

An Inquiry into the Rede

by Sophya Byrd

Smashwords Edition

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Introduction

This discussion should be read as having taken place among six members of a circle of Wiccans who later edited their exchange for publication. As some participating members did not wish their identities to be known even to other members of the Craft, all six took an oath of secrecy. All participating members of the circle are familiar with the Craft and have read some traditional philosophical works.

The participating members offer their discussion here for the enjoyment of the reader, who may (or may not) be a Witch who is interested in pondering the Rede. They do not urge the reader to accept 'the' answer contained here. In the first place, there is no single answer offered, so it would be quite impossible to accept it even if the reader wanted to. In the second place, what is proposed is not so much an 'answer' as a set of further questions. The reader is urged to consider the mystery of the Rede for herself.

At the outset, the reader may wish to remind himself that the Rede is a statement most often expressed as *An it harm none, do as yet wilt* or (in somewhat longer form) *An it harm none, do as yet wilt, and that shall be the whole of the law*. It appears in several places, including the Old Laws (also known as the Ardanes or the 161 Laws).

Participants:

Eyrie, the High Priestess

Lark, *Raven*, *Dove*, *Robin*, and *Corbin*, all Wiccans joining in this Circle of Discussion

The Discussion

Eyrie said to the coven: *An it harm none, do as yet wilt, and that shall be the whole of the law*. What do you all think about this Rede?

Raven said: I understand the Rede to mean 'Do whatever you want so long as no one is hurt.' Would the rest of you agree with me?

Lark: Yes.

Robin: Yes.

Corbin: Wait a minute. Is the idea that no *one* is hurt, or that *nothing* is hurt? Would it be all right for me to do whatever I want if an animal was hurt?

Dove: Or what about a plant?

Lark: Good point, Corbin and Dove. I would try to avoid harming the animal. Plants are a little bit more difficult to be sure about, but I think we should try to avoid hurting them too.

Raven: Okay, so the rule should be 'Do whatever you want so long as no human, plant, or animal is

hurt.'

Dove: I'll add: extradimensional beings, aliens, and higher powers. They shouldn't be hurt either.

Lark: Agreed.

Corbin: What about natural features of the earth? I'm thinking about rivers, lakes, stones, mountains, the ocean, the sky. . . .

Dove: How can you harm the sky?

Corbin: You can pollute the atmosphere.

Dove: I agree it's possible to pollute the atmosphere, but is that the same thing as hurting a person? he person feels pain, but the atmosphere doesn't.

Corbin: How do you know it doesn't?

Dove: Good point. Still, does it matter? The atmosphere can certainly be damaged, and damage is a kind of harm.

Raven: What's more, the pollution of the atmosphere eventually causes us humans harm. So I think we should count the atmosphere as something that falls within the Rede's prohibition on wanton harm.

Dove: All right.

Corbin: Let me sum up. Do we agree that the Rede allows us to follow our desires only if *no one and nothing whatsoever* is harmed? Or does the Rede speak only of *a limited number of things* where it is important to do no harm?

Lark: I think it is better to include all things.

Raven: Agreed.

Dove: Wait a minute. I am still not quite convinced. Might including all things create a problem?

Lark: What do you mean? What problem?

Dove: Perhaps if we are unwilling to harm anything, we may find ourselves unable to act at all. Perhaps all action involves some harm.

Lark: What do you mean? Can you give an example?

Dove: Easily. I am breathing now. I must continue to breathe. I cannot stop breathing for long without dying. The same is true for all of us. Can we agree on this?

Lark: Yes.

Raven: Perhaps there are some enlightened people or higher beings who can live without breathing, but I haven't reached that stage yet. I don't think any of us here has done so, and certainly most people still need to breathe.

Dove: Very well, we agree that we -- at least those of us here, and most of the people in this world -- must breathe, if we want to live. Yet when I breathe, I inhale microorganisms in the air. Some may be diseases such as the flu or the measles virus, or the bacteria that cause tuberculosis or diphtheria. I may also breathe in mushroom spores or pollen, which are not diseases. My body actively seeks to kill or neutralize these living things before they do me harm. Obviously I could not live with mushrooms growing in my lungs.

Lark: That sounds like something out of a really gruesome horror movie.

Robin: Yes. Gross.

Dove: I apologize for sounding gross. But my point is that I inevitably kill small animals in order to stay alive myself. I will admit the animals I kill are extremely small -- perhaps only a cell in size. But when we agreed that the Rede applied to harming animals as well as humans, we did not specify that the only animals meant by the Rede were mammals. Should we make such a limitation now, and say that we may freely harm very small living things, such as microorganisms?

Robin: I'm not sure it counts to hurt a flu virus, especially if the virus attacks me first.

Dove: Does it make a difference if the virus attacks you first?

Robin: I think it does. I don't think the Rede requires us to die so that a flu virus can be happy. I don't think a flu virus is *capable* of happiness.

Dove: Is it capable of pain?

Robin: I don't know. I don't think so. It doesn't have a central nervous system, anyway.

Lark: In any case, if we kill a flu virus we have certainly damaged it, and therefore 'harmed' it. But we did so in self-defense. That ought to be permitted, I think. Here's another example: I don't think the Rede requires us to be nice to muggers, either. If someone attacks me, I think I ought to be free to respond in some way that protects me, even if it may harm my attacker. That is just common sense, and I don't think the Rede exists to urge us to act against common sense.

Raven: You all know I like to quote Gerald Gardner's Old Laws. Well, Gardner noted there that Wiccans should avoid injuring Christians who speak ill of us or harm us. But when he did so he gave as the reason that we Wiccans are very few in number, but there are a lot of Christians who are hostile to us. If we were to act in our own defense, we might reveal ourselves and our fellow coven members inadvertently. For that reason, the most important of all Laws was always that of secrecy. So if the Old Laws suggest we avoid injuring others who harm us, the reason they give is simply that we will best protect ourselves thereby. Of course, that is a *practical* point of view, and it may be completely separate from the Rede. The Old Laws do not tell us we *must* avoid harming others because of the Rede.

Dove: You're the expert on the Old Laws, so let me ask a question even though I think I already know the answer. Do they say, directly and positively, that the Rede bars us from acting self-defense?

Raven: They do not. But neither do they say that the Rede allows us to act in self-defense.

Corbin: Well, let us say, at least for now, that the Rede does not give us any direction as to how we should respond to those people, animals, or things that seek to injure us. But if we can return to the viruses for a minute, I would like to point out that not all viruses injure us. For example, scientists hold small samples of many illnesses in storage. Those samples lie dormant, and while they are dormant they do not hurt anyone. This is so even though the disease may have harmed and even killed many people in the past, such as the smallpox virus. Does the Rede urge us to do no harm to those samples?

Lark: I really don't care about destroying the last samples of the smallpox virus, as long as it's locked up and doing no one any harm. Why not let it continue to exist?

Raven: Because it might get loose, and then it would cause a lot of harm! I think the last smallpox samples should be destroyed.

Corbin: My concern is with what the smallpox virus represents: a very tiny form of life that is currently not injuring anyone. I don't mean to trivialize your concerns, Raven, but I think you would agree with me that there is no one suffering from smallpox anywhere in the world right now.

Raven: Not right now, no. But what about in the future?

Corbin: Bear with me for a moment. Let us imagine that we can be absolutely certain that the smallpox virus will never escape.

Raven: All right. I can imagine that, although I don't think it is true.

Corbin: My question is as follows: In this imaginary world where the smallpox virus is absolutely safe because it will never escape, does the Rede bid me respect the smallpox virus and seek to avoid harming it? Is there any form of life that is so small and insignificant to us that we may harm it freely?

Lark: I am not sure that harming any life, so long as it does not seek to injure us, would be within the spirit of our Rede. I speak from my personal feelings, but I would not want to injure even a single cell of life that does not seek to harm me. Let the smallpox virus exist in peace, I say, so long as it is safely contained in a laboratory.

Raven: So long as we can be sure it will always be contained, I agree. I think harming any form of life would *not* be permitted by our Rede, either in letter or in spirit. The Rede says 'An it harm none.' 'None' surely means *none*, not just 'any beings who are big enough to be important to us.'

Lark: I agree, Raven.

Raven: Let me go further and say that if the Rede had been intended to apply only to humans, or only to mammals, or only to humans and mammals and birds and fish, surely the Rede could have easily been phrased to say just that.

Lark: True.

Raven: But it was not so phrased. So I think we should conclude the Rede applies to *all* life forms. With the one exception we have already mentioned, at least, that if another being attacks us, we should be free to defend ourselves. In my opinion, the Rede does not imply we ought to sit passively under an attack and die. I think I am free to get inoculated against tetanus, even we must kill some tetanus bacteria to make the vaccine.

Lark: I see things the same way you do.

Raven: And here is another argument that the Rede applies even to a virus or a single bacterium. Did we not just agree that the Rede applied even to the sky and the sea and the earth? If it applies to all those things, I think it should apply even to single-celled organisms as well. They're also a part of this world, after all, even though they're very different from us. We shouldn't be indifferent to the sufferings of any creature, just because they're small or non-mammals.

Robin: I've been listening to all of you for a while now, and I agree. What kind of people would we be, if we were to strive to avoid harming some living beings but were utterly indifferent to the deaths of others? No, I think we should avoid harming any person, any living being, and any thing in existence, so long as they do not attack us--in which case the Rede does not bar us from defending ourselves.

Dove: But then, as I said before, I suffer problems in knowing how to allow the Rede to guide me. For it is not only that I kill when I breathe. I also kill when I eat, even if I kill nothing but a carrot or a cabbage leaf. When I walk to my garden to harvest the carrot or the cabbage, I inevitably step on ants or other insects and kill or injure them. And if by some gift of the Goddess and her consort I could avoid all this, I would still be hurting the local wildlife by depriving them of the carrot or the cabbage they might otherwise have eaten.

Corbin: Oh, the dire disaster of hungry bunnies! Be serious, Dove.

Dove: I am being serious. My point is that I cannot avoid doing some harm, even lethal harm, to small creatures. Every day of my life, I kill living beings who have done me no harm. Sometimes I kill in self-defense. Sometimes I kill by accident. Sometimes I kill because I need to do so to survive, and I

seek out my victim (which I admit may be nothing more than a ripe fruit or vegetable). What good is the Rede if I do some harm at every minute of my existence? It is meaningless to urge me to do no harm if I am always doing some harm.

Lark: Wait a minute. None of this is something you can avoid. You can't avoid eating and breathing and moving about.

Dove: True.

Lark: Then I don't think you can be blamed for it. You can't be blamed for doing something you can't avoid doing.

Corbin: No, I would have to disagree. I see a way Dove could avoid doing harm.

Dove: What is that, Corbin? I would love to hear it.

Corbin: I think you will not like hearing it so much when you do, but the possibility should be mentioned if we are to explore all the issues. The solution I see is simply this: You could kill yourself, and then you would not harm other living creatures.

Dove: Yes, I see what you mean. In fact, when I was dead I could even feed the worms, which presumably would wriggle with delight at finding a convenient meal.

Corbin: I don't want you to commit suicide, Dove, and I am certainly not urging you to do so. But it is the only option I can see for us to be certain of causing no harm.

Dove: I understand and I don't take offense. In fact, I agree with you. Killing myself is the only way I can imagine to avoid harming at least some other beings. But even then it is not certain that I could avoid doing harm, because perhaps my spirit would do some harm in the Summerlands. And if I were reborn, I would inevitably return to killing.

Raven: Even assuming that your spirit would linger in the Summerlands and do no harm there, committing suicide isn't a good answer. I mean, in the first place Dove would be harming himself if he committed suicide. And if the Rede tells us to harm *none*, I think that includes a directive not to harm ourselves.

Lark: Good point, Raven.

Raven: And in the second place, I believe the world would be a better place if everyone followed the Rede. It is a guide for all people's actions; it speaks to all of us. But if we can only follow the Rede by killing ourselves, then we all would have to kill ourselves. And what kind of moral rule would require all the people who want to do the right thing to kill themselves?

Lark: I think Raven is absolutely right. We can't consider suicide as an appropriate way to follow the Rede. That just wouldn't work.

Corbin: But then what are we left with? As I see it we can avoid killing other people fairly easily. We can avoid killing fish or birds or mammals if we are vegetarians. But --

Dove: Wait a minute. Can we be sure we are able to avoid killing other people?

Corbin: I'm not a murderer, Dove. Are you?

Dove: I haven't killed anyone personally. But is killing another human being personally all we should be concerned about?

Corbin: What do you mean?

Dove: I am concerned about actions I take that may contribute indirectly to other people's deaths, even though my actions do not directly cause their deaths. For example, if I go to the store and buy a loaf of

bread, I do not feel as if I have harmed anyone at all, much less killed anyone. But for the bread to come to the store, it had to be baked elsewhere and then delivered. Or if the bread I buy was baked at the store, then the flour and yeast and other ingredients were delivered.

Corbin: If your point is that most supermarkets do not include wheat fields inside them, I would certainly agree. But how does that lead to killing other human beings, even indirectly?

Dove: It is this: if someone is delivering bread to the supermarket, or at least flour and yeast, then whoever is doing the delivery is making use of the roads.

Corbin: That would certainly seem to follow, yes.

Dove: But roads are dangerous places, Corbin. People get killed when they drive. About one out of every hundred people dies in a road accident.

Corbin: Really?

Dove: Yes.

Raven: But probably many of those accidents occur late at night because of drunk drivers, and deliveries to supermarkets are made during the day.

Dove: Let us assume so, but the fact remains: at least a few people who make deliveries to supermarkets will die of road accidents that occur when they are making deliveries. Maybe very few, maybe only one or two in a hundred thousand or a million--but still, some people will die. I know this, but I choose to shop at a supermarket anyway. By helping to support the supermarket, have I not indirectly contributed to someone's death?

Lark: Wait a minute. You didn't cause the road accident. At most, you knew a road accident would happen. You didn't go out there in your own car and smash into the delivery truck. The person whose bad driving caused the accident is the one at fault, not you.

Dove: I agree I did not cause any road accident. But my point, as you'll remember, is that I bought the loaf of bread. That I chose to do, even though I knew that loaves of bread could only reach the supermarket by the roads. And I also knew that for every hundred people, one out of a hundred would eventually die from a road accident.

Lark: But you had to eat!

Dove: I agree, and even if I stayed home and baked my own bread, I would still have to go somewhere to buy the wheat and other ingredients. I don't have a wheat field in my house, any more than the supermarket has one. Even if I did grow my own wheat, I would need to have the wheat seed delivered by someone -- and the mill to grind the wheat into flour, and the bins to store the flour. I am not perfectly self-sufficient and unfortunately can never be, unless I want to risk death from malnutrition.

Lark: I don't think you should be held morally responsible for killing anyone under the circumstances you describe. You have to eat, and that means something has to be transported along the roads. We're not morally guilty if we don't live up to an impossible ideal. Starving yourself is not the right answer.

Dove: I agree, Lark. I agree completely. But what I am trying to suggest is that, while none of us here has ever killed another human being in the obvious way that horrifies most people and leads to a murder conviction, we are not free to stop participating in a system that allows some people to be killed. It is as Herman Melville said when urging his readers to be sparing when they used whale oil: 'not a gallon you burn, but at least one drop of man's blood was spilled for it.'

Raven: And plenty of drops of whales' blood, I would add. Even if Melville didn't.

Dove: True. My only point is that when we say that we can easily avoid killing other people, we are a

little generous to ourselves -- perhaps too generous -- in our understanding of what 'killing other people' means.

Raven: I feel that murder is entirely different from buying a loaf of bread and knowing that the delivery person has a very slight risk of dying on his delivery route.

Dove: I agree it *feels* different. I would even be inclined to say it *is* different. But just because I have not committed the great evil of murder does not mean I have committed absolutely no evil at all. I feel guiltless, but perhaps I am guilty anyway.

Raven: Aren't one's feelings a good guide to knowing what's right and wrong?

Lark: I'm going to jump in and say one's feelings are *not* always a good guide to understanding moral responsibility. If we could always rely on our feelings to guide us, we would not need to have this discussion. We would not need the Rede either, since in that situation we could always trust our intuitions no matter what we confronted. We need the Rede, and we are having this discussion to understand the Rede as fully as possible, because occasionally situations arise where our intuitions do not point us clearly in a single direction.

Raven: So you think the Rede is there to guide us when there is something we want to do that would cause some harm?

Lark: In part. But the Rede is also there, I believe, to guide us to listen to our *own* will and happiness when we harm none. For we might otherwise needlessly obey the will of others.

Raven: And the Rede reminds us we need not do this.

Lark: Exactly.

Corbin: So it gives us freedom?

Lark: Yes, and. . . .

Robin: Hold on a minute. Can we pause this line of discussion for a moment? There's something I want to say.

Corbin: By all means say it. We're speaking freely here, with honest curiosity and with trust that we all sincerely share a desire to learn.

Robin: But that's just my problem. I have listened to all of you for a while now, and I have been silent myself because I think the conversation is going in the wrong direction.

Corbin: If you're right, that's very important. How are we going in the wrong direction?

Robin: You are making distinctions that are too subtle, and quibbling over tiny points that are not important. We all know what the Rede directs us to do.

Lark: I *don't* know, at least not after I've been listening to you all.

Robin: Exactly! All this is more confusing than helpful. There is no need to try to understand the Rede in every microscopic detail. Who cares? Perhaps the Rede means nothing if we look at it that closely.

Lark: Hold on! I trust that anything that is important -- and that includes the Rede -- is worth examining closely.

Robin: If you look at a single drop of water with your naked eye, you see a beautiful thing that is transparent and pure. But if you look at it under a microscope, it is filled with microorganisms. Right?

Corbin: Right.

Robin: Looking at a drop of water with your eye, and looking at it with a microscope, yield very different results. Neither is wrong, but they are both different from one another. I believe you are looking at the Rede as if through a microscope, but the Rede should be looked at as if through the eye.

Corbin: In other words: you want us not to consider the Rede closely?

Robin: The Rede is there to be followed generally, not to be parsed and sifted and strained and peered at. If it has a few exceptions, who cares? What rule doesn't?

Corbin: The law of gravity.

Robin: Objects float in outer space.

Corbin: That they float in outer space is consistent with our understanding of the law of gravity.

Robin: A Witch might cast a spell to cause an object to levitate.

Corbin: Even if a Witch or a psychic were to levitate an object, I think that would be an application of another force that countered the force of gravity, and not an exception to the law of gravity itself. If the Witch ceased the spell that caused the object to levitate, it would fall.

Robin: Okay, perhaps that was a bad example. But the law of gravity is a physical law, and the Rede is not. Perhaps physical laws have no exceptions, but why shouldn't the Rede have them? After all, the laws made by judges and legislatures have exceptions. It is murder to kill another person, for example, except when that other person is trying to kill you, and then it is self-defense.

Corbin: Is that an exception to the rule, or a restriction on its extent?

Robin: My point is that *it does not matter*. Every human being can understand how to follow the rules on murder and self-defense without sitting around a table and fussing over the meaning of the rules for hours on end. What good does that do?

Corbin: Perhaps ordinary people do not need to worry about the distinction between an exception and a restriction. Indeed, if everyone worried about every distinction that could be drawn, we would spend our whole lives worrying without ever reaching the end of our self-imposed task. No one would have a chance to eat or sleep or walk the dog. And that would not seem to be a good way to run the world.

Robin: My point exactly!

Corbin: But I think lawyers and judges and legislatures should worry about the distinctions between murder and self-defense, because doing so may help them write better laws and reach better judgments. Ordinary people: no. Specialists in the area: yes.

Robin: Well, even if I concede your point, why are *we* investigating the Rede by questioning it so closely?

Corbin: We are the specialists here. We have undertaken to investigate the meaning of the Rede to the fullest possible extent. I do not suggest that everyone must do the same, but I think it is good that *some* Wiccans ask these questions.

Robin: Well, not all of what you are doing is to my taste, but I suppose I can agree with that.

Corbin: Well then --

Robin: Wait. Why not say that everyone can come up with his or her own explanation of the Rede? Why can't we accept everyone's understanding? It seems intolerant to reject some interpretations. If we do that, how are we different from those religions that have a strict theology and expel everyone who does not agree with them to the *n*th degree? It would be a great betrayal of Wicca if we were to do that.

Corbin: I agree we must be careful to avoid suggesting that our answers are the best and only ones. We do not want this discussion to be the start of a path leading to a spiritual dictatorship.

Robin: That is exactly what I fear we may be encouraging: a religious tyranny.

Corbin: But I believe we can still question the Rede's meaning without starting down that path. Obviously not *every* interpretation of the Rede is as good as any other, so it will profit us to weed out the very bad ones.

Robin: Wait! Why can't every interpretation of the Rede be equal?

Corbin: Well, if I were to say that the Rede should be interpreted as calling for the slaughter of everyone over the age of 30, would you agree with me?

Robin: Is that a joke?

Corbin: I will take that response as meaning 'Obviously that is not a good interpretation of the Rede.' And I agree with you: such an interpretation of the Rede is ridiculous and horrifying at the same time. But you see: it is possible to come up with bad interpretations of the Rede.

Robin: I suppose it is possible. Still, I believe people have suggested very few such bad interpretations of the Rede, and many good interpretations.

Corbin: Surely we agree more than you seem to think. I am aware many good interpretations have been suggested. In this Circle, we are not setting out to provide the single true answer to the question of what the Rede means. Instead, we are trying to explore some of the issues, and to show why some interpretations of the Rede are not as obviously true as they may seem at first. No more than that.

Robin: Very well.

Corbin: Then to continue, there is another issue we have not yet considered regarding the Rede. I would suggest we investigate a single but very important word within it.

Raven: What word would that be?

Corbin: The word 'harm.'

Raven: Have we not been discussing harm?

Corbin: We have been discussing who or what may not be harmed. But we have not yet inquired as to what 'harm' means when it is encompassed by the Rede. What is 'harm'? And does the Rede apply to all harm, or just some particular types of harm?

Raven: I will try to answer the first of your questions. 'Harm' is doing wrong to someone or something. It is causing them pain, or doing them an injury, or leaving them in a worse situation than they were before. We said before that to damage something was to harm it.

Corbin: You have given me five definitions instead of one! I hardly know where to start in considering what you say.

Lark: Let me start, for I have a question to ask of Raven.

Raven: By all means, let me hear it.

Lark: You say that 'harm' can be to cause pain to another being.

Raven: Yes, I think that is what is meant by 'harm.'

Lark: Yet do we not sometimes cause pain in order to do good?

Raven: What do you mean?

Lark: For example, is it not true that a surgeon does us good when he removes a cancerous tumor, even though the surgery is somewhat painful despite anesthesia during the surgery and pain medication afterwards? And could we not say the same thing about all doctors, dentists, and nurses . . . that they do us good even though they often cause us some pain? I take my dog to the vet once every year to get him vaccinated against rabies. Surely I am not 'harming' my dog, even though I am asking the vet to prick him painfully with a needle, because I am trying to prevent him from getting a fatal illness. The good of being safe from rabies outweighs the bad of being pricked with a needle.

Raven: I see your point, and I believe you are doing the right thing to take your dog to the vet. Still, I would assume your dog is not happy going there.

Lark: That is true.

Raven: I do not really look forward to getting a shot myself. Most people avoid pain whenever possible. Medical procedures may make us healthy in the future, and if they do so, that would generally be considered a good thing. Still, very few of us enjoy medical procedures while they are taking place.

Lark: True.

Raven: And so I believe it may be fair to say that doctors and the like cause us 'harm' in the present, even though they may cause us good in the long run. It is not much different from going to work, I think. For I do not particularly enjoy my job. I work to earn money today so that I do not starve tomorrow. I think this is my best course of action, since I am not independently wealthy. But if I were to win the lottery and get all the money I ever needed, I would give up my job. My job causes me to lose my free time, which I would count as 'harm', even though my job also makes me able to buy food and shelter, which is good.

Lark: You mean your job brings you more good than harm, but you do not want to deny that there is still some small harm in your job?

Raven: Yes, exactly.

Corbin: I think, Raven, that you have just raised a question about 'harm' that is very difficult to answer. When the Rede bids us not to 'harm' another, does that mean we must avoid all harm at all, or does it mean that we must merely do more good than harm to others when we act? Must we scrutinize our actions to see whether any harm, no matter how tiny, lurks in them? Or should we simply try to count up all the good and all the harm we do in an act, and feel free to act whenever we believe the good outweighs the harm? Do we violate the Rede in taking our dogs and cats to the vet to get a rabies shot even though we are saving them from a horrible death?

Raven: I think any harm is 'harm', and we cannot pick and choose and argue that some harm does not really count. The Rede does not urge us to avoid only great harms, or only acts where the harm outweighs the good. The Rede seems very straightforward to me: we should avoid all harm--*all*.

Lark: I understand your position, Raven, and yet I am not sure I would agree. I believe this is what I meant when I described taking my dog to the vet for a rabies shot. I would agree there is some small harm to my dog in taking him to the vet, for he is clearly frightened and unhappy when he realizes where we are going. But it seems to me that there would be a much greater harm in letting him be vulnerable to rabies. And if he were to nip or bite anyone, that person would demand proof he had been given his shots recently, and if he did not have the shots they could demand that he be killed and his brain autopsied. I don't want this to happen to my dog. So I have decided there is more good than harm in taking him to the vet for a rabies shot once a year, and I don't think I'm acting against the Rede.

Corbin: So Raven, you believe the Rede bids us avoid all harm, no matter how slight it may be. But

Lark, you believe the Rede asks us to weigh the harm involved in an action, and if it is less than the good in the action then we may freely act.

Lark: Yes, that is how I interpret the Rede. Otherwise, the Rede would advise against an action that created infinitesimally great good and infinitesimally tiny evil, because there would still be some small evil present. For example, if a madman believed that he should plant a nuclear bomb to blow up a city because he thought it would bring about world peace (though in fact we might guess it would do just the opposite), we could not even ask him politely to stop, because by disagreeing with him we might hurt his feelings. I do not believe the Rede directs us to sit idle while a madman's bomb incinerates a million people and causes millions more to die of radiation sickness, merely because to stop the madman would involve hurting his feelings. This would be ridiculous. And since the Rede is not ridiculous, that interpretation of the Rede must not be the best.

Corbin: Indeed, Lark, you have made a good argument. But I see an even stronger one.

Lark: What is that?

Corbin: It is this: that all actions have some possible harm in them, and so if we were to avoid absolutely every harm, we would never act at all. And even our inaction would cause some harm.

Lark: Is it true that every action brings with it some harm?

Corbin: I think so. To use your example above, if I try to stop a madman from setting off a nuclear bomb by saying, 'Sir, please reconsider, what you are doing is not a good idea,' I am being as courteous and polite as possible. Even so, I may well hurt his feelings. If I try to take the bomb away from him by force, I may hurt him physically. Even if I do not hurt him physically, his feelings will once again be hurt by my attempt. So no matter how I respond, I will hurt him unless I go along with his ideas wholeheartedly. But how I can do that? If I do, won't I participate in an act that hurts millions of people? I cannot imagine any response to this scenario that does not involve my causing some slight harm, even if it is only to a madman's feelings.

Lark: Yes, and sometimes my feelings are hurt when I tell a friend an idea that I think is a good one, and she is neutral. It is a very small hurt, and I am embarrassed to admit it, but a part of me always wants other people to love my ideas. Even when we avoid disagreeing with another person, they may be hurt if we are insufficiently enthusiastic supporters.

Corbin: Exactly. I wonder if it is impossible to avoid doing tiny harms. And if it is impossible to avoid doing them, then perhaps we should not interpret the Rede as directing us to avoid them. I do not think the point of the Rede is to urge us to do the impossible.

Lark: There is a fable beloved by the pagans of old about the donkey-owner who tried to please everyone: when he tied his bundle to the donkey's back a passer-by criticized him for making the donkey suffer beneath the load while he walked without a burden, and when he took the bundle on his own back another passer-by criticized him for letting the donkey be lazy. And when he split the bundle between himself and the donkey, another passer-by laughed at him. I was always told that the moral of the story is that you cannot please everybody, so you should not try. I never interpreted the Rede as being so encompassing and all-demanding that it required me to try to please everyone lest I injure their feelings in some tiny way for a brief instant.

Raven: I agree: the Rede cannot demand so much of us. And yet I am not quite comfortable with the idea that the Rede asks us to balance harm and good in a single action and to see as harmless those actions where the good outweighs the harm. First, that is not what the Rede says: as we have observed before, the Rede speaks of '*no* harm' and not 'no harm on balance.' Second, I think you have spotted one problem but ignored another.

Corbin: What problems are those?

Raven: I think you are right that we always do some small harm in every act, and that is a problem for the interpretation of the Rede I suggested before. But the other problem is just the opposite--that if we understand the Rede as allowing us to act freely where our actions cause more good than harm, then we are free to act however we wish in situations where the harm is almost as great as the good.

Corbin: And so?

Raven: Well, let us return to Lark's scenario of the madman who wishes to detonate a nuclear bomb. Can we agree the bomb would cause an almost unimaginable amount of harm?

Corbin: Yes, I think we can agree on that. People would be harmed, and animals would be harmed, and the environment would be harmed. Even those who were not harmed directly might be harmed indirectly. For example, a sheep in Australia might not know or care about a bomb in Toronto, but the sheep farmer might be too distraught by the news to feed and water his sheep according to their usual schedule. And then the sheep would be harmed indirectly.

Raven: Very well. Would you not agree that torturing a single person very slowly to death is a lesser evil than allowing the detonation of a nuclear bomb in a city?

Corbin: I do not know for certain, but I can imagine many people would agree. Almost anything is a lesser evil than the detonation of a nuclear bomb. In fact, the only thing I can imagine that would be a greater evil is the detonation of *two* nuclear bombs.

Raven: Let us assume for the sake of the argument, then, that torturing a single person is a lesser evil than detonating a nuclear bomb. If your interpretation of the Rede is correct, and the Rede merely directs us to balance good and harm, then the Rede would permit us to torture freely the madman who set the bomb.

Corbin: Of course the madman is guilty of doing much harm himself. . . .

Raven: Even so, the principle does not limit itself to hurting only the guilty. Under this interpretation of the Rede, we would be free to torture the madman's innocent baby and kill it, if by doing so we could somehow persuade the madman not to detonate his bomb. For on the whole, there would be more good than harm in torturing an innocent baby to death than to allow a nuclear bomb to be detonated. In fact, I might even interpret the Rede as directing that I *ought* to torture the baby to death, or even a hundred babies, rather than to allow that nuclear bomb to be detonated. For if you balance the painful deaths of a hundred innocent babies against the destruction caused by a nuclear bomb, it would seem that the nuclear bomb is worse.

Lark: I do not want to torture any babies.

Raven: Nor do I. But I hope you see my dilemma. If the Rede bans us from acts that involve any harm whatsoever, then we disobey the Rede constantly because all our actions and inactions involve at least some tiny degree of harm to some creature somewhere. And if the Rede bids us instead weigh the relative harm and good of our actions and inactions, then where we may cause some great good we are permitted also to cause some great harm. I do not want to torture any babies, but how are we to avoid an interpretation of the Rede that permits this?

Dove: Forgive me, but I see another issue.

Lark: Aren't we in enough difficulties already?

Dove: It would seem so! And yet we cannot ignore another alligator merely because we are chin-deep in them already.

Lark: Colorfully put, Dove. Though the anatomical part in that figure of speech isn't usually the chin.

Dove: I was trying to avoid crudity.

Lark: Congratulations, you succeeded. But back to our discussion -- what new alligator do you want to tackle?

Dove: Well, I am wondering about the problem of knowing whether we are causing harm.

Lark: What do you mean?

Dove: It is this: Up to now, we have been saying that we harm the world around us by breathing, or by eating, or by taking a dog to a vet, or even by hurting the feelings of a madman with a nuclear bomb. But we have not yet asked ourselves whether we are capable of knowing the full consequences of our actions.

Raven: Well, I think it is clear we cannot.

Dove: Why do you say that, Raven?

Raven: Because I can see only a few steps ahead of me. If I plan a surprise birthday party for my friend, I can imagine her surprise and happiness. That seems like a good thing to me and one in which I do no harm. But I do not know what my friend would have done if I had not planned a surprise birthday party for her. Perhaps she would have been lonely and unhappy and have gone to the movies where she would have met the future love of her life. In that case, I would have deprived her of a relationship that would have meant much more to her than my surprise birthday party. Yet I could not have foreseen the harm I did her.

Dove: Missed opportunities are something we cannot know about, for if we foresaw them they would not be missed. But there is another possibility as well. You might plan a surprise birthday party for your friend, but when she cuts her birthday cake she slices her finger open with the knife, and the cut becomes infected and her hand has to be amputated. When you planned her birthday party, you knew that she would be surprised and you hoped she would be happy, but you did not foresee that she would end up with an amputated hand because of the birthday cake you baked for her.

Raven: But it would be wrong to let the remote possibility of disaster stop me from throwing a surprise birthday party for my best friend.

Dove: I agree, and I would say we cannot live our lives by diligently attempting to avoid unlikely disasters. It is always possible that when I try to cross a street, there will be an approaching bus with brakes that failed an instant before I stepped onto the pavement. But I cross streets anyway.

Still, even if we choose to ignore remote dangers, I think we must admit that they exist. Sometimes people crossing the street are run over by buses or other vehicles. And therefore, I think we must admit that sometimes we intend to do a friend a good action but we end up harming him. But what does this mean for an understanding of the Rede? Should we never try to do a good deed because our inability to foresee the future means that our good deed may turn out to hurt others?

Robin: Obviously not! What a bizarre situation that would be: by being so determined to do good, we can do nothing at all!

Dove: I completely agree that such an understanding of the Rede would be bizarre. And yet it is much like the problems we have seen with the Rede already. It seems as if 'no harm,' strictly interpreted, bans every possible act that a Wiccan can perform. And yet if we try to avoid this problem by allowing some degree of harm, we are put in the position of trying to decide how much harm can be permitted. I have a feeling that we are on the wrong track and that this is not what the Rede intends.

Corbin: Wait! I wonder if we have fully grasped the meaning of the Rede in our discussion up to this point?

Lark: What do you mean?

Corbin: Does the Rede actually bid us to do no harm?

Lark: Well, yes . . . doesn't it?

Raven: I thought that much was clear. Weren't we only debating what 'harm' was and what the Rede applied to -- animals and spirits and plants and natural features as well as humans?

Corbin: But if you look closely, the Rede only directs us as to what we may do if we are causing no harm. It says nothing as to what we may do if we are causing harm to others, and it is also silent as to whether we may ever choose to cause harm.

Raven: No!

Corbin: I apologize, but I truly believe this is what the Rede says.

Raven: Please explain.

Corbin: What I mean is this. The Rede states, doesn't it, that we may do as we will if we do no harm to others?

Raven: It does. Of course we have been debating exactly what 'others' may be here, and what 'harm' may include.

Corbin: Well, if I say 'I will visit the park tomorrow if it does not rain,' and on the next day after I have made this remark it does not rain, then I must visit the park or have broken my word. Right?

Raven: Yes, I think that is right. Either you visit the park or you have broken your promise.

Corbin: But what if it does rain on the next day? Have I said what I will do if it *does* rain?

Raven: I am not sure.

Dove: I think I see what you mean, Corbin. You have said what you will do if it does *not* rain, but you have not said what you will do if it *does*. And because you have not said anything at all about what you will do if it rains, you have not made any promise. And if you have not made a promise, then of course you cannot break it.

Corbin: Exactly, Dove. I have not said anything about what I will do if the day is rainy. I could stay at home and read a book, or I could call friends and we could go to a movie. I could even go to the park, because I have not promised I will *not* go the park if it rains. I have promised only that I will go there if it *does not* rain.

Dove: Let me see if I can guess where you are aiming. If the statement 'I will visit the park if it does not rain' only promises what you will do if it does not rain and is silent as to what you will do if it does rain, then the Rede is the same -- it permits us to do as we will if we harm none, but it is silent as to what we may do if we cause harm by our actions.

Corbin: You have stated my thought admirably, Dove. The Rede does not direct us to do no harm, nor does it tell us what we should do if we believe our actions will cause some harm. It merely says we are free to follow our own will if we will cause no harm.

Raven: But wait a moment, because I think I have seen something you missed.

Corbin: What might that be?

Raven: Let us return to your example. You have said that you have only spoken of what you will do --

namely, go to the park -- if it does not rain, and that you have been completely silent as to what you will do if it rains.

Corbin: That is true.

Raven: Is it? Have you really made no promise about what you will do if it rains?

Corbin: I have made no statement regarding what I will do if it rains.

Raven: But by not making a statement in a context where you might easily have done so, have you not indicated an intention? When you say 'If it does not rain I will visit the park,' are you not implying that you will only visit the park if it does not rain?

Corbin: I am not sure I follow you.

Raven: Let me give you an example. Suppose I say: 'If you walk heavily and cause the souffle that I am baking to fall, I will be very angry,' am I not implying that I will *not* be angry if you walk softly and my souffle turns out perfectly?

Corbin: Perhaps. . . .

Raven: Or here is another example. Suppose I hear a child screaming for the pleasure of hearing her own voice at top decibel, and I say to her: 'If you don't stop your screaming right now, you will not get ice cream for dessert.' She stops her screaming. Have I not implicitly promised to give her ice cream for dessert?

Lark: I think you have.

Raven: Feel free to ask your children or your younger siblings, any one of you, if you doubt me. They will all say without exception that you have promised them ice cream if they are quiet. They will not agree with you, Corbin, that you have only promised 'no ice cream if the screaming continues.'

Lark: It seems to me that some statements are promises that do not imply anything about matters where they are technically silent, and some statements are promises that do have implications. I would agree with Corbin and Dove that the statement 'I will go to the park if it does not rain' makes no promise as to your behavior when it does rain, but I would also agree with you, Raven, that 'If you don't stop your screaming you will not get ice cream for dessert' implies a promise that the child will get ice cream if she stops screaming. So perhaps there are two kinds of statements, one kind which makes an implied promise and one kind which does not.

Dove: The important question, then, would seem to be: which kind of statement is the Rede? Is Corbin correct that it implies nothing if harm will occur? Or is Raven correct that it implies something if harm will occur? And if the Rede does imply we should do something in the event that we do harm, what is that 'something' that we should do?

Raven: Or avoid doing.

Dove: I stand corrected, Raven. I should have said: 'what is that "something" we should do or refrain from doing'?

Corbin: I stand my ground and believe the Rede is silent as to what we should or should not do in cases where harm to others may occur.

Lark: But we have already observed that by breathing and moving around and eating we inevitably do some harm to other beings, even if they are only plants or single-celled organisms.

Corbin: Yes, that is true.

Lark: And we have also agreed that 'harm' includes many things, not only killing and maiming but also

injuring a person's feelings.

Corbin: Yes.

Lark: But then the Rede gives us no guidance and means nothing, because it says 'an ye harm none,' and we always do some tiny harm. To return to your earlier example, it is like saying 'I will visit the park if it does not rain,' but it always rains.

Corbin: I see your point, though I do not like it.

Lark: Neither do I, and yet we must answer as honestly as possible those questions we ask ourselves. If the Rede can never be applied to our actions because we cannot act without causing some slight harm -- or at least we must be uncertain as to whether we will cause some slight harm -- then the Rede will be useless to us. Like a fork without prongs or a knife without a blade, we will not be able to put it to any purpose in our lives.

Corbin: But then why do we have the Rede?

Lark: That is a good point, and I see only two answers.

Corbin: What are they?

Lark: The first possible answer is that we should not have the Rede, any more than we should have a rule telling us 'You may do as you will on every day that the sun rises in the west' or 'You may follow your heart when it snows on the Equator in summer.' There is no point in giving people permission to act only in a situation that will never happen, and that is arguably what the Rede does.

Corbin: But generations before us have believed in the Rede and taken it to their hearts as a wise rule.

Lark: Indeed, it is hard to think that so many people may be wrong, but we must contemplate that possibility, however unwelcome, if we are to seek out truth. However, there is another possibility, as I have mentioned.

Corbin: What is that? I hope it is a happier option.

Lark: It is. Dove has already said there are two ways to interpret the Rede. If the first way proves unpalatable, perhaps the second way will work better.

Corbin: Very well. Let us look at the second way to interpret the Rede.

Lark: The second way was suggested by Raven, who claims the Rede implies where it does not explicitly state. We have not yet considered exactly what the Rede may imply, however, and obviously that is a question of some importance.

Raven: I would suggest the Rede implies we may *not* do as we will if we would cause harm.

Dove: So your interpretation of the Rede is: 'If no one and nothing is harmed, you may do as you will, but if someone or something is harmed, you are not free to do as you will?'

Raven: Yes, that seems right.

Corbin: But I have a problem with that interpretation. In fact, I have several problems with it.

Dove: What would they be?

Corbin: First, they are the problems we saw before when we talked about 'no harm' -- it seems impossible to avoid doing some harm, no matter how tiny and brief, with every action we take. But second, if we always do some harm by any action we may take, the Rede never applies to any of our actions, and so the first half of the statement -- 'If no one and nothing is harmed, do as you will' -- is useless as a guide to our actions. According to Raven, there is a second, implied rule hidden within the

first. That may still be meaningful to us. But the implied rule states 'If someone or something will be harmed, you are not free to do as you will.' And -- forgive me! -- that is not the sort of message that I expect from a Wiccan circle.

Dove: Why not?

Corbin: Because it is depressing and tedious. And also because it is obvious. Everyone knows it is wrong to cause harm just for the sake of one's personal pleasure. I would not leave my puppy tied up without food and water all day just because I wanted to have a marathon movie session without interruption. But I don't think this is because I am a Wiccan. I believe that no one -- not just Wiccans, but Christians and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and everyone else on this earth -- would think he or she should leave a puppy tied up all day without food and water. Every sane person who is not a monster can figure this out. If this is all the Rede means, then it has no special insight. Wicca would have no need of this Rede, since it would tell us nothing we did not learn about the same time we were mastering the art of toddling and eating solid food. The Rede would be reduced to nothing more than a very basic lecture on moral responsibility.

Dove: But if we are being honest, as Lark suggested, and considering every possibility that arises, surely we must consider the possibility that the Rede *is* what you say: a depressing, tedious, basic, and obvious lecture on moral responsibility.

Corbin: But I cannot believe that. In my heart, I know that is not true. I have been inspired by the Rede. Contemplating it has given me hope and joy and a sense of freedom. I have imagined myself as harming none, acting freely. I have followed the Rede -- or I have thought I followed it -- many times in my life. I agree we should contemplate the possibility that the Rede means little or nothing, but I do not think that possibility is the true one. Let us explore this path, for we should have the courage to investigate all approaches, even the ones we loathe. But as we explore let us also trust we will find it a dead end.

Dove: Very well; let us continue our exploration, though we hope we explore this route in vain. But where have we gone wrong?

Lark: Perhaps it is not so much that we have gone wrong, as that we have not yet gone far enough.

Dove: What do you mean, Lark? You give me hope.

Lark: Let us assume that the second interpretation is a valid one. But is it the only valid one?

Dove: Ah! Are you imagining a *third* interpretation?

Lark: Why not? Perhaps there is a third interpretation -- and a fourth and a fifth, for all I know -- that would be more cheerful and inspiring. I do not say the second interpretation is wrong, mind you. Corbin has objected that it is depressing, and I would agree with him. But I believe that a depressing interpretation may lie beside a happier one, and both be valid. Rather than seeking a means to reject the second interpretation, let us explore and see whether there are yet other valid approaches.

Dove: I am all ears, Lark. What ideas do you have?

Lark: How have Wiccans interpreted the Rede in the past? Perhaps this tradition may give us insight.

Dove: Well, they have not always sat idle merely because they might cause harm by their actions. We have all heard the story how Witches worked to prevent Hitler's forces from conquering England during the Second World War. Surely they harmed others then, as we have defined harm. The English were saved, but many Germans died who might otherwise have lived.

Raven: Yes, and let us also look at the Old Laws that Gerald Gardner passed down to his Covens, where he wrote, 'You may use the Art for your own advantage, or for the advantage of the Craft, only if

you be sure you harm none. But ever let the Coven debate the matter at length. Only if all are satisfied that none may be harmed may the Art be used. If it is not possible to achieve your ends one way without harming any, perchance the aim may be achieved by acting in a different way, so as to harm none.' Though we have spoken of how it may be impossible to act without causing any harm at all to anyone or anything, Gardner apparently had a different understanding of what it meant to 'harm none.'

I would say: Gardner saw the Rede as directing us to harm no person, but he did not seem to concern himself greatly with the harm we might do to animals or natural features of our world. We might be more enlightened than Gardner in this respect.

Lark: So if we look to the Wiccan tradition, Wiccans of past eras have interpreted the Rede to mean that we should do the least harm possible when we act for our own interests. Of course, their interpretation need not be the one we like best, for as we have already said, it is possible to misinterpret the Rede.

Corbin: Would it be very wrong of me to say that if your motto is 'Do no harm,' you're a doctor, not a Witch?

Lark: Yes, Corbin, it would. Please restrain yourself.

Robin: I disagree with you all; for me the Rede is different. It is precious to me. When I hear the Rede, I am not instructed but inspired. I do not hear a strict command that I must follow or else beg Their pardon for my inevitable failure to achieve Their impossible injunction. Instead I hear a Mystery in which I rejoice to participate.

The Rede, I believe, is set to us as an ideal. As some have argued here, we may not achieve it in our lives, for when can we be certain that our actions cause no harm whatsoever to anyone at all, anything at all? But we may still dream of this.

And we may say, 'Such would be a perfect world.' If we knew how to avoid all harm, we would follow our desires and act without causing it. More: it is our nature to desire those things that cause no harm, for who among us is perverse enough to want to injure others? Perfect love and perfect trust are within the Circle, and they exist because we know one another's goodness and desire to do no harm.

The Rede points toward this ideal, and though we may never reach it, I treasure the Rede for suggesting to me this perfect world. The Rede exists to point the way, and not to command that our feet always be firmly on the path.

Indeed, when we walk, one foot leaves the path with every step, and comes back to it again. And I see this as Their hint to us that we move forward only by entrusting a part of ourselves to the uncertainty of the air. When our feet are both on the ground, we have great comfort of certainty but no progress. The Wiccan must risk something to gain something; she must lift her foot briefly from the path to continue along it. So the Rede is not something to dwell safely inside, but the path the Wiccan must touch briefly and in gentle rhythm as she travels.

I rejoice when I hear the Rede, even if I do not follow it perfectly. It is the distant goal on which I set my sight, the goal to which I hope to draw ever closer. I do not want the Rede to be a rule that bars me from all action merely because I can only satisfy it imperfectly. I do not want a Rede that suggests I may never act as I wish because all doing involves harm. I want it to inspire my actions and to guide me toward my goal of a world in which I can follow my heart's wishes with unspoiled joy and the knowledge that I have caused no harm.

What would such a world be? What would the world be like if we could move and speak and act without harming any? Would it not be a place of almost inconceivable happiness? The Rede is the signpost on my path to this world. If I never reach it, at least I will have progressed somewhat toward

it. So I wish to view the Rede; so mote it be.

Dove: I am moved. Yet we cannot always easily proceed from 'I want it to be so' to 'It is so.' You may want the Rede to say this, but does it?

Robin: It does to me.

Dove: So?

Eyrie: Let the meditation of this Circle on this topic be concluded here, lest further discussion lead to quarrelling rather than insight. My thanks to all who have contributed to this conversation.

All: You are welcome.

FINIS

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