THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS

Ethics: Course Notes | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)

"*They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist."* (Le Guin, The Ones Who Walk From Omelas)

"The Ones Who Walk From Omelas" is a 1973 short story by the American author **Ursula K Le Guin.** It won the 1974 Hugo Award for Best Short Story, and has since become one of the most widely anthologized (and taught) short stories of the modern era. LeGuin has stated the short story was written partially in response to philosophical thought experiments given by **William James** and **Fyodor Dostoyevsky.**

About the Author (adapted from Encyclopedia Britannica). Ursula K. Le Guin,(1929 - 2008) is an American writer best known for tales of science fiction and fantasy imbued with concern for character development and language. She was the daughter of distinguished anthropologist A.L. Kroeber and writer Theodora Kroeber. The methods of anthropology influenced her science-fiction stories, which often feature highly detailed descriptions of alien societies. Le Guin's most philosophically significant novels exhibit the same attention to detail that characterizes her science fiction and high fantasy works. The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) is about a race of androgynous people who may become either male or female. In The Dispossessed (1974), she examined two neighbouring worlds that are home to antithetical societies, one capitalist, the other anarchic, both of which stifle freedom in particular ways. The destruction of indigenous peoples on a planet colonized by Earth is the focus of The Word for World Is Forest (1972). Always Coming Home (1985) concerns the Kesh, survivors of nuclear war in California, and includes poetry, prose, legends, autobiography, and a tape recording of Kesh music.

Question: In what ways do you think "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" was informed/influenced by Le Guin's background in anthropology?

SUPER SHORT SUMMARY (SPOILERS AHEAD!)

The short story is in many ways a fairly simple story, despite the (many!) philosophical questions it raises:

Setting: The story is set in the fictional city of Omelas, which appears (at least at first glance) to something like a **utopia** (or perfect place). The narrator suggests that Omelas has a number of interesting characteristics (in comparison to the sorts of utopias described by previous philosophical or religious thinkers). However, she ALSO invites the reader to make their own additions/alterations to Omelas, since the story only "works" if the reader agrees that Omelas really IS a utopia.

1. The citizens of Omelas are people *just like us*, and are not "simple" or "stupid." However, they are happy as is possible for beings like us (human beings!) to be. This is important for what follows.
2. The city's inhabitants produce beautiful art and music, they have festivals, and they enjoy being with one another. They undertake scientific inquiry. Parents love their children and vice-versa.
3. The city has no "ruler" and no slaves. The narrator leaves it to us (as readers) to determine what exact type of government they had, but it is one without many rules/laws.
4. The narrator suggests that there may be sex (for pleasure) and/or drugs in this utopia, which is in marked contrast to the way many religions/philosophies have described utopia. Again, though, the narrator suggests that it is up to *reader* whether utopia has such things.
5. There is "religion" but no "priests." It's worth thinking about why this might be!
6. There is a single child locked in a basement without light or hope, and whom of the citizens know about. The child suffers so that the rest of the citizens may be happy. In particular, the narrator suggests that human beings (such as those living in Omelas) MUST

Characters. There aren't really any traditional "main characters" in this story. Instead, we have the following::

- The **narrator** (who seems closely related to the author in this case) takes the reader on a sort of "virtual tour" of Omelas. The narrator's attitude seems to be that of a "teacher" who wants the reader to *learn* something from their virtual visit. But what?
- There are two children: the **one who suffers** and the **one who plays the flute.** They are, in some ways, mirrors of each other, with one capturing the "evil" in the city and the other all that is "good" about it. Late in the story, the narrator suggests that the flute-player couldn't exist without the suffering child.

- The **reader** is invited to be an active participant in the story, making choices about what the city of Omelas is like.

Plot: There isn't really a traditional "plot." Instead, the story has the form of a thought experiment" The main plot asks the reader to imagine a number of things:

1. First, the narrator invites the reader to participate in imagining a utopia (a "perfect place") in as much detail as possible. Don't like something about Omelas? Feel free to change it!
2. The existence of the suffering child is revealed! The suffering is horrible, and the child gets no "benefit" from it. Instead, everyone else benefits from it.
3. The narrator argues that a utopia like Omelas MUST HAVE something like the suffering child. Without this suffering, the citizens couldn't really be human. There would no art, no religion, no compassion (or "love"). Everything good is dependent on this one horrible thing.
4. Finally, the narrator reveals that some people reject Omelas, and leave. By definition, they do NOT do so because they can imagine a better society (they can't!). However, they seem confident that such a thing must exist.

Question: What would you change about Omelas (besides the suffering child) in order to make "better"? Do you agree with the argument that Omelas *needs* such a child?

PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES AND PROBLEMS

Omelas raises a ton of interesting philosophical questions—more than we can cover in a single lecture. However, here are a few to get you started.

1. **Thought Experiments, Imagination, and Possibility.** Omelas provides with an example of a philosophical "thought experiment," where the reader is invited to imagine (in as much detail as possible) what the "perfect human society" might look like. We are free to "turn the knobs" of this thought experiment as we like, in order to make it capture our *personal* idea of perfection. Just as in physical experiments, the goal is to answer certain "why?" or "how?" questions. As it turns out, this thought experiment concludes with a somewhat terrifying conclusion: we CANNOT eliminate evil. Le Guin's ending of the story also asks to think about a different, tougher question: Are there things that are *possible* that can't be *imagined* or *described?* After all, the people who leave presumably think they are headed *somewhere*.
2. **The Dangers of Utopic Thinking.** Many philosophers and religions have described different sorts of utopias/heavens. In fact, the idea of such "perfect" places play a huge role in many people's lives. For example, we imagine what society *should* look like, and aim to improve our own society. Similarly, we imagine what our ideal "self" should be, and we aim to improve ourselves based on this. Real life has shown, however, that attempts to realize such utopias in the "real world" (via things like the Communist Revolution, various religious dictatorships, or even misconceived diet plans) end up failing pretty badly, in part because of the mismatch between **ideal theory** (the way things "should happen" according to some theory) and the messy real world.
3. **The Banality of Evil.** Writers and artists love to focus on certain sorts of suffering and evil. Films and books are full of supervillains, serial killers, the tortured artist who produces a great artwork, cops and criminals, and stories of people overcoming childhood adversity to succeed. However, Le Guin suggests that most evil in the real work is not like this at all. Instead, it "banal" (normal) and largely pointless. Millions of children in real world, for example, suffer and die horrible deaths (from disease, starvation, violence, etc.) and there's no "point" to any of it. It just happens.
4. **Is Evil Necessary for God?** Le Guin suggests that the people of Omelas could NOT be as perfect or happy as they were without the suffering child. Among other things, she suggests that they need to know about evil (and know that it exists) in order to allow them to develop things such as **compassion** for other people, **self-knowledge** (for example, that they are "lucky" to lead the lives they have), **artistic creativity** (if there were no suffering at all, what could they make art about?) and even **scientific inquiry** (since this gives the a problem to solve).
5. **Do the Ends Justify the Means?** The influential ethical theory of **utilitarianism** claims that we should always do whatever maximizes human (and animals) happiness, and minimizes suffering. So, for example, we should sacrifice 1 person if that is what is needed to save 100 people. Omelas provides a vivid depiction of how this "sacrifice" might look. Traditional religious views of the world (see the next section on the problem of evil) often claim that God is justified in allowing suffering in order to help humans achieve grace/salvation. Again, Omelas casts doubt on whether this is justified.
6. **What is the Purpose of Art?** Finally, a more general question. What is the point of art, both in Omelas and in our own world? What does the flute player offer to the citizens? What does Le Guin's story offer to us? In what ways does art help us become "better people?"

Question: Choose 1-2 of the problems explained above, and analyze it in more depth. What might be some possible solutions/responses to the question? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these solutions.

IS IT IMMORAL TO WORSHIP GOD? THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

As mentioned above, Le Guin's story was written at least partially in response to an older thought experiment by Dostoyevsky. It's worth considering what this original thought experiment was "about." In Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov,* the main character (**Alyosha,** a firm believer in God, but one with many questions) has a long debate with his older **Ivan,** who is at this point in the story an atheist. He begins by giving many examples of the way that children have suffered, which he thinks is a strong argument for either (a) not believing in God or (b) not worshipping God, even God does exist. Ivan concludes as follows:

Ivan to Alyosha: *[Heaven/God] is not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God'! It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price…From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket."*

As traditionally formulate the Problem of Evil has the following form:

1. There is evil in the world (for example, the undeserved suffering of the innocent child in Omelas).
2. If there were an all-good, all-powerful God , there would NOT be evil in the world.
3. So, an all-good, all-powerful God doesn't exist. Any God that DOES exist isn't worth worshipping.

Both Le Guin and Dostoyevsky focus on the **suffering of innocents** in their presentation of the problem. This is largely because this is the most difficult sort of evil to "explain away." So, for example, a **theist** (a person who believes in God) can easily explain *some* sorts of evil. For example, some suffering (such as the "pain" that comes with working out, or spending time doing homework) actually *benefits* you in the long run, while other sorts of suffering (such as being imprisoned for a crime) might be arguably be something a person "deserves." However, the suffering of the child in Omelas is not like this. Instead, they suffer in order to help other people.

Both Ivan (in the above quote) and the "ones who walk away" *reject* the idea that this sort of evil can ever be justified for the "greater good." This is true even in the greater good is something like the "eternal salvation of all humans" or "the happiest possible human society." The idea seems to be that some things, such as the torture of innocent children, are never OK for anyone anywhere (even God! Even the perfect democracy!).

Question: Do you think that suffering of innocent children provides a good reason for thinking "An all-good God doesn't exist?" Why or why not?

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Is it possible to have a utopia/heaven that did NOT have evil in it? Why or why not?
2. Omelas suggest the relationship between what we can "imagine" and what is genuinely "possible" is complicated, especially when it comes to ideas like heaven/utopia. Is "heaven" really possible? Is God? In what ways can we (or can't we) understand/imagine such concepts?
3. The philosopher **Hannah Arendt** coined the term "banality of evil" to describe Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi who designed the "Final Solution" (to kill million of Jews). She argued he was nothing like a super-villain, but basically an ordinary beaucrat, of the sort many of us would recognize. How is it possible for people like this to do such terrible things?
4. What philosophical questions/ideas (beyond those listed above) occurred to you while reading this story?