

THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

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The Challenge of the Omelas

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In “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” a short philosophical story, by Ursula Le Guin, the city Omelas is a utopia, filled with beautiful gardens, parks, and sceneries. The citizens experience perpetual happiness as there are no laws, slaves, or monarchs. Even without these objects and people and limited technology, there is order, and the people are joyful. In this town, the citizens celebrate the summer solstice through the Festival of Summer, where people from neighboring towns visit and horse race. This fairytale-like happiness and splendor, however, is preserved through the suffering of a child locked in a room. The child is malnourished, scared, and abandoned. But if the child is released, the prosperity of Omelas and the joyfulness of the residents would falter. When the children of Omelas are of the age of eight to twelve, the citizens explain to them the unjust situation, and most of these children are filled with anger and disgust. Some of them even want to help the child. However, they soon ignore these feelings, remembering that their lifestyle would no longer exist if the child was freed and realizing that the child, if released, would perhaps not enjoy the new lifestyle as that person would be too scared. Most people accept this situation while a few others leave Omelas.¹

Utilitarians would approve of this utopia, deeming that exploiting and caging the child is ethical. Specifically, author Le Guin explains that releasing the child would be like “[throwing] away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one.”² Utilitarians use the consequences of the action, rather than the motive, to determine the morality of the action. According to the utilitarian Greatest Happiness Principle, the more happiness, the more morality. Therefore, since the suffering of a child leads to the happiness of the thousands of other people in Omelas, the utilitarians would consider the creation of the utopia ethical. The happiness of thousands outweighs the happiness of one.

On the other hand, Immanuel Kant would not approve of Omelas. Le Guin states, “the beauty of their

city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.”³ So the utopia exists because the oppression of the child allows for the joyfulness of the other citizens. Since the utopia was built on an unethical act, Kant, who judges an action moral or immoral based on the motive and act, would detest Omelas. According to Kant, the only moral motive is one arising from respect for duty, so the exploitation would be immoral as the motive of the citizens was to ensure their happiness. In addition, the citizens of Omelas use the child as a means to an end, which Kant considers unethical as human dignity cannot be used to accomplish goals.

I believe that this utopia is unethical, so I would like to think that I would walk away. I find slavery, when people subjugate and exploit other human beings, unethical. And the child is enslaved as the residents caged and used the child for their own advantage. Therefore, the utopia, built on the bondage of the child, is immoral, and I would not want to live in a place that is so unjust and guilt-inducing. However, this decision is theoretical, and currently in reality, I do benefit from the exploitation of children. For example, some of the products I consume, which make me happy, are made by child laborers, who are often malnourished and basically enslaved, working long hours for low wages. Slowly, I am trying to walk away from these products, so hopefully I would at some point walk away from Omelas.

Notes

1. Ursula Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” 1973, 1–2, <https://learning.hccs.edu/faculty/emily.klotz/engl1302-6/readings/the-ones-who-walk-away-from-omelas-ursula-le-guin/view>.
2. Le Guin, 4.
3. Le Guin, 3.