Eight

Sociability, solidarity and surplus

with C.M. Marsh

That throughout the world in those countries sometimes described as industrial societies many millions of people go to work for eight, ten, or twelve hours each day, five or six days a week, forty eight or fifty weeks in the year, year in and year out for perhaps fifty years is, or so it would often appear, utterly unremarkable. If, however, a number of people acting in concert stop work or meet to declare that they are not going to go to their usual workplace, this will be remarked and may indeed attract widespread attention and discussion in newspapers and on television. Likewise, if an employer discharges a substantial number of employees at one time or a government department reports that there are a large number of people who are unable to find work, this may also attract comment, locally and nationally. Employment, it seems, is not news, unemployment and strikes are. The most cursory examination of the matter, however, suggests that the reputable questions 'why are people out of work?' and 'why do people go on strike?' have a thoroughly disreputable identical twin–'why do people work?' Perhaps all questions of this kind will appear altogether too indelicate, undisciplined, and simple-minded, especially if we suspect that there is no set of statements which could possibly constitute a simple, comprehensive answer to them. Even to array the possible senses in which such questions may be understood would require the services of a compulsive enumerator and a dedicated taxonomist. Nevertheless, people continue to make these enquiries, among them social scientists. Social scientists, indeed, appear to have no option but to ask them in some form or other. These questions have been written into the definitions of the objects and procedures which constitute political economy, social anthropology, sociology as disciplines of social inquiry.

For our own purposes, we shall treat as given the operation of processes in industrial societies ordered on market principles which constrain most people to enter the labour market in search of paid employment. In other words we are assuming the operation of a

capitalist mode of production. We are not, however, assuming that a stage has already been reached in which the 'various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level'[1]. On the contrary we shall suppose that within the general constraints of the employment relationship there are substantial variations in the conditions under which people live and work. It is with one sub-set of those variations and their possible consequences that we are especially concerned, variations connected with what have been variously described as occupational communities or occupational cultures. We take these terms to refer to processes and structures which are conceived of as intermediate between the endless stream of transactions between individuals which constitute everyday social life and the level of historical generality to which such terms as society and mode of production apply. We leave as an open question the extent to which they can be rigorously derived either from the analysis of the interactions of individuals and interpersonal relations or from the examination of an epoch or mode of production as a whole.

One variant of the question 'Why do people work?' which has appeared repeatedly in studies of industrial societies during the past three decades is investigation of the extent to which people profess themselves satisfied with the kinds of work they do and the importance which they themselves attach to their work. Variation in patterns of responses to questions of this kind has prompted further inquiry into the possible sources of such satisfactions and, more especially, attempts to discover the conditions which are presumed to give rise to the variations. One such condition may be membership of an occupational community. If we are prepared to suppose that occupational and industrial variations in reported satisfaction with work, and indeed much else, have been established, it then becomes possible to explore somewhat more directly the extent to which those employed in different industries and occupations do constitute some kind of definable occupational community and to consider the possible consequences of such communities for other sets of activities and relationships.

Let us now disperse the fog of anonymity. It is Blauner who remarks that 'levels of work satisfaction are higher in those industries and in those kinds of jobs in which workers make up an occupational community.' He proposes three criteria for recognising such communities:

1. 'The essential feature of an occupational community is that workers in their off hours socialize more with persons in their own line of work than with a cross section of occupational types.'
2. '...participants 'talk shop' in their off-hours.'
3. 'Occupational communities are little worlds in themselves. For its members the occupation itself is the reference group; its standards of behaviour, its system of status and rank, guide conduct.'

Blauner further identifies two sets of circumstances in which occupational communities are likely to develop, spatial isolation and peculiar hours of work, and one in which they are not: 'Occupational communities rarely exist among urban factory workers.' [2]

These criteria are, it seems, applicable either singly or in various combinations. The first appears most readily adapted for empirical social research especially survey research, and to quantitative treatment. Questions corresponding to Blauner's first criterion which are usually asked contain either or both of two possibly significant modifications; a reference to 'friends' or 'close friends', and a specification of where the interaction takes-place. The second criterion 'shop talk', has less often been used, possibly because it is less readily convertible to questions suitable for survey research. Information on this issue does, however, appear in studies which draw on direct observation and participation. The third criterion is more complex, and possibly combines a number of elements, not all of which need necessarily be present simultaneously. Thus it would seem entirely possible for sets of occupations to have a well-defined 'system of status and rank' – this is presumably true by definition in bureaucratised settings – without thereby constituting 'little worlds in themselves'. It is also not entirely clear if Blauner supposes these 'little worlds' to extend beyond the limits of the workplace. In the absence of an explicit statement that they do, we shall assume that they may but need not.

Studies of a variety of industrial settings in America, Britain, and elsewhere have suggested the presence of distinctive occupational cultures, notably among miners, dockers, fishermen, printers and steelworkers, but also among lorry drivers, railwaymen and shipbuilding workers. These studies meet Blauner's criteria to varying degrees. Dennis, Henriques, and Slaughter's study of miners in 'Ashton' and the studies of Hull fishermen by Duncan and Tunstall match the criteria

exactly; and if it is supposed that to qualify as an occupational community the social relations among workers must match all three criteria unequivocally, coal mining and trawl fishing may be unique. For most purposes, however, workers in four other industrial settings also meet the three criteria: dockworkers, railwaymen, shipbuilding workers and steel workers.

Cannon's study of compositors and Sykes's study of trade union organization in the printing trades suggest that social relations among printers meet Blauner's third criterion exactly. If this was the sole criterion to be used, printers would constitute the example of an occupational community parexcellence.[3] It seems entirely possible, however, that printers do not meet either of the other two criteria. Both Cannon and Sykes provide detailed analyses of the social relations of the workplace. Cannon also examines the extent to which the influence of the occupational community extends beyond the ambit of the workplace. However, apart from a passing reference which Cannon makes to the possibilities of meeting workmates outside the workplace, the evidence in these two studies that printers commonly engage in the kind of activity and relationships which meet the first two of Blauner's criteria is slight and equivocal. There is no evidence from these or other studies of any marked tendencies among printers towards residential propinquity, nor of any pronounced overlap between the activities and relationships of the workplace and those undertaken outside. On the other hand, Cannon does provide evidence of a substantial conformity between norms and values at the workplace and outside and also draws attention to expressions of solidarity with the working class and the labour movement generally. It is possible therefore that the printing industry provides an example of a distinct type of occupational community. This would consist of the occupations and institutions peculiar to one industry, would be largely concerned with the technical and social organisation of work and with the maintenance of the custom and practice which this organisation embodies, but, qua community, would be manifest only at the workplace.

In contrast to the situation which may obtain in printing, Hollowell's study suggests that social relations among lorry drivers may meet all Blauner's criteria and to that extent constitute an occupational community. However, this may be an occupational community which, qua community, is less likely to affect the other activities and relationships of its members outside the immediate ambit of the occupation and the

workplace. It may also be an occupational community which is less likely to give rise to ideologies which would facilitate and justify concerted attempts to maintain any existing advantages which an occupation enjoys, or make good the disadvantages from which the occupation is thought to suffer. If so, it is possible that lorry drivers provide an example of another distinct type of occupational community, one which exhibits recognizable patterns of sociability, shop talk, and of differentiation within the occupation, but which is largely ineffective in exercising any collective measure of control over the organisation of work or in affecting the overall situation of the particular occupation in question.

A cursory examination of other studies of workplaces in Britain suggests the possibility that occupational communities vary in other respects which appear relevant to the investigation of the connections between occupation and, in particular, social stratification. For instance the social relations of the workers in the waterproof garment industry which Cunnison and Lupton describe appear to meet all three of Blauner's criteria but some of the most important values and standards of comparison associated with the occupational group appear to originate and to be sustained outside the workplace and then, as it were, projected upon the social relations of work.[4]

Put more generally, differences in the conditions to be found in local labour markets alone are sufficient to suggest that even if the various industrial settings in which occupational communities have been observed resemble one another in some respects, they will differ markedly in others. These variations may also be found within the industries concerned, although it is often easier to surmise about this problem than to bring published evidenceto bear on it. The circumstances of dock workers in the Manchester docks or of miners in 'Ashton' in the early 1950s were not necessarily identical with those of other dockers or miners, nor do they necessarily obtain unchanged in the 1970s. Inspection of these resemblances and variations may however draw attention to important differences between these and other kinds of industrial settings not so far considered which are also relevant to the study of political action and of stratification.

With the possible exception of road transport, the industries in which occupational communities have been observed were established in something like their present form during the nineteenth century, and in the case of printing appreciably earlier. Many of the elements of the

technical and social organization of work observed in these industries in the second half of the twentieth Century, including the workplaces themselves and even some of the machinery in use, are identical with those of a century before. It is thus possible for several generations of men to have been employed in the same industry, if not necessarily the same occupation, and in most of these industries a high proportion of new recruits have been sons of those already employed, or previously employed in the industry. This may facilitate, though not necessitate, the transmission of a variety of traditions and the formation of a core of workers who have undergone some kind of anticipatory socialisation in the elements of an occupational culture and are therefore somewhat more likely to remain the bearers of such. It is plausible to suppose that such circumstances are more likely to engender occupational community than those which bring together for the first time a heterogeneous labour force which lacks a core of workers who have already undergone some form of anticipatory socialisation.

These industries also provide the possibility of spending an entire life in the same occupation or sub-set of inter-related occupations. At the same time,with the notable exceptions of printing and shipbuilding, the acquisition of the specialised knowledge and skills often required in these occupations has not been accompanied by apprenticeship or other generally recognised forms of training. Consequently skills, knowledge, and seniority are rarely transferable from one industry to another, or in some industries from one workplace to another. Where these circumstances are accompanied by high levels of earnings and more especially by earnings appreciably higher than those which could be obtained by leaving the industry, it seems likely that a fairly stable labour force will emerge, itself one of the possible preconditions of the development of occupational communities.

Between, and very possibly within, the industrial settings which we are considering there are appreciable variations in the extent of state control and intervention, in the size of economic enterprises and of operational units, and in methods of payment, levels of earnings and security of employment. These variations in turn appear to be related to the extent to which the effective operational unit in the industry is a small clearly defined group of individuals responsible for deciding exactly how particular tasks are to be performed, for instance the crew of a fishing vessel at sea or a lorry driver on the road compared with, say, furnace crews in a steel works. They may also be related to variations

in opportunities for promotion, in the chances of becoming self-employed within the same industry, and in the ways in which competition between individual workers and groups is evaluated and regulated. In particular, it is plausible to suppose that 'shop talk' will be most frequently observed where earnings are related to some form of individual or group piece-rates, and at the same time high levels of earnings depend upon a combination of effort with skill in solving technical problems under conditions which are not fully subject to the joint control of workers and management, and which often involve considerable risks. Coal-mining and fishing, especially when compared with, say, printing, are cases in point.

There are also pronounced differences between the various industrial settings in the conduct of industrial relations, the importance of trade unions, and the involvement of workers in the labour movement. In coal mining, the relations of miners with coal owners and colliery managers and more recently with the NCB have often been marked by a degree of overt and sustained antagonism rarely matched in other industries in Britain. Miners have also been especially active in sponsoring candidates for Parliamentary election in coalfield constituencies. Local branches of the NUM appear to be intricately involved in occupational communities of miners. In printing, to imagine the removal of the Chapel and the multifarious activities associated with it would leave virtually nothing of the occupational communities which have been described, whereas in fishing the sudden disappearance of the Fishing section of the TGWU would leave the occupational community virtually intact.

Considerations such as these suggest that it may be appropriate to seek for variations not only in the different situations of those workers who are in occupational communities compared with those who are not, but also among the different kinds of occupational communities which there appear to be. To sketch classifications of occupational communities would lie outside the scope of present discussion. However some further examination of two possible components of such classifications, both deriving from Blauner's criteria, is relevant to our present purposes. These are sociability, an item to which considerable attention has been paid in a number of studies of workers and the workplace, and solidarity.

In some discussions of work and community, sociability and solidarity are used as more or less interchangeable terms. Alternatively, it

may be supposed that solidarity is a necessary consequence of sociability. At all events, it is a not uncommon practice in sociological investigations to ask people if they have friends, or sometimes good friends, at work and also how often and where they meet them outside the workplace. These kinds of questions do presumably yield indispensable information about friendships and interpersonal relationships. Thus such information seems wholly appropriate to the study of life styles and, more generally, of who associates with whom in everyday life. Interlocking networks of friends and acquaintances would certainly appear to form an important part of the life of any community, however defined. Friends presumably play some part, and possibly a crucial part, in the development of personal standards of comparison used in evaluating a wide range of situations and events. Friends are likely to share many opinions, beliefs and ideas about society and the ways in which it is ordered. Friendship ordinarily implies a willingness to associate on equal terms, and groups of friends may thereby comprise the primary units of status groups in a Weberian sense, and of social class as Schumpeter and T.H. Marshall employ that term. Moreover, the closer the approximation of social interaction to Simmel's pure sociability and the more highly it becomes prized for its own sake, the lower the instrumental and adaptive content of the interaction in relation to other sets of activities.[5]

Solidarity, as that term has been employed not only in sociological discussion but in the social sciences and political commentary more generally, possesses a wider range of connotations than sociability. Among these connotations Durkheim's employment of the term to apply to cooperation between unlike individuals and, more importantly, between groups which are unlike is an established part of sociological usage and it is improbable that when historians and others refer to the solidarity of the working class they should thereby pre-suppose close friendships between millions of people. Where sociability is often continuously manifested and reciprocity not unduly postponed, solidarity may be intermittent and contingent in its manifestations, a readiness to stand by and support other individuals and groups if and when the need arises rather than a wish to associate with them frequently. Interpersonal solidarity at the workplace may only appear in casual exchanges. Nevertheless this may be sufficient to sustain fairly effective measures for the regulation of output. Outside the workplace, the pattern of drinking and talking which plays so prominent a part in descriptions of the social life of miners and of

fishermen may reflect the solidarities outside working hours of men who during working hours pursue the same occupations rather than the sociability of close friends. The distinction which Goldthorpe and his colleagues, following the cues of their respondents in Luton, draw between friends and mates may represent fairly exactly in interpersonal terms the distinction between sociability and solidarity. If expressions of solidarity may be intermittent and contingent, it follows that intermittent attendance at trade union meetings when matters of immediate interest arise and a certain scepticism towards the intentions of those who immerse themselves in union affairs is by no means incompatible with solidarity.

People need not like one another greatly in order to cooperate sufficiently to complete the tasks which the constraints of their common employment require. Indeed when the occasion demands, solidarity may be exhibited among those who otherwise greatly dislike one another. The solidarities of the workplace do not depend on asking friends from work round for Sunday afternoon tea. Conversely the more intimate forms of sociability outside the workplace are perhaps less likely to be observed among those who are constrained to exhibit some form of solidarity at work. The admittedly imperfect information available may with equal plausibility be construed as supporting any one of three hypotheses:

that the intensity of sociability varies directly with the intensity of solidarity;

that the intensity of sociability varies independently of the intensity of solidarity;

that the intensity of sociability varies inversely with the intensity of solidarity.

Irrespective of the merits of these hypotheses, the term solidarity is commonly applied not only to interpersonal relationships but also to activities, to individuals and to groups which fall outside the range of direct personal acquaintance and thereby implies a greater emphasis upon the instrumental and adaptive components of action in relation to other groups. Especially in the political and ideological senses of the term, the solidarity of a group is manifest in its opposition to another group, or in its support for one group in opposition to another. Industrial action by one group of workers in support of others in another industry and another part of the country is unlikely to occur simply because they are all good friends.

The suggested distinction between sociability and solidarity by no means implies that to the extent that occupational communities exhibit solidarity at all, itself a matter for empirical investigation, they necessarily exhibit class solidarity, still less that the conscious pursuit of common interests is a manifestation of class consciousness as that term has been generally understood. Indeed much of the information relating to occupational communities can be more readily construed as evidence of occupational solidarity and trade union consciousness. The development of pronounced solidarities within occupational communities could conceivably inhibit the emergence of class solidarities. Certainly there seem to be no grounds for supposing that occupational communities necessarily engender class solidarity. The strikes of British coal-miners and dockers in 1972, despite the support which the former received from some other workers, appear much more like collective action which the workers directly concerned undertook in defence of their own immediate economic interests than concerted action undertaken on behalf of a class.

The uses of the term solidarity are sufficiently uncontentious but not, we think, the term sociability. For Simmel:

> the impulse to sociability distils, as it were, out of the realities of social life the pure essence of association, of the associative process as a value and a satisfaction. It thereby constitutes what we call sociability in the narrower sense...
>
> ...Since sociability in its pure form has no ulterior end, no content, no result outside itself, it is oriented completely about personalities. Since nothing but the satisfaction of the impulse to sociability – although with a resonance left over – is to be gained, the process remains, in its conditions as in its results, strictly limited to its personal bearers.

Even in its ideal form, Simmel's sociability is not far removed from Kantian justice and interpersonal exchanges.

> 'Sociability creates, if one will, an ideal sociological world, for in it – so say the enunciated principles – the pleasure of the individual is always contingent upon the joy of others; here, by definition, no one can have his satisfaction at the cost of contrary experiences on the part of others. In other forms of association such lack of reciprocity is excluded only by the ethical imperatives which govern them but not by their own immanent nature.

> ...If association itself is interaction, it appears in its stylized form when it goes on among equals... Inasmuch as sociability is the abstraction of association – an abstraction of the character of art or of play – it demands the purest, most transparent most engaging kind of interaction – that among equals.

Applied to a group of colliers coming off shift or to a hairdressing salon full of housewives under the driers, some of Simmel's turns of phrase may appear a little high-flown but not, on that account, inapposite. Observations of such gatherings are among the commonplaces of social anthropology and sociology, as of everyday life, but the significance attached to them and the conditions for and consequences of sociability are by no means invariably those which Simmel proposes.

Simmel, and to pursue our sibilant path, Sahlins, both identify surplus as a condition of sociability, and sociability as interaction which produces no surplus. In industrial societies surplus time and effort are necessarily required if workers are to engage in sociability during working hours at theworkplace, a surplus which can only be appropriated by making inroads into the production of a very different kind of surplus. Otherwise, they will have to await the 'off hours'.

For Blau, no prior condition for sociability appears necessary. Sociability is the omnipresent but unexamined alternative to competing for power and status. In contrast to Simmel, whom he cites on many other issues but not on this, Blau largely concentrates his analysis of the arts and crafts of social interaction upon the emergence of power – and status.

> Exchange transactions and power relations, in particular, constitute social forces that must be investigated in their own right, not merely in terms of the norms that limit and the values that reinforce them, to arrive at an understanding of the dynamics of social structures.

It is difficult to resist the inference that in this undertaking, like many of his predecessors who have taken exchange and distribution as the starting point of their analysis, Blau is postulating 'a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham.'

To suppose that social life consists of a stream of exchanges, prestations, or transactions does not however entail the use of proposi-

tions about exchange as the necessary starting point for analysis. Homans commences with propositions about the actors (or as he prefers to call them, men), Bailey with the rules of the game, Barth, when it is appropriate, with contracts of employment. Of these the mode of analysis which Barth proposes appears best suited to our purposes and we can try to indicate why this is so by attempting to sketch an alternative to it, if only because imitation has its part to play in the study of social life.[6]

Simplifying to the point of caricature, the crew which Barth describes act as if they had never put to sea before. More to the point, perhaps, they act as if they had never before put to sea in a Norwegian seine netter in search of herring. For the purpose of Barth's analysis, this may be an entirely apposite supposition and we may enquire into the possible consequences of varying it. Let us suppose instead that the skipper, the netboss, and some of the fishermen have put to sea before after the herring, though not perhaps altogether in the same vessel. The crews of these vessels come from a number of small settlements in which most adult men know or know of one another, especially if they engage in fishing for some part of the year. Many are already linked to one another by ties of kinship, friendship, and hostility. They know too much about one another to engage in impression management, at least in its simpler forms. They have grown up and live in a society in which many people set a high value on treating others as equals in social relationships. Apart from the skipper there are other men aboard who have skippers' tickets in their pockets, men keen to learn everything they can from successful skippers whom they may one day hope to succeed and supplant, if their rivals don't beat them to it. An action, any action may have remote, unforeseeable, disadvantageous consequences unless it is converted into a contribution to sociability and thereby rendered inconsequential. Fishing is highly competitive and, on occasions, highly dangerous – the two are not entirely unrelated. Solidarity, not sociability, takes one middle-aged man into the sea to aid another who has gone overboard in a suddenly choppy sea. The culture of an occupational community includes, among much else, customary procedures for converting social action into sociability, indifference into solidarity, antagonism into cooperation. There may, however, be one process from which these sets of activities, relationships and values, together with an explanation of the conduct of the men on the bridge could be ultimately derived.

The exigencies of the technical and social organisation of fishing are such that there is inevitably a period of time when one part of the means of production (the fishing vessel and its gear) are in search of the other part (the uncaught fish). Until they are united production cannot begin. In the meantime, the owner of the fishing vessel has to transport surplus labourers to the rest of the means of production, surplus labourers in the sense that they are not necessary for the purpose of sailing the vessel from one place to another although they are very necessary once fishing commences. The skipper/owner of the vessel however is not engaged in merchant shipping or holiday cruising. He, just as much as his contracted employees, is obliged to wait until they are all able to commence fishing, thereby instituting the 'sort of exchanges between capital and labour upon which capitalistic production, or the wages system, is founded, and which must constantly result in reproducing the working man as working man, and the capitalist as a capitalist.'

We indicated near the outset of our discussion that we did not expect to provide a simple and comprehensive answer to the question 'Why do people work?', any more than those authors whose works we have cited claim to have answers to comparable questions. We are by no means sure that our discussion has contributed even self-clarification in the applicability of the concepts sociability, solidarity, and surplus to the study of social life. We may console ourselves with the reflection that if the study of social life is, like much else in social life, a process of trial and error, then we may at least have contributed some errors, and perhaps now see the error of our ways. Our resolve to mend our ways awaits the conviction that there already exists a sufficient surplus of errors to sustain sociability.

Notes

Introduction

1 A version of this paper was published in Bulmer, M. (ed) (1975) *Working Class Images of Society*, London, RKP.

2 Callinicos, A. (1989) *Against Postmodernism*, London, Polity, p151.

One

1 Parsons, T. (1949) *Essays on Sociological Theory*, New York, Free Press.

Two

1 The study was carried out between 1959 and 1962 and in the municipal Borough of Leigh by W Watson, J Grange and myself, from the Department of Social Anthropology and Sociology, Manchester. For much of this time colleagues from the Department of Social Medicine and of Psychiatry were also engaged on research in the town. Grange and I lived in the town for 18 months apiece. Our main sources of information were; direct observation; descriptions and statements of informants; published and unpublished documents; and interviews with a 1 in 50 random sample of persons on the electoral register.The interviewing of this sample was undertaken in the summer and early autumn of 1962, mainly by postgraduate students of the University.

2 The number of miners living in Leigh, however, is nearer 3,500. Many miners living in Leigh work outside the town, but this movement is more than offset by men coming into the town to work in the pits. Coal miners comprise slightly more than 1 in 4 of the occupied male population living in the town.

3 In 1921, the percentages employed in these three industries were:

	MEN	WOMEN
Mining	41.5	2.3
Textiles	11.5	64.6
Engineering	10.4	2.1
All three	63.4	69.0

In 1961 the overall number of jobs available for men in the town was almost exactly the same as it had been in 1921, about 15,000, but the number of jobs for women had risen form 7,000 to 10,000.

4 Apart from 1952 when there was a recession in the textile trade, the unemployment rate has been at or below the national level, and distinctly below that of the North West region. For instance, at the end of 1961, the proportion of men wholly out of work was 1.3, and of women 0.7, giving a combined rate of 1.1%.

5 The Parliamentary constituency consists of Leigh itself and the adjoining urban districts of Atherton and Tyldesley. The occupational composition and social history of these two towns is very similar to that of Leigh, and there is a great deal of journeying across local boundaries, both to and from work, and to visit friends and kin. Somewhat more than half the electorate live in Leigh.

6 That is, they said they would vote Liberal if there was a candidate to vote for at the next Parliamentary election. Liberals hold one ward in the town but there has not been a Parliamentary candidate since 1929.

7 The main difference between the young voters and the rest of the sample limes in the much lower proportion of probable Conservative voters and the much higher proportion to "don't knows" among the former. A preliminary analysis of matched pairs of respondents under thirty and in their thirties suggests that these "don't knows" (14% of the under thirties) may become Conservative voters later on.

Four

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1 Mao Tse–Tung (1966) *Four Essays on Philosophy*, Peking.

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