

The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas

This is a great introduction to our unit on ethics. In just a few pages, this short story invites us to reflect on a whole host of interesting and important moral questions.

1. What does utopia look like?

The city of Omelas is meant to be the image of a (near?) perfect society – at least for most people. Take a moment to envision what YOU think that society looks like...

What is it like? Is there government there? Religion? Military? Drugs? Sex? Celebration? Competition? Games? Or what? How much technology do the people there have? Why?

(LeGuin suggests that a utopia would have no slavery – ok, that sounds correct. But she also says that it would have very few laws, no bombs, no secret police, no clergy, no soldiers... Not even advertisements, or a stock market. Do you agree with any of these?)

What things are good? What is the good life? are central questions in moral philosophy.

2. Is it permissible to sacrifice one for many?

We are told that, somehow, all of the goods in the lives of the people of Omelas are made possible by the suffering of one child.

Imagine that we were told that the U.S. would become a utopia if only we selected 3,500 children to lock naked in a broom closet for the rest of their lives, occasionally treated with cruelty, and never to receive a warmth or a kind word again (one per 100k pop.). Would it be okay to take the deal? Why or why not?

What kinds of actions are morally acceptable? is a central question in moral philosophy.

Of particular concern is, *When (if ever) is it morally acceptable to harm someone?* For instance, in the story about Omelas, does the fact that the suffering of the child brings happiness to thousands justify harming him? i.e., does the benefit derived make it morally acceptable to harm him? Why or why not?

Here's a slightly different question: Imagine that society were *already* in this deal. Imagine that we lived in a utopia already, and you were brought to observe one of the suffering children. You are told that if anyone speaks a kind word to the child, it breaks the deal. That child will benefit, but the 100,000 who are benefitting from the child's suffering will lose all of their prosperity. What should you do? Is it morally permissible to refrain from uttering the kind word to break the deal? Why or why not?

- *Doing harm vs. allowing harm*

Some might have the intuition that it is morally *worse* to actively force a child INTO such a state of suffering than it is to merely fail to prevent a child from further suffering. That is, many have the intuition that it is much worse to DO harm than it is to merely ALLOW harm. Is that correct? Is it worse to be the one who puts the child into the broom closet, and enters the deal, than it is to be someone who visits and merely fails to say a kind word to break the deal?

- *Intentionally harming as a means to an end*

Notice something else: The people of Omelas are USING the child for personal gain. They are PROFITTING off of the child's misery. Some have the intuition that using others as mere means to an end is *especially* morally objectionable. For, to use someone as a mere means to some benefit is to treat them not as a human being, but rather as a mere *thing* – in the absence of the empathy and respect that we owe to one another. For this reason, some might find the behavior of the people of Omelas to be *particularly* repugnant. Is that correct?

(For instance, we harm others via our fossil fuel emissions. But we're not benefitting from the harm itself. The harm is merely a byproduct. Does that make it more acceptable?)

3. Does walking away from injustice make you complicit?

In the story, people sometimes leave the city forever. It seems that maybe they cannot live with themselves continuing to profit off of the misery of the child, and so they choose to simply walk away. This is a sort of "middle ground" reaction to the situation. They choose not to actively profit off of the child's misery. But, they ALSO choose not to actively fight to end the child's misery. They simply stay out of it altogether...

Is that an acceptable response to the situation? Why or why not?

Some believe that, if you are not actively fighting against injustice – but are simply standing by doing nothing – then you are complicit in that injustice. E.g., you may hear it said that, in the face of pervasive racism, it is not enough to be *non-racist*. Rather, you have a duty to be *anti-racist*. That is, rather than just staying out of it, you must actively fight against the injustice. Failure to do so is still morally objectionable. Is that correct?

4. Does there need to be suffering in order for there to be happiness?

Sometimes I wonder what the nature of this "deal" in Omelas really is. We might think that some super-powerful entity has offered to miraculously solve all social problems,

and usher in an era of prosperity and happiness, but for a price... The price of the suffering of one child...

But, maybe it is like this: There is no mastermind behind the plan. No super-powerful puppetmaster who has brought happiness to Omelas. Rather, it is simply the *knowledge* that the child is suffering – the awareness of every citizen of Omelas that there is a child, and he is suffering – that makes their joys and their appreciations of the goods of life possible.

I have found that most people have the intuition that true happiness, or appreciation of life's goods, is not possible unless there is also some struggle, some unhappiness, some pain. I can sort of see that. For instance, have you ever recovered from several days of nasty illness to think to yourself, Wow, I forgot how amazing it is to just feel NOT SICK! I've been taking it for granted all this time!

Some people seem to think that a true utopia of PURE happiness is not possible. Without some suffering in the mix, there would be nothing to compare the happiness to – nothing to contrast it with – and no one would appreciate what they have. (This often comes up when I teach The Experience Machine, or The Problem of Evil for God's Existence.) So, the best, happiest society would need to have some suffering in it too; ideally, the perfect amount – just enough to give the people some contrast with which to compare (and therefore appreciate more fully) their happiness.

Question: If you share this intuition, then I wonder, Do you *personally* need to suffer in order to fully appreciate the good times? Or would it be enough to be taken as a child to a small closet, and shown a miserable, wretched creature like the child in the town of Omelas? Would it be enough to just see him, and then forever go on, knowing that he is still there – would that be enough to make you appreciate the goods of life most fully? And if so... Is THAT the nature of the "deal"? Is THAT why Omelas would cease to be a utopia the moment the child ceased to suffer?

5. Are WE already in Omelas?

Sometimes I also wonder whether we are already as guilty as the people of Omelas. For example, a fully capitalistic society seems to necessitate that there will be massive inequalities, where the worst off struggle and face hardship while the best off flourish and want for nothing. Perhaps our worst off are not necessarily all naked and malnourished in dark, lonely closets. Still... Aren't they pretty badly off? Or consider sweatshop labor; or the harm caused by our excessive greenhouse gas emissions. If we go through life benefitting from a system that harms others, or (perhaps worse) *profits* off of the suffering of others – if we are benefitting from that system rather than actively fighting against it, are we not just as guilty as the people of Omelas? Why or why not?