Walking Away from Omelas:
An Overview of Philosophical Ethics

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Thinking Matters 9
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- Le Guin and Omelas
- Philosophical timeline
- Classical ethics (Aristotle)
- Deontological theories (Kant)
- Consequentialist theories (Bentham and Mill)
- The Omelas dilemma
- Ethical analysis from a scientific perspective
- Close reading *vs.* holistic reading
- Close reading of Omelas

Thought Questions from "Omelas"

1. How do you think Le Guin imagines the role of technology in the utopian world of Omelas? What specific passages can you cite that talk about technology?

2. On page 2 of the reader, Le Guin posits that "one thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt." How does that assertion square with the rest of the story?

3. The last paragraph of Le Guin's story describes how some people leave Omelas and walk away to a "place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness," even though Le Guin cautions the reader that "it is possible that it does not exist." What do you think Le Guin wants the reader to conclude from this paragraph?

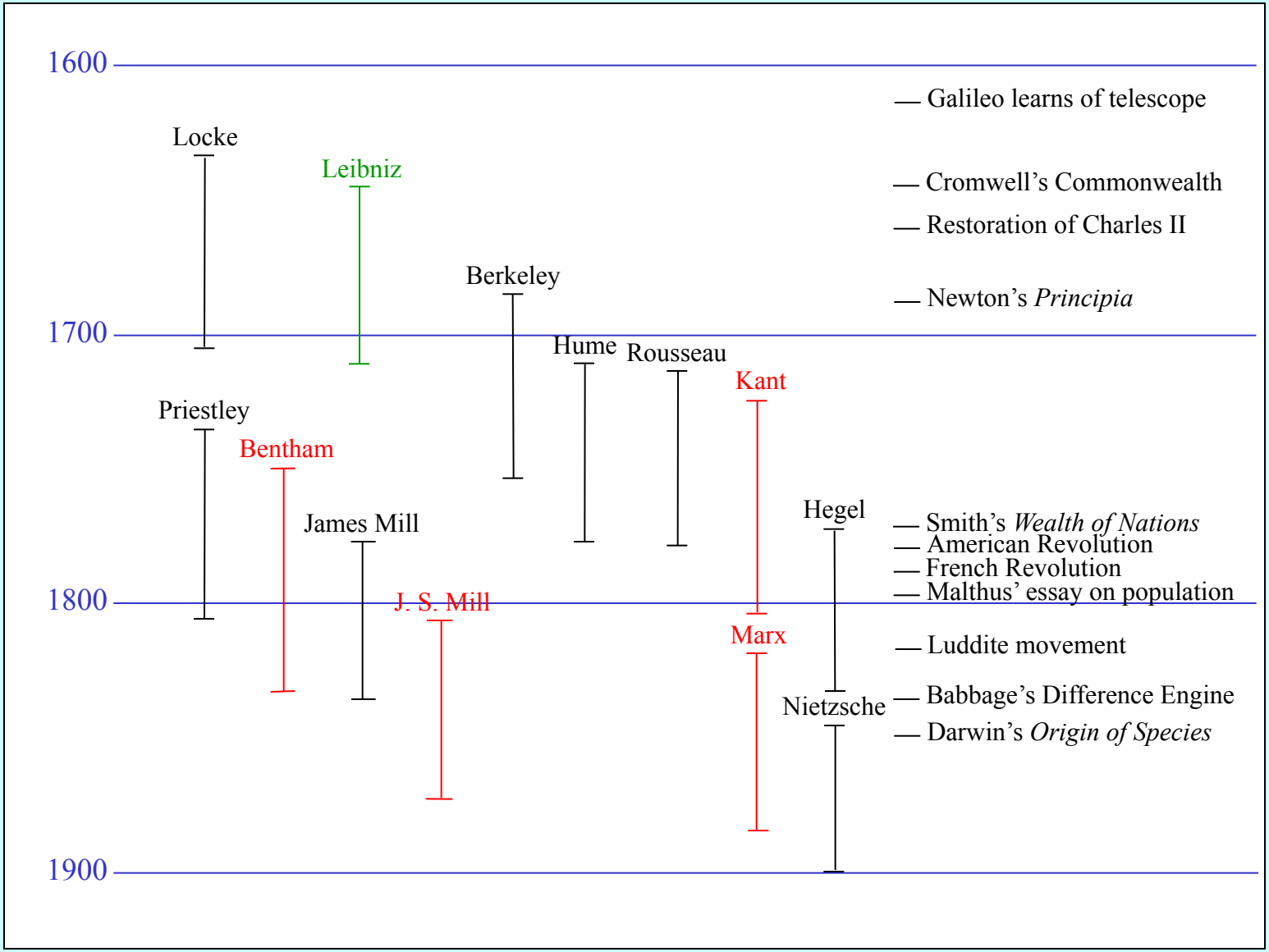
Le Guin and Omelas

Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"—winner of the Hugo Award in 1974—is in many ways a perfect work with which to begin a study of utopian thought. In just a few pages, Le Guin manages to draw her readers into the process of defining a utopian vision even as she exposes the philosophical complexities of the search for a society of universal—or at least nearly universal—happiness.

Ursula K. Le Guin

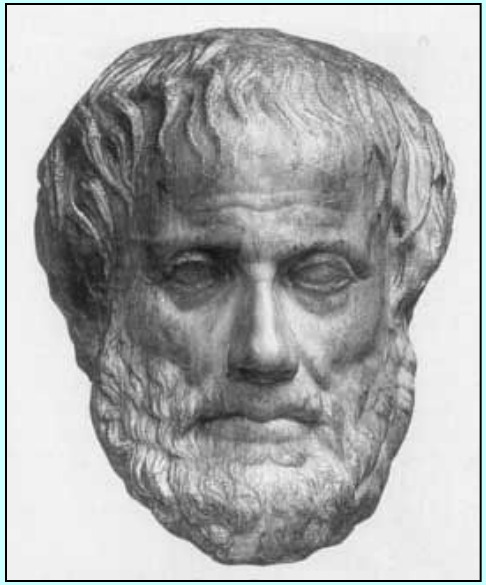
Le Guin's story also offers an opportunity to begin the process of close reading that is a central skill required in all Thinking Matters courses. Le Guin's story has an overall message, but is also rich in its imagery and literary technique.

Philosophical Timeline



Classical Foundations

Although most of our discussion will center on philosophy from the 18th and 19th centuries, it is important to recognize that ethical philosophy has much deeper historical roots.



Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

The most important figures in the early development of ethical thought is Aristotle, who introduced, primarily in his book *Nicomachean Ethics,* three ideas that had profound influence on later philosophers:

- The distinction between *intrinsic good* and *instrumental good*
- The use of happiness as the measure of intrinsic good
- The importance of *virtue* as distinct from pleasure

Deontological Theories

The notion that there is an abstract sense of the good that transcends the objective and measurable concept of pleasure gives rise to a set of philosophical theories called ***deontological*** theories after the Greek word *δεον*, or *duty.* Under these frameworks, human beings—given their capacity for rational thought—have an obligation to behave in a morally defensible way.

While most deontological writing has a religious foundation, the challenge for philosophers writing during the Enlightenment was to argue for ethical norms from secular principles.

Immanuel Kant

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant is the leading exponent of the deontological school and wrote extensively on ethical philosophy, most notably in his *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals,* originally published in 1785.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Kant's ethical theory assumes, following Aristotle, that there are intrinsic qualities that are "good without qualification." For Kant, this good is the "rational will."

To guide people toward good behavior, Kant outlines a set of ***imperatives***. Some imperatives are ***hypothetical*** in the sense that they depend on the situation, but at least one is ***categorical***, which are "objectively necessary in themselves, without reference to another end."

Kant's "Categorical Imperative"

First formulation:

> *Act in such a way that such actions would be appropriate as a universal law.*

Second formulation:

> *Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.*

Consequentialist Theories

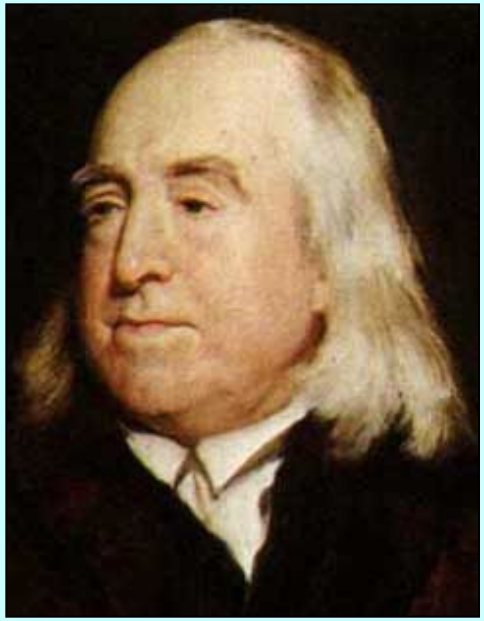
The major competition to the deontological framework of Kant consists of a broad class of theories labeled as ***consequentialist*** because they focus on the expected consequences of an action rather than on any absolute moral imperative.

The most prominent consequentialist theory is ***utilitarianism***, whose principal exponents are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

Jeremy Bentham and Utilitarianism

The leading early proponent of modern utilitarianism is Jeremy Bentham. Bentham is sometimes difficult to read, but there are many straightforward quotations that give a good sense of his philosophy, including

> *It is the greatest good to the greatest number of people which is the measure of right and wrong.*



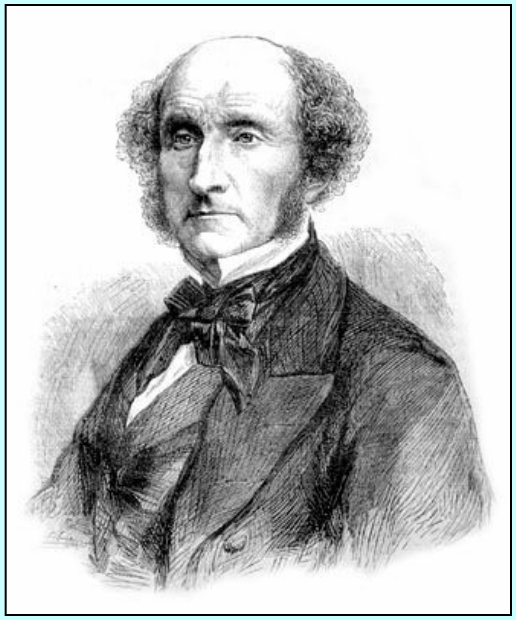
Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

Bentham believed that it was possible to define a calculus for measuring utility according to the following formula:

$$utils = hedons - dolors$$

John Stuart Mill

The most accessible defense of utilitarianism comes not from Bentham himself but from John Stuart Mill, who was closely connected with Bentham's philosophy through his father James. Mill abandoned the strict mathematical structure that Bentham had sought to impose on utilitarian calculation and recognized the complexity and nuances involved in using utilitarianism as a decision-making tool.



John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

The Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness.

Omelas as a Challenge to Utilitarianism

When "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" won the Hugo Award, Le Guin wrote an essay describing where the idea came from. She describes feeling "a shock of recognition" on reading the following passage in William James's essay "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life":

> If the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torment, what except a specifical and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?

Omelas as a Challenge to Utilitarianism

Superficially, however, the Omelas society seems to follow precisely the logic of the early utilitarians. Even if the misery of the child is substantially more intense than the happiness of the other inhabitants of Omelas, Bentham's utilitarian calculus might well show a positive balance sheet:

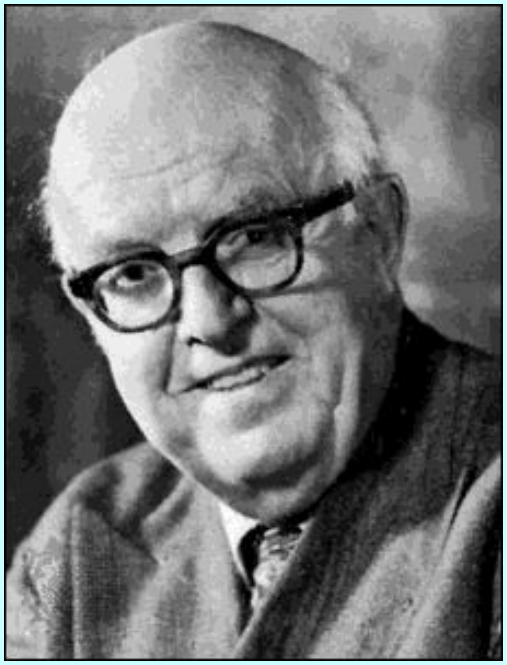
1 child	×	1000 dolors	=	–1,000 utils
1000 people	×	100 hedons	=	100,000 utils
				99,000 utils

Does this example mean that utilitarianism is fatally flawed? Should we reject it entirely?

The Two Cultures

In 1959, C. P. Snow—successful as both a physicist and a novelist—delivered the Rede Lectures at Cambridge University. He described what he saw as a growing gap between humanists and scientists:

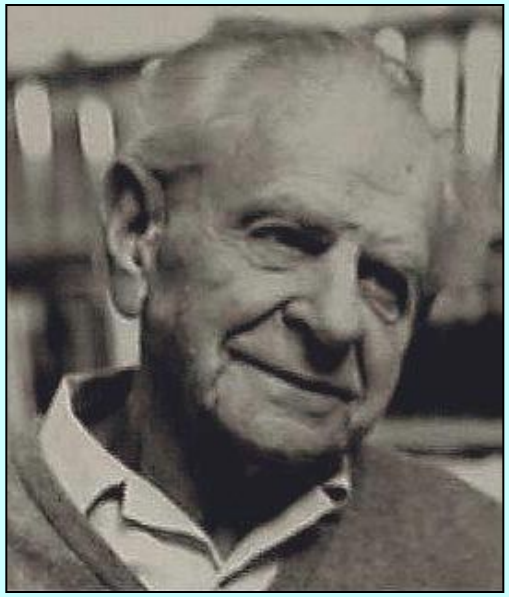
> *I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups. . . . Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding.*



C. P. Snow (1905-1980)

Ethical Analysis from a Scientific Perspective

The gap between the "techie" and "fuzzy" perspectives is interesting for many reasons. In this course, the most important thing is to recognize that the traditional scientific route to knowledge is not always the optimal one.



Karl Popper (1902-1994)

Students of science and engineering tend to internalize—not always consciously—the following precept developed by philosopher of science Karl Popper: that science proceeds by ***falsification***. Given a theory, a scientist tries to find counterexamples that invalidate the theory.

As the Le Guin short story makes clear, it is easy to find refutations of ethical theories. Those theories nonetheless provide useful tools for analysis as long as one remains mindful of their limitations.

Close Reading *vs.* Holistic Reading

In this class, we want you to learn how to apply literary sources effectively. Doing so requires a combination of skills:

- ***Close reading*** requires you to look carefully at the details of specific passages as you defend a particular argument.
- ***Holistic reading*** requires you to step back from the details of the text to understand what it means at a more abstract level. This style of reading is essential when you want to trace the evolution of an idea through a single work or a set of works that may be separated widely in time and style.

The two styles are not independent but instead are mutually supportive. For example, if you make an argument that a particular idea from an earlier source reappears in some later work, you will need to undertake close reading to find the evidence for the connection.

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The End