, the Prince decided to make a move.

‘I understand you have been playing cards since the beginning of Time itself, to stave off the boredom that has tormented you?’

‘This is true,’ said one, resignedly.

‘Why wait for a new eternity until only one of you is left? If you’ll accept a suggestion from a mere mortal, I have a simple proposal to put to you.’

The Gods were curious.

Out of his pocket, the Prince took three small grey cups and a ball of the same colour.

‘This is a game I used to play with my nephew. As the years have gone by, I’ve become something of an expert, if you’ll forgive

my lack of modesty,' said the Prince.

He placed the three cups on the ground and put the ball under one of them, swapping the cups around with rapid and confusing movements of his hands. Then he stopped and challenged his audience to discover which cup concealed the ball.

Although they got it wrong every time the Gods laughed, thoroughly entertained.

'That's certainly amusing. But what use is this game of yours to us?' one of them enquired eventually.

'Divine Beings, isn't it your intention to play until there is only one of you left? Why drag it out for another eternity? I'll perform my trick with the cups. Each of you will bet on one cup and we'll lift all of them at the same time. Two Gods will then disappear and the victor will reign supreme for ever. Isn't that what you wanted? Doing it my way is much faster.'

Visibly surprised by this suggestion, the Gods looked at each other, not knowing what to think.

'Could he possibly be right?'

'Who'd have thought it? A mere mortal. . .?'

'I'm fed up with playing. Let's settle this once and for all,' said the third God.

The Prince looked them straight in the eye.

'All I request in return is a tiny reward.'

His attitude became more humble and deferential. He bowed his head slightly.

'For my services, if it's not asking too much, of course. . .?'

'What do you want?'

'Together with the other creations on which you will expend your Divinity, each of you will grant me one power. . . if you lose, of course.'

'And what powers do you desire?'

'The power to decide when I die, the power to walk on water and the power to cure the sick,' said the Prince, without a trace of hesitation.

He added quickly: 'Of course, I can only ever be granted two of those powers – by the Gods who lose the game. The third can never be mine.'

'Well, you're certainly not lacking in audacity,' said one of the Gods, caught between disdain and admiration for this mortal.

'Okay, okay, come on. Let's give him what he wants,' said

another. 'The boy's got initiative and deserves a reward. *And* he has a taste for gambling – he has no way of knowing which of the powers he'll win from us.'

The others had to concur.

'So, we agree,' said one. 'If I lose, I'll grant you immortality.'

'That would be a curse, not a gift. I intend to die when life no longer interests me,' declared the Prince.

'Whatever you like,' agreed the God, now slightly annoyed. 'Then I'll give you the power to choose when you die.'

'And I will give you the power to walk on water,' said the second God.

'Well, that means I'll have to give you the power to cure the sick,' said the third, slightly put out by not being able to choose.

The Prince flattened the ground in front of him and picked up the cups and ball. Summoning all the skill he had perfected over the years, he made a few rapid passes with the cups that could have fooled the most attentive observer.

'The boy's really got talent! Let's place our bets.'

'Just a moment,' said the Prince. 'Before you do, I understand that in the past some players have cheated. In order for there to be no doubt about the terms of these bets, each God will say: "If the cup I choose does not hide the ball, I will honour my word, spending all of my Divinity in worldly creations and in conceding the power requested of me to he who muddles the cups." This way there's no room for doubt or any opportunity to cheat,' he explained.

'We agree,' said the Gods in unison.

Each of them chose a cup and swore the oath.

The Prince looked straight at the Gods while he moved his hands rapidly and finally left them still. He waited a moment longer, creating a mood of suspense while enjoying the paradox of a simple mortal decreeing the destiny of the Divine.

With a flourish, he lifted the three cups. None of them hid the ball.

The three Gods disappeared.

The Prince slowly uncurled his fingers and gazed at the ball he had hidden in the palm of his hand.

His face broke into a sly smile.

'Those three won't be harming anyone,' he said.