Chapter 6: Walking Away (or Not)

Sci Fi and Philosophy: Course Notes | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)

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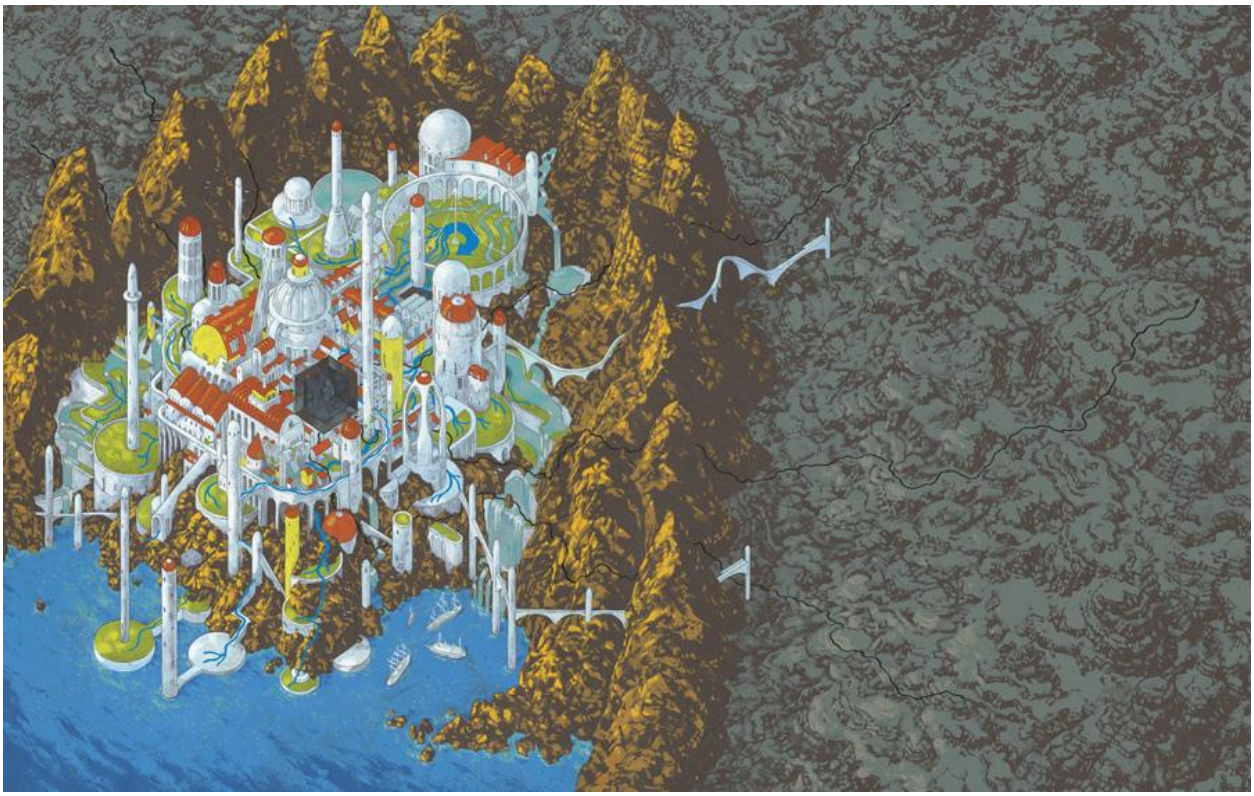

Figure 1 Map of Omelas by Andrew DeGraff

[Brendan's Note: My notes and discussion questions can be found later in this chapter.]

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights, over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green' Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mudstained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children – though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you.

Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however – that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc. -- they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains,. washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas – at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of drooz may perfume the ways of the city, drooz which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer; this is what swells the hearts of the

people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really don't think many of them need to take drooz.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men, wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope. . . ." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits haunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes-the child has no understanding of time or interval – sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, 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.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. 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. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

3 DISCUSSION: THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS

"*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. Ursula K. Le Guin (1929 to 2018) is an American novelist, short story writer, and essayist known for her works of speculative fiction. These include science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history. She has also written poetry and works for children. Her work has often been compared to that of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and J.K. Rowling.

Le Guin was born in Berkeley, California, on October 21, 1929. She began writing at a young age and completed her first novel, Rocannon's World, while still in college. She went on to publish a total of nineteen novels, eleven collections of short stories, four volumes of essays, twelve children's books, and four volumes of poetry.

Le Guin's best-known works include the Earthsea series, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *The Dispossessed*. The Earthsea series, which consists of six books, is set in a fictional world of islands and tells the story of a young wizard named Ged. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a science fiction novel about an ambassador from Earth who is sent to a planet where the inhabitants can change their gender. The Dispossessed is a science fiction novel about two societies, one on a planet and one on a moon, that are living in different ways.

Le Guin has won many awards for her work, including the National Book Award, the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, and the World Fantasy Award. In 2014, she was inducted into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame.

Le Guin's work often explores themes of gender, race, and power. In an interview, she once said, "I think hard times are coming, when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine some real grounds for hope."

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

3.1 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 have knowledge that suffering and pain of this type exist.

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?

3.2 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.

Figure 2 Underneath Omelas (Brendan Shea x Dall-E)

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 in business or find love. 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.

3.3 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 and concerns) 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 if 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, spending time doing homework, or any sort of self-improvement) 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 (or the suffering of children in the real world) 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 could 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 s!).

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

3.4 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 millions of Jews). She argued he was nothing like a super-villain, but basically an ordinary, petty, self-interested mid-level manager of the sort many of us would recognize. How is it possible for "ordinary" people like this to do such terrible things (in Omelas or the real world)? What, if anything, can we do to stop these sorts of things from happening again?
4. If you lived in Omelas, would you "walk away"? Why or why not? How does this relate to your obligations in the "real world"?

4 READING: THE ONES WHO STAY AND FIGHT

"The world is a cruel place, and you must be a cruel person to survive it." - N.K. Jemisin

Introduction: The following reading, by the contemporary writer NK Jemisin, is an homage and response to some of the ideas and problems raised in LeGuin's original story. Here, I'm going to let *you* think about what it means (as opposed to providing my own analysis 😊).

About the Author. N.K. Jemisin is a critically acclaimed, award-winning science fiction and fantasy writer. She was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1972, to a black father and a white mother. Her father was a physicist, and her mother was a psychiatric social worker. Jemisin grew up in a mostly black neighborhood, and attended a predominantly white high school.

Jemisin attended the University of Oklahoma, where she studied psychology, sociology, and anthropology. After graduation, she worked as a technical writer and editor for a software company. She also worked as a substitute teacher, a counselor, and a freelance writer.

In 2001, Jemisin self-published her first novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. The novel was well-received, and Jemisin was signed by a major publisher. Her second novel, *The Broken Kingdoms*, was published in 2010, and her third novel, *The Killing Moon*, was published in 2012.

Jemisin's novels have been nominated for several awards, including the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, and the World Fantasy Award. In 2016, Jemisin became the first black person to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel, for her novel *The Fifth Season*.

It's the Day of Good Birds in the city of Um-Helat! The Day is a local custom, silly and random as so many local customs can be, and yet beautiful by the same token. It has little to do with birds—a fact about which locals cheerfully laugh, because that, too, is how local customs work. It is a day of fluttering and flight

regardless, where pennants of brightly dyed silk plume forth from every window, and delicate drones of copperwire and featherglass—made for this day, and flown on no other!—waft and buzz on the wind. Even the monorail cars trail stylized flamingo feathers from their rooftops, although these are made of featherglass, too, since real flamingos do not fly at the speed of sound.

Um-Helat sits at the confluence of three rivers and an ocean. This places it within the migratory path of several species of butterfly and hummingbird as they travel north to south and back again. At the Day's dawning, the children of the city come forth, most wearing wings made for them by parents and kind old aunties. (Not all aunties are actually aunties, but in Um-Helat, anyone can earn auntie-hood. This is a city where numberless aspirations can be fulfilled.) Some wings are organza stitched onto school backpacks; some are quilted cotton stuffed with dried flowers and clipped to jacket shoulders. Some few have been carefully glued together from dozens of butterflies' discarded wings—but only those butterflies that died naturally, of course. Thus adorned, children who can run through the streets do so, leaping off curbs and making whooshing sounds as they pretend to fly. Those who cannot run instead ride special drones, belted and barred and double-checked for safety, which gently bounce them into the air. It's only a few feet, though it feels like the height of the sky.

But this is no awkward dystopia, where all are forced to conform. Adults who refuse to give up their childhood joys wear wings, too, though theirs tend to be more abstractly constructed. (Some are invisible.) And those who follow faiths which forbid the emulation of beasts, or those who simply do not want wings, need not wear them. They are all honored for this choice, as much as the soarers and flutterers themselves—for without contrasts, how does one appreciate the different forms that joy can take?

Oh, and there is *such* joy here, friend. Street vendors sell tiny custard-filled cakes shaped like jewel beetles, and people who've waited all year wolf them down while sucking air to cool their tongues. Artisans offer cleverly mechanized paper hummingbirds for passersby to throw; the best ones blur as they glide. As the afternoon of the Day grows long, Um-Helat's farmers arrive, invited as always to be honored alongside the city's merchants and technologers. By all three groups' efforts does the city prosper—but when aquifers and rivers dip too low, the farmers move to other lands and farm there, or change from corn-husking to rice-paddying and fishery-feeding. The management of soil and water and chemistry are intricate arts, as you know, but here they have been perfected. Here in Um-Helat there is no hunger: not among the people, and not for the migrating birds and butterflies when they dip down for a taste of savory nectar. And so farmers are particularly celebrated on the Day of Good Birds.

The parade wends through the city, farmers ducking their gazes or laughing as their fellow citizens offer salute. Here is a portly woman, waving a hat of chicken feathers that someone has gifted her. There is a reedy man in a coverall, nervously plucking at the brooch he bears, carved and lacquered to look like a ladybug. He has made it himself, and hopes others will think it fine. They do!

And here! This woman, tall and strong and bare of arm, her sleek brown scalp dotted with implanted silver studs, wearing a fine uniform of stormcloud damask. See how she moves through the crowd, grinning with them, helping up a child who has fallen. She encourages their cheers and their delight, speaking to this person in one language and that person in another. (Um-Helat is a city of polyglots.) She reaches the front of the crowd and immediately spies the reedy man's ladybug, whereupon with delighted eyes and smile, she makes much of it. She points, and others see it, too, which makes the reedy man blush terribly. But there is only kindness and genuine pleasure in the smiles, and gradually the reedy man stands a little taller, walks with a wider stride. He has made his fellow citizens happier, and there is no finer virtue by the customs of this gentle, rich land.

The slanting afternoon sun stretches golden over the city, reflected light sparkling along its mica-flecked walls and laser-faceted embossings. A breeze blows up from the sea, tasting of brine and minerals, so fresh that a

spontaneous cheer wafts along the crowded parade route. Young men by the waterfront, busily stirring great vats of spiced mussels and pans of rice and peas and shrimp, cook faster, for it is said in Um-Helat that the smell of the sea wakes up the belly. Young women on streetcorners bring out sitars and synthesizers and big wooden drums, the better to get the crowd dancing the young men's way. When people stop, too hot or thirsty to continue, there are glasses of fresh tamarind-lime juice. Elders staff the shops that sell this, though they also give away the juice if a person is much in need. There are always souls needing drumbeats and tamarind, in Um-Helat.

Joyous! It is a steady joy that fills this city, easy to speak of—but ah, though I have tried, it is most difficult to describe accurately. I see the incredulity in your face! The difficulty lies partly in my lack of words, and partly in your lack of understanding, because you have never seen a place like Um-Helat, and because I am myself only an observer, not yet privileged to visit. Thus I must try harder to describe it so that you might embrace it, too.

How can I illuminate the people of Um-Helat? You have seen how they love their children, and how they honor honest, clever labor. You have perhaps noted their many elders, for I have mentioned them in passing. In Um-Helat, people live long and richly, with good health for as long as fate and choice and medicine permits. Every child knows opportunity; every parent has a life. There are some who go without housing, but they can have an apartment if they wish. Here where the spaces under bridges are swept daily and benches have light padding for comfort, they do not live badly. If these itinerant folk dwell also in delusions, they are kept from weapons or places that might do them harm; where they risk disease or injury, they are prevented—or cared for, if matters get out of hand. (We shall speak more of the caretakers soon.)

And so this is Um-Helat: a city whose inhabitants, simply, care for one another. That is a city's purpose, they believe—not merely to generate revenue or energy or products, but to shelter and nurture the people who do these things.

What have I forgotten to mention? Oh, it is the thing that will seem most fantastic to you, friend: the variety! The citizens of Um-Helat are so many and so wildly different in appearance and origin and development. People in this land come from many others, and it shows in sheen of skin and kink of hair and plumpness of lip and hip. If one wanders the streets where the workers and artisans do their work, there are slightly more people with dark skin; if one strolls the corridors of the executive tower, there are a few extra done in pale. There is history rather than malice in this, and it is still being actively, intentionally corrected—because the people of Um-Helat are not naive believers in good intentions as the solution to all ills. No, there are no worshippers of mere tolerance here, nor desperate grovelers for that grudging pittance of respect which is *diversity*. Um-Helatians are learned enough to understand what must be done to make the world better, and pragmatic enough to actually enact it.

Does that seem wrong to you? It should not. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by those concealing ill intent, of insisting that people already suffering should be afflicted with further, unnecessary pain. This is the paradox of tolerance, the treason of free speech: We hesitate to admit that some people are just fucking evil and need to be stopped.

This is Um-Helat, after all, and not that barbaric America. This is not Omelas, a tick of a city, fat and happy with its head buried in a tortured child. My accounting of Um-Helat is an homage, true, but there's nothing for you to fear, friend.

And so how does Um-Helat exist? How can such a city possibly survive, let alone thrive? Wealthy with no poor, advanced with no war, a beautiful place where all souls know themselves beautiful . . . It cannot be, you say. Utopia? How banal. It's a fairy tale, a thought exercise. Crabs in a barrel, dog-eat-dog, oppression Olympics—it would not last, you insist. It could never be in the first place. Racism is natural, so natural that

we will call it "tribalism" to insinuate that everyone does it. Sexism is natural and homophobia is natural and religious intolerance is natural and greed is natural and cruelty is natural and savagery and fear and and and . . . and. "Impossible!" you hiss, your fists slowly clenching at your sides. "How dare you. What have these people done to make you believe such lies? What are you doing to me, to suggest that it is possible? How dare you. *How dare you*."

Oh, friend! I fear I have offended. My apologies.

Yet . . . how else can I convey Um-Helat to you, when even the thought of a happy, just society raises your ire so? Though I confess I am puzzled as to *why* you are so angry. It's almost as if you feel threatened by the very idea of equality. Almost as if some part of you needs to be angry. Needs unhappiness and injustice. But . . . do you?

Do you?

Do you believe, friend? Do you accept the Day of Good Birds, the city, the joy? No? Then let me tell you one more thing.

Remember the woman? So tall and brown, so handsome and bald, so loving in her honest pleasure, so fine in her stormcloud gray. She is one of many wearing the same garb, committed to the same purpose. Follow her, now, as she leaves behind the crowd and walks along the biofiber-paved side streets into the shadows. Beneath a skyscraper that floats a few meters off the ground—oh, it is perfectly safe, Um-Helat has controlled gravity for generations now—she stops. There two others await: one gethen, one male, both clad in gray damask, too. They are also bald, their studded heads a-gleam. They greet each other warmly, with hugs where those are welcomed.

They are no one special. Just some of the many people who work to ensure the happiness and prosperity of their fellow citizens. Think of them as social workers if you like; their role is no different from that of social workers anywhere. Word has come of a troubling case, and this is why they gather: to discuss it, and make a difficult decision.

There are wonders far greater than a few floating skyscrapers in Um-Helat, you see, and one of these is the ability to bridge the distances between possibilities—what we would call universes. Anyone can do it, but almost no one tries. That is because, due to a quirk of spacetime, the only world that people in Um-Helat can reach is our own. And why would anyone from this glorious place want to come anywhere near our benighted hellscape?

Again you seem offended. Ah, friend! You have no right to be.

In any case, there's little danger of travel. Even Um-Helat has not successfully found a way to reduce the tremendous energy demands of macro-scale planar transversal. Only wave particles can move from our world to theirs, and back again. Only information. Who would bother? Ah, but you forget: This is a land where no one hungers, no one is left ill, no one lives in fear, and even war is almost forgotten. In such a place, buoyed by the luxury of safety and comfort, people may seek knowledge solely for knowledge's sake.

But some knowledge is dangerous.

Um-Helat has been a worse place, after all, in its past. Not all of its peoples, so disparate in origin and custom and language, came together entirely by choice. The city had a different civilization once—one which might not have upset you so! (Poor thing. There, there.) Remnants of that time dot the land all around the city, ruined and enormous and half-broken. Here a bridge. There a great truck, on its back a rusting, curve-sided thing that ancient peoples referred to by the exotic term *missile*. In the distance: the skeletal remains of another city, once just as vast as Um-Helat, but never so lovely. Works such as these encumber all the land,

no more and no less venerable to the Um-Helatians than the rest of the landscape. Indeed, every young citizen must be reminded of these things upon coming of age, and told carefully curated stories of their nature and purpose. When the young citizens learn this, it is a shock almost incomprehensible, in that they literally lack the words to comprehend such things. The languages spoken in Um-Helat were once *our* languages, yes—for this world was once our world; it was not so much parallel as *the same*, back then. You might still recognize the languages, but what would puzzle you is how they speak . . . and how they don't. Oh, some of this will be familiar to you in concept at least, like terms for gender that mean neither he nor she, and the condemnation of words meant to slur and denigrate. And yet you will puzzle over the Um-Helatians' choice to retain descriptive terms for themselves like *kinky-haired* or *fat* or *deaf*. But these are just words, friend, don't you see? Without the attached contempt, such terms have no more meaning than if horses could proudly introduce themselves as palomino or miniature or hairy-footed. Difference was never the problem in and of itself—and Um-Helatians still have differences with each other, of opinion and otherwise. Of course they do! They're people. But what shocks the young citizens of Um-Helat is the realization that, once, those differences of opinion involved differences in respect. That once, value was ascribed to some people, and not others. That once, humanity was acknowledged for some, and not others.

It's the Day of Good Birds in Um-Helat, where every soul matters, and even the idea that some might not is anathema.

This, then, is why the social workers of Um-Helat have come together: because someone has breached the barrier between worlds. A citizen of Um-Helat has listened, on equipment you would not recognize but which records minute quantum perturbations excited by signal wavelengths, to our radio. He has watched our television. He has followed our social media, played our videos, liked our selfies. We are remarkably primitive, compared to Um-Helat. Time flows the same in both worlds, but people there have not wasted themselves on crushing one another into submission, and this makes a remarkable difference. So anyone can do it—build a thing to traverse the worlds. Like building your own ham radio. Easy. Which is why there is an entire underground industry in Um-Helat—ah! crime! *now* you believe a little more—built around information gleaned from the strange alien world that is our own. Pamphlets are written and distributed. Art and whispers are traded. The forbidden is so seductive, is it not? Even here, where only things that cause harm to others are called evil. The information-gleaners know that what they do is wrong. They know this is what destroyed the old cities. And indeed, they are horrified at what they hear through the speakers, see on the screens. They begin to perceive that ours is a world where the notion that *some people are less important than others* has been allowed to take root, and grow until it buckles and cracks the foundations of our humanity. "How could they?" the gleaners exclaim, of us. "Why would they do such things? How can they just leave those people to starve? Why do they not listen when that one complains of disrespect? What does it mean that these ones have been assaulted and no one, *no one*, cares? Who treats other people like *that?*" And yet, even amid their marvel, they share the idea. The evil . . . spreads.

Figure 3 Bad ideas spread quickly (Brendan Shea x Dall-E).

So the social workers of Um-Helat stand, talking now, over the body of a man. He is dead—early, unwilling, with a beautifully crafted pike jammed through his spine and heart. (The spine to make it painless. The heart to make it quick.) This is only one of the weapons carried by the social workers, and they prefer it because the pike is silent. Because there was no shot or ricochet, no crackle or sizzle, no scream, no one else will come to investigate. The disease has taken one poor victim, but it need not claim more. In this manner is the contagion contained . . . in a moment. In a moment.

Beside the man's body crouches a little girl. She's curly-haired, plump, blind, brown, tall for her age. Normally a boisterous child, she weeps now over her father's death, and her tears run hot with the injustice of it all. She heard him say, "I'm sorry." She saw the social workers show the only mercy possible. But she isn't old enough to have been warned of the consequences of breaking the law, or to understand that her father knew those consequences and accepted them—so to her, what has happened has no purpose or reason. It is a senseless, monstrous, and impossible thing, called murder.

"I'll get back at you," she says between sobs. "I'll make you die the way you made him die." This is an unthinkable thing to say. Something is very wrong here. She snarls, "How dare you. How *dare* you."

The social workers exchange looks of concern. They are contaminated themselves, of course; it's permitted, and frankly unavoidable in their line of work. Impossible to dam a flood without getting wet. (There are measures in place. The studs on their scalps—well. In our own world, those who volunteered to work in leper colonies were once venerated, and imprisoned with them.) The social workers know, therefore, that for incomprehensible reasons, this girl's father has shared the poison knowledge of our world with her. An uncontaminated citizen of Um-Helat would have asked "Why?" after the initial shock and horror, because they would expect a reason. There would *be* a reason. But this girl has already decided that the social workers are less important than her father, and therefore the reason doesn't matter. She believes that the entire city is less important than one man's selfishness. Poor child. She is nearly septic with the taint of our world.

Nearly. But then our social worker, the tall brown one who got a hundred strangers to smile at a handmade ladybug, crouches and offers a hand to the child.

What? What surprises you? Did you think this would end with the cold-eyed slaughter of a child? There are other options—and this is Um-Helat, friend, where even a pitiful, diseased child matters. They will keep her in quarantine, and reach out to her for several days. If the girl accepts the hand, listens to them, they will try to explain why her father had to die. She's early for the knowledge, but something must be done, do you see? Then together they will bury him, with their own hands if they must, in the beautiful garden that they tend between caseloads. This garden holds all the Um-Helatians who broke the law. Just because they have to die as deterrence doesn't mean they can't be honored for the sacrifice.

But there is only one treatment for this toxin once it gets into the blood: fighting it. Tooth and nail, spear and claw, up close and brutal; no quarter can be given, no parole, no debate. The child must grow, and learn, and become another social worker fighting an endless war against an idea . . . but she will live, and help others, and find meaning in that. If she takes the woman's hand.

Does this work for you, at last, friend? Does the possibility of harsh enforcement add enough realism? Are you better able to accept this postcolonial utopia now that you see its bloody teeth? Ah, but they did not choose this battle, the people of Um-Helat today; their ancestors did, when they spun lies and ignored conscience in order to profit from others' pain. Their greed became a philosophy, a religion, a series of nations, all built on blood. Um-Helat has chosen to be better. But sometimes, only by blood sacrifice may true evil be kept at bay.

And now we come to you, my friend. My little soldier. See what I've done? So insidious, these little thoughts, going both ways along the quantum path. Now, perhaps, you will think of Um-Helat, and wish. Now you might finally be able to envision a world where people have learned to love, as they learned in our world to hate. Perhaps you will speak of Um-Helat to others, and spread the notion farther still, like joyous birds migrating on trade winds. *It's possible.* Everyone—even the poor, even the lazy, even the undesirable—can matter. Do you see how just the idea of this provokes utter rage in some? That is the infection defending itself . . . because if enough of us believe a thing is possible, then it becomes so.

And then? Who knows. War, maybe. The fire of fever and the purging scourge. No one wants that, but is not the alternative to lie helpless, spotty and blistered and heaving, until we *all* die?

So don't walk away. The child needs you, too, don't you see? You also have to fight for her, now that you know she exists, or walking away is meaningless. Here, here is my hand. Take it. Please.

Good. Good.

Now. Let's get to work.

4.1 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what way is Jemisin's story the "same" as LeGuin's? In what ways is it different?
2. In places where it is different, I'd like you to consider *why* it is different. That is, what point is Jemisin trying to make (vs. those Le Guin is trying to make)?
    a. Note: This doesn't necessarily mean Jemisin "disagrees" with Le Guin. She's just trying to do something else!
3. Jemisin's story provides a way of "turning the knobs" on Le Guin's original thought experiment. That is, it changes some crucial details, and explores what happens as a result. Suppose that I gave you an assignment: "Write a story in response to the two you've just read." What might the plot of YOUR story be?

5 READING: '[T]HEY, LIKE THE CHILD, ARE NOT FREE': AN ETHICAL DEFENSE OF THE ONES WHO REMAIN IN OMELAS (BY PAUL FIRENZE)[1]

In the *Analects* of Confucius, one of the master's disciples, Zigong, proclaims, "I do not want others to impose on me, nor do I want to impose on others." Confucius replies, "Zigong, this is quite beyond your reach."[1] Now, Confucius does not seem to be saying here that this freedom from imposition is beyond the reach of Zigong in particular, but rather, when seen in the context of the master's overall teachings in the *Analects,* it is beyond the reach of every one of us to live without imposing on others or having others impose on us. Humans simply are the kinds of creatures who must impose on others and therefore must recognize as legitimate the imposition of others on them. We are not solitary individuals who, like Zigong, can, or even should, want to live beyond the demands of others.

[1] Paul Firenze, "'[T]Hey, Like the Child, Are Not Free': An Ethical Defense of the Ones Who Remain in Omelas," *Response* 2, no. 1 (2017), https://responsejournal.net/issue/2017-11/article/%E2%80%98they-child-are-not-free%E2%80%99-ethical-defense-ones-who-remain-omelas.

The passage from the *Analects* is relevant here because Ursula K. LeGuin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" asks us to think about the degree to which our happiness is intertwined with others, and therefore how much we can rightfully expect from others and how much they can rightfully expect from us.2 LeGuin's narrator paints a picture of a city, Omelas, in which the general happiness of everyone in the city is the result of an extreme imposition, an extreme cost to one very unfortunate person. But as I will argue, while the happiness of the people of Omelas comes at an extreme cost to one, this in no way means it is without cost to those who benefit from it. In fact, I will argue that the people who remain in Omelas recognize and accept these costs as the price of imposing on the one who suffers. They recognize, as Confucius does and Zigong does not, that living without these reciprocal impositions is, and ought to be, "beyond our reach."

The illustrator Andrew DeGraff provides an evocative image of Omelas in his *book Plotted: A Literary Atlas,* in which he imagines the "geographies" of various literary works.3 I especially appreciate how DeGraff has given the space outside the city and its encircling mountains, the so-called Eighteen Peaks, as much room in the image as the city itself, emphasizing that the dark "unknown" outside Omelas is as important to our understanding of the story as is the city itself. The title of the story, after all, is "The Ones Who *Walk Away* from Omelas," even though we only learn of their existence in the story's final paragraph. And it is the genius of LeGuin's story that the narrator invites us to speculate continuously, giving us just enough detail to get our imaginations going.

[Brendan: You can see this image at the very beginning of this chapter. What do you think of it?]

Before discussing the dark unknown into which some will walk away, it is important to consider what they walk away from, and why. The narrator begins by describing a summer festival during which a procession moves through idyllic streets, "under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings," heading toward the "Green Fields," where "boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race."4 This exalted tone quickly gives way to an almost neurotic attempt by the narrator to convince the reader that the people of Omelas are simultaneously happy and real people:

> *"these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting."5*

And again,

> *"How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children—though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time."6*

The narrator eventually gives up the task of description and concedes that, "Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all."7

Having left the reader to imagine her own vision of a genuinely happy society, the narrator reveals the "reason" for this happiness. At the heart of Omelas there is a child of about ten, who lives in a dark room, in abject misery. The narrator's description is heart-rending, and it is impossible to read it without feeling "shocked, sickened, angered, outraged and impotent," as do the people of Omelas who learn of, or go to see, the child for themselves. Because, as the narrator tells us,

> *"They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but all understand that their happiness, 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."*[8]

When this is first explained to the children of Omelas, who are told of the child's existence and purpose sometime between ages eight and twelve,

> *"They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms….The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child."*[9]

These terms are difficult at first for everyone in Omelas, but most come to accept them through a combination of rationalization (the child could never *really* know happiness now) but also, **I will argue, through a realization that the child's suffering is actually a call to live a moral life, not simply for oneself, but for others.** And I think ultimately this is the source of their moral strength, and therefore the source of their genuine happiness. But of course, not everyone accepts these terms, and not everyone stays. Some find the terms unacceptable, and they walk away from the city into the dark unknown beyond the Eighteen Peaks.

[Brendan: The author states his thesis just above. Before reading further, what do you think of it? Agree? Disagree?]

Before discussing those who walk away, I want to address briefly one possible ethical question regarding the so-called "terms," and how they are enforced. This would seem like an important question: does some "god" or "power" command and/or enforce these terms? But I do not think this question is all that important. If a god does command compliance with these terms, it should not matter to our moral evaluation. Gods can, and have, commanded all variety of immoral things. Only a follower of the untenable **"divine command"** approach to morality would equate a god's commands with moral, as opposed to merely prudential, good. In addition, the narrator suggests there is no clergy in Omelas to enforce this divine command. There is also no mention or even hint of a deity who speaks directly to the people. It just seems taken for granted that these are the terms. The terms are enforced, like nearly all moral norms, by, in the words of philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, the "impersonal authority" of the norm.[10] The institutions and practices of Omelas could simply enforce these norms, by the impersonal authority with which norms constrain behavior. Those who cannot be governed by these norms cannot live with the terms, and they walk away. Those who remain accept the "horrible justice" of the norm and work to improve the lives of everyone else in Omelas—save one. It is central to the practices which make Omelas what it is that those who live there accept the burden of the interdependence of happiness.

[Brendan: Would it make any difference to the "Omelas" story if "God" told the citizens to let the child suffer? Why or why not?]

As **this essay is an ethical defense of the ones who remain**, I should say that my defense is a comparative one. That is, those who remain in Omelas are, in important ways, morally "superior" to those who walk away. Those who remain are by no means morally perfect people, simply people who I believe live by a better moral system than those who walk away. To illustrate why, it will be helpful to imagine the moral possibilities for those who would walk away. In what ways, if any, could their moral lives be "better" than those who remain?

They could decide to live as solitaries in a kind of Hobbesian or Lockean "state of nature." Hobbesian nature is a state of war of all against all, were life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," and would probably be especially so for those raised in the comforts of the city of joy.[11] Life in a Lockean state of nature is usually

portrayed as more benign, but this is precisely because Locke imagines his solitaries living by "laws of nature," instilled by a spark of divinity.12 What Locke is really seeing, though, is that even thinking about true, natural, human solitaries is impossible. Humans carry their socialization with them, so while Locke is right that many solitaries would follow the normative dictates of an "impersonal authority," these dictates would be the product of their socialization, not some innate divine spark, "conscience," or natural law which they somehow intuit. To live as a solitary, however, is to live outside of morality—to reject all morality, which is necessarily concerned with how we treat others. It is to live by oneself, and for oneself. It is to be like Confucius's erstwhile disciple, Zigong—to seek something beyond the reach of a moral person.

Perhaps the ones who walk away could join an already existing society, like our own society. Is this morally preferable to Omelas? If so, it is difficult to see why. Is it because no *one* individual is forced to suffer, against their will, for the happiness of others? This sounds like an overly optimistic and generous description of our society. Is there any reason to think that the society into which they might walk will be better than the one they left? Omelas presents a high moral bar to clear.

The ones who walk away could come together to form social contracts of a Hobbesian or Lockean variety. A Hobbesian contractarian society would be a kind of authoritarian society, where the sovereign is given all power with no recourse if this power is abused. A Lockean society would (without Locke's "religious" foundations to constrain it) be a kind of libertarian society, where the only reason to work together would be for the sake of the individual's own self-interest, or as Locke himself says, for "the preservation of their property."13 Can we really say that these societies would be morally preferable to Omelas? Hobbesian authoritarianism? A libertarian society of purely self-interested individuals? These might be morally preferable to Omelas, but this would certainly take some argument.

[Brendan: Hobbes thought humans would "rationally" agree to live under an all-powerful monarch, while Locke thought they would "rationally" agree to live under a capitalist democracy. Are either of these preferable to Omelas? What about *our* society?]

Perhaps they might try to reconstruct a society based on all the good things in Omelas, only without the one obviously bad thing—the suffering child. Call it New Omelas. But in creating New Omelas they have not done away with the very thing they most reject—the child's suffering. They have merely left it behind in the hopes of not contributing *directly* to its suffering. But it is unclear how this walking away absolves them of responsibility any more than those who remain. It is true that whatever life they make for themselves outside Omelas will be, to some extent, their own life. They will no longer be enjoying life directly at the expense of the child kept in misery. But it seems sure that the life they make (in New Omelas or elsewhere) will be colored by their former life in Omelas, even (or especially) to the extent they might reject what happens in Omelas and try to make their new life a negation of their life there. Those who walk away and attempt to form a society more perfect than Omelas (that is, one without the child's suffering), nevertheless carry the child's suffering with them as a model of what *not* to do. How is this different from the ones who remain? They too, as we will see, use the child's suffering as a kind of negative example for their own behavior toward others.

[Brendan: What do you think? Would the founders of a "New Omelas" still be (implicitly) relying on their knowledge of the "old" Omelas, and the child that suffered?]

The ones who walk away from Omelas are not necessarily bad people. In rejecting the suffering of the child, they show sympathy toward that suffering. However, one can easily imagine those who walk away being self-satisfied, in the way that many who "stand on principle" look down upon those who "compromise" with brute reality: "At least my happiness is *no longer* at the child's expense," they might say. "It is my own doing."

I think part of the explanation for this way of thinking is that the ones who walk away have misunderstood what constitutes human freedom, and how this freedom relates to our moral life. They believe freedom is to be as Zigong wishes to be: free of all imposition on and from others. But real human freedom is not to be completely liberated from the power of others and their demands. **Human freedom is not to try to walk away from all constraints, but to interact with these constraints so as to mitigate their potentially negative effects.** Those who walk away see freedom as a form of negative liberty. Those who remain have a deeper understanding of their own freedom. They realize that to be free in the sense of having no limits on what one does is impossible. Morality is doing the best we can with what we are given—to work with the powers that be, the world as we find it, to create the best self and world we can imagine. This is ultimately an ameliorist approach to morality**. Sometimes the best we can do is to slow down the pace at which things get worse, as we do when we, say, opt for the lesser of two evils.**

[Brendan: What do you think about the author's ideas about nature of human freedom?]

As was mentioned earlier, the narrator tries constantly to convince us that the people of Omelas are simultaneously happy and real people—that they are not flat characters. They are not stupid or simple. The narrator struggles to "make us believe" that this kind of happiness is possible. Why is this such a struggle? I think the word the narrator is searching for to describe the life of the people of Omelas is that they are *flourishing*. And no wonder the narrator cannot make us understand this situation. For many of us, the word happiness connotes a purely subjective inner experience (or state) that is different for each person. Happiness is both intense and necessarily fleeting. It cannot be sustained for long periods of time due to the intrusion of life's complexities. Also, what makes you happy will not necessarily make me happy. The thought of a night at the opera fills you with joy and me with dread. So, if the people of Omelas are consistently happy, their happiness must be so easily achieved and maintained that it can only be of the simplest variety, working on the simplest of people.

Flourishing, on the other hand, requires a broader view. It requires us to look at the overall trajectory of one's life. As Aristotle says,

> *"[T]he best and most complete virtue [arête; excellence]…will be [expressed] in a complete life. For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy."*[14]

This is why the narrator can describe the people of Omelas as genuinely happy, without being simpletons. The overall arc of their life is a good one. They are raised in a virtuous and discriminating society, and they affirm the overall goodness of this society, even after, especially after, they learn of the existence of the suffering child. The narrator tells us:

Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child they are so gentle with children.[15]

The existence of the child requires the people of Omelas to locate the source of their own happiness outside themselves and their own subjective experience. Walking away is an attempt to break this link. It says, "My happiness is my own affair, my own doing." For those who remain, the child serves as an anchor, a constant living reminder that our happiness requires others, and that others' happiness requires us.

But this is a very high price.

All the possibilities inside or outside Omelas seem to be morally compromised because of the child's suffering. We are right to think, as those who walk away seem to think, that the world would be better if the

child did not suffer—better to have a world where this child (like all children) need not suffer. **Thus, releasing the child may end up being the *most* moral thing one could do in this situation, but it is not the *only* moral thing.** Morality and immorality do not necessarily exist in a binary world of 1s and 0s, of all or nothing, of right and wrong.

[Brendan: What do you think of the claim here—that releasing the child isn't the "only" moral thing? Would Le Guin agree? Do you?]

Ultimately, my critique of the ones who walk away is that while they hold Omelas to be a place of unacceptable evil precisely because of the child's situation, they have no plan for how to ameliorate the child's suffering. This amelioration could only come, if it is ever to come, from within Omelas itself. Those who remain are at least in a position to eventually realize, and to make others realize, that the moral duty which ties them all to these admittedly grotesque "terms" is of their own making (and it is made by all of them, together). And then, if and when they eventually reach that day of realization, and the child is brought out of that room, out of its misery, and is comforted, and made happier, and it is decreed that from that day forward no child will be kept in such misery ever again, the ones who will do this, with no opposition, the ones who will have moved even closer to their moral perfection, will be the ones who remain in Omelas, not the ones who walk away.

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About the Author:

Paul Firenze is Assistant Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston, where he teaches classes in ethics, philosophy and religion.