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## Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas”: Would You Walk Away?

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When, if ever, is it right to sacrifice someone for the greater good?

Ursula K. Le Guin’s (1929-2018) fantasy short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” raises this question, among others.<sup>[1]</sup>

This essay introduces her story and explores its philosophical implications.

### 1. The Dark Secret

The story begins with an elaborate description of a summer festival in an exquisitely beautiful and happy city called Omelas. It’s as though we’re being shown a travel brochure for a place that seems too good to be true.

Le Guin says if you can imagine an even better city than the one she describes, then think of that instead.

Of course, there’s a twist.

Somewhere in the city is a closet where an emaciated child, referred to only as “it,” is locked up. It’s smeared with its own feces, covered with sores, and constantly afraid. Occasionally, the door opens and people will look at it, kick it, and make it stand up.

It says, “I will be good,” but the door always shuts without anyone making a reply.

Why?

Because the denizens of Omelas made a deal – with what or whom, we aren’t told, but apparently dark magic was involved.

The deal is that Omelas would be a paradise provided that a child’s happiness is sacrificed. Whether this applies to just this one child, or a succession of children, is unspecified. In any event, every adult

knows that a single kind word spoken to this child would violate the terms of the deal.

We don’t know what the consequences of breaking the deal would be because we don’t know what things were like before. But certainly Omelas would be a much less happy place overall, even though this child would be happier.

### 2. Walking Away

When the children of Omelas reach adolescence, they’re told the dark secret, and some see the child. They react with shock and horror. Most get over it eventually. But a few don’t. And some leave Omelas:

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 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.<sup>[2]</sup>

### 3. The Greater Good

One question this story raises is *when, if ever, is it permissible to sacrifice one person for the good of a greater number of people?*

Different moral theories provide different answers.<sup>[3]</sup>

According to *consequentialism*, the morally best actions are those that create the most good. A common version of consequentialism, *utilitarianism*, maintains that happiness is what’s good.

So if imprisoning the child creates more happiness overall, then a utilitarian would say that it’s right.

Likewise, if releasing this child reduces total happiness, the utilitarian would say that it’s wrong. Some take this to be a counterexample to utilitarianism.

According to *deontology*, we ought to obey certain moral rules even when obedience doesn’t create the best outcomes—think of the “Thou Shalts” and “Thou Shalt Nots” like the Biblical Ten Commandments.

Some deontologists say these rules can never be violated, others think we may break them in extreme circumstances.

Immanuel Kant, an important 18th Century deontological thinker, believed that it's absolutely wrong to treat people as mere instruments to our own goals, without respecting them as people.

Abusing this child so that others could be happy breaks this rule. So Kant would say that the deal's wrong.

Here's a challenge for Kant: sometimes it seems right to sacrifice innocents for the greater good. For instance, distributing an effective vaccine when we can predict a few people will react adversely to it, and drafting people into fighting just wars against their wills, seem justifiable.

Why are these things okay if imprisoning the child is wrong?

#### 4. Living with injustice

The story also raises the question *how would, and should, we react to the discovery that our society, our livelihood, also depends on something terrible?*

Depending on your views, that terrible thing could be racism, abortion, animal cruelty, exploitation of the environment, economic injustices of many types, or something else.

Omelasians react with shock when they first learn about the mistreated child. For most of them, the shock wears off. That's psychologically realistic. We hear about terrible things on the news, but we typically change the channel and go on with our lives. Only a conscientious few continue to be concerned.

What's the point of being concerned if you don't do anything about it? Those in the story who walked away could have freed the child, but they chose to simply walk away. Maybe that makes them as complicit in the abuse as anyone else. But maybe they're right to think that the consequences of violating the deal would be unacceptable.

So why walk away?

Perhaps, even though they think the consequences of freeing the child are unacceptable, they don't want to participate in the abuse. Maybe they think happiness that comes from *this* isn't worth having. Or maybe they can't *truly* be happy in these conditions.

Could you?

## 5. Conclusion

This story probes our intuitions about what can, and what can't, be done for the greater good and, indeed, what "the greater good" even is.

It also challenges us to ask ourselves what we'd walk away from, and why. If you think you'd walk away from Omelas, what – if anything – should *you* walk away from, in real life?

### Notes

[1] In her prelude to "The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas" in her 2015 anthology, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters & Compass Rose*, paperback ed., (UK: Gollancz, 254-55), Le Guin credits American philosopher and psychologist William James for inspiring her to write this story. She reports that in James's 1891 essay, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics* 1(3): 330-354, he had considered a thought experiment in which one innocent person is sacrificed for the greater good, though his brief rendition wasn't fleshed out in the way Le Guin's story is. James's essay can also be found in James, William, 1960, *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality and other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 184-215).

[2] Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas" in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters & Compass Rose*, paperback ed., (UK: Gollancz, 262).

[3] The moral theories discussed here are *utilitarianism*, which is a specific form of *consequentialism*, and Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics. For introductions to these, see [Consequentialism and Utilitarianism](#) by Shane Gronholz and [Deontology: Kantian Ethics](#) by Andrew Chapman.

The ethical issues raised by the story could also profitably be analyzed from, at least, the perspectives of *virtue ethics* – which sees the development and display of good character or virtue as central to ethics, *John Rawls' theory of justice* – which requires that ethical decisions be made from an unbiased perspective, seeing the issue from the perspective of each individual affected by the action, to ensure fairness, as well as *the African ethic of Ubuntu* – which values harmonious relationships and the promotion of community. For introductions to these theories, see [Virtue Ethics](#) by David Merry, [John Rawls' 'A Theory of Justice'](#) by Ben Davies, and [The African](#)

Ethic of Ubuntu by Thaddeus Metz. Other theories could be used to analyze the story also.

## References

James, William. 1891. "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics* 1(3): 330-354. Reprinted in James, William. 1960. *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality and other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 184-215).

Le Guin, Ursula K. 1973. "The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas," in Le Guin, Ursula K. 2015. *The Wind's Twelve Quarters & Compass Rose*, paperback ed. (UK: Gollancz, 254-262).

## Related Resource

[UrsulaKLeguin.com](http://UrsulaKLeguin.com)

## Related Essays

Consequentialism and Utilitarianism by Shane Gronholz.

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Virtue Ethics by David Merry

John Rawls' 'A Theory of Justice' by Ben Davies

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## About the Author

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