



The Child in the Cellar: A Kantian Perspective on Moral Dilemmas in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin

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ABSTRACT

Deontological Ethics is a philosophical approach for justifying an action under universal moral laws. In Deontology, Immanuel Kant presents the three universal formulations of the Categorical Imperative to distinguish human actions from a universal viewpoint. Many scholars have applied Kant's *Categorical Imperative* to different literary works, but inadequate research has been conducted on the exploration of the *Categorical Imperative* and its three formulations in Le Guin's short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. By using the qualitative research method, this study aims to examine the ethical dilemmas in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* through the lens of Kantian Categorical Imperative. The findings of the study suggested that *The ones who walk away from Omelas* are mediocre in moral justification, neither prefer every action universalized nor reject those who will to action. This analysis highlights how Kant's ethical principle explores the moral dilemmas in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*.

1. Introduction

Categorical Imperative is an ethical principle of Immanuel Kant's Deontological Moral Philosophy that, regardless of consequences, focuses the significance of moral rules, principles, or duties to distinguish the sense of right and wrong. It emphasizes on intentions behind any particular action to determine moral values and adherence to certain ethical principles to act rather than the outcome of an action. In the words of Udayakumar and Babu (2021), Deontological theory is meant to guide and assess what kind of person (in terms of character traits) we are and should be. Thus, Kantian Ethical Philosophy provides a rational insight into moral discourse, along with a set of codes to explore societal or individual will to action on ethical grounds. However, Deontology is a duty-based approach to consider each action on a universal point of consideration. "It is derived from the Greek word *deont*, which refers to that which is binding. Kant's deontological philosophy stemmed from his belief that humans possess the ability to reason and understand universal moral laws that they can apply in all situations." (Udayakumar & Babu, 2021).

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Immanuel Kant is a German Philosopher who is often celebrated for his contribution to ethical discourse in modern philosophy. The Categorical Imperative is the primary ethical and universal principle of moral concepts that Kant focuses on in Deontology. In the book *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1775), Kant presents three formulations of the Categorical Imperative principle: The formula of Universal Law, the Formula of Humanity as an End in itself, and the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends. According to Kant, each of these four formulations produces the same conclusion regarding the morality of any particular action. Thus, “each of these formulas offers a step-by-step procedure for determining the morality of any particular action.” (Prichard, 2024). However, scholars have applied Deontological Ethics in different works of literature, but there is inadequate research available on Kantian Deontology applied to *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin. Therefore, the present study aims to apply Kantian Deontology to explore moral values in the story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* to determine the moral standard of the characters through the lens of the Categorical Imperative principle. This section introduces the study by discussing the background, followed by the problem statement, research aims, research gap, objectives and questions, the significance, and the limitations.

1.1. Background of the Study

Deontology is a philosophical approach that observes intention behind any action to determine it in an ethical framework. This approach deals with an action on rational grounds by using the Categorical Imperative principle to distinguish right from wrong. Kant models the moral philosophy on science, seeking to ascertain universal laws that govern the world. Therefore, the philosopher emphasizes on Categorical Imperative to rationalize ethical principles within the formulations of the Categorical Imperative, distinguishing moral values of will to action universally.

1.2. Problem Statement

Morality is an act of intention while performing some deeds. Taking will to action into consideration, Deontology focuses on intentions rather than the consequences of actions. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* is a multidimensional work of literature posing ethical dilemmas, based on citizens' intentions. Despite this, no research has been conducted on the application of Kantian Deontology to *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin. Therefore, this study aims to apply the Categorical Imperative on *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* to explore the intentions of Omelas' Citizens and their moral code of conduct from a universal viewpoint.

1.3. Research Aim and Objectives

There is inadequate research available on the application of Kantian Deontology to *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. The research aims to examine the ethical dilemmas in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* through the lens of Kantian Categorical Imperative.

- To examine how the three formulations of the Categorical Imperative from Kantian Deontology apply to the selected text.
- To explore the three formulations from Kantian Deontology, distinguish the moral dilemmas in the selected text.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How are the three formulations of the Categorical Imperative principle from Kantian Deontology reflected in the selected text?
2. How are the three formulations of the Categorical Imperative principle from Kantian Deontology distinguish the moral dilemmas in the selected text?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The current findings of this study are an addition to Ethical Philosophy and Literary Discourse. These findings can be used for a comparative study applied to different works of literature. Furthermore, in light of Deontological Ethics, these findings explore moral dilemmas in contemporary world affairs and societal concerns, mostly in terms of suffering in the marginalized social class and child labor.

1.8. Limitations of the Study

This research is limited to Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. The three formulations of categorical imperative provide a space for exploration, making the analysis subjective in nature and open to alternative understanding. In chapter one, the context of the study has been introduced. The parts or the pathway to the study, including the research questions of

objective, gaps, aim, significance, and limitations, are discussed respectively. In chapter two of the study, the existing Literature has been reviewed to provide an overview of the works of scholars on Deontological Ethics and the application of Kant's three formulations of Categorical Imperative on existing literary works. In chapter three, a detailed view of methodology has been provided. A qualitative approach, along with textual analysis, has been used in the current study. Moreover, the three formulations of the Categorical Imperative of Kantian Deontological Ethics have been applied in the text, respectively. As well as the theoretical framework has also been discussed in the chapter to assist in portraying the Deontological Ethics as a universal moral code in each sphere of Life.

2. Literature Review

In the Ethical philosophy, Immanuel Kant, in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), constructs the possibility of a moral philosophy that fits the conception of reason as developed in the critique of pure reason, giving room for human freedom based on willful action and self-imposed reason. According to Bordum (2002), Kant believes he has found this formula in what he calls the "Categorical Imperative". For Kant, there are two different ways of justifying an action. One is with reference to a purpose considered to be good, the other with reference to a principle or rule, which is self-evidently good. Kant observes that morality as a duty-based principle of action is contingent on natural law. If the will, then it comes in hypothetical Personal desire, need, and want, then it comes in imperative. Whereas, in categorical Imperative, Kant believes in universal and rational command of action. Therefore, distinguishing the will to action, Kant rationally considers the rightness or wrongness.

"For Kant, what makes an action good is nothing other than the goodwill behind that action. What the goodwill is, specifically, in deontology is an expression of one's character and reason, which informs the nature of a good act as good when it is derived from said will." (Pertierra, 2019). Intentions behind any action is what Kantian Deontology observes on Kantian deontology observes intentions behind an action. According to Pertierra (2019), for Kant, one could act while think about the act as a means conducive realizing some desired end, but if the act's rationale stop there, then the act would not exhibit moral worth; only when the rationale is sourced from the good will even over and against any intended usefulness or detested "fruitlessness" in achieving an intended effect, will that rationale express the act's worth. Thus, Kantian deontology in the Categorical Imperative emphasizes morality based on certain principles. And following the rational rules, an action can be observed as morally right.

In the contemporary world, moral deontology is one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden, or permitted. Deontology falls within the domain of moral theories that guide and assess gift choice of what one ought to do. The choice that is applicable for every individual, regardless of situation and condition, is permitted and belongs to the first ethical formulation of the Categorical Imperative. On the other hand, the choice is based on individual desire and need and can't be applied universally; it is morally wrong.

"The most popular formalistic version of the Categorical Imperative is less important than the other two—prohibiting treating other people simply as means and instituting the 'Kingdom of Ends'" (Boldyrev, 2012). 'Kingdom of Ends' in the Categorical Imperative provides a unified approach and duty to act upon some shared laws. The Humanity formulation of the Categorical Imperative states that one should never act in such a way that one treats humanity. This is often seen as introducing the idea of 'respect' for persons, for whatever it is that is essential to humanity. Obiagwa and A. apply Kant's moral philosophy to contemporary society. "Kant argues that a person is good or bad depending on the motivation of their actions and not on the goodness of consequences." (A., 2019). According to Bhattacharyya (2021), Kant claimed that human beings' innate capacity to reason should be the pillar of morality and that it is this capacity to reason that makes human beings morally powerful. Hence, considering the above-mentioned literature, Deontology is an act of universalizing the moral code of conduct.

3. Methodology

This research paper uses textual analysis to explore the Ethical Dilemmas in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. Textual analysis is the method of interpreting any text. Using textual analysis as a central technique to explore the moral complexity of the text simplifies the study, focusing on the narrative text. Along with this, a qualitative research design is used to analyze the text. The analysis follows a literary and philosophical evaluation of the story in light of Kant's ethics. Kant presents his Ethical Philosophy as a new yet rational approach to moral laws in the book *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in 1785. This study applies the three Formulations of Categorical Imperative to the story, exploring the moral dilemmas. The text of the story is taken from *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* by Ursula K Le Guin's short story collection, published in 1975.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding the current study is Immanuel Kant's Ethical theory, particularly the Categorical Imperative, which explores the moral dilemmas while considering the three formulations along with the universal maxim. By applying the three formulations of categorical imperative, the study analyzes the findings respectively. The first formulation is

universalization that deals with the story in a universal viewpoint, whether the decisions taken by Omelas' folks are morally good or not. Using the term 'maxim', the study put each of the decisions on a universal code of conduct to distinguish the broader universalized consequences of the actions. In the story of Le Guin, this formulation observes the individual suffering as an act of universal law in order to determine moral justification. Secondly, the formulation of treating humanity as an end in itself reinforces the study to explore the child's suffering as a means to an end, regardless of human dignity. Owing to this formulation, the present study evaluates the suffering of one for the happiness of many on ethical grounds. The third formulation suggests that an action should only be done if that contributes to universal moral laws. This formulation explores the decision of the ones who walk away from Omelas, and the intentions of the people could contribute to universal ethics. This framework provides a literary and philosophical pathway to interpret the character's will to action within the story, considering each decision on Kantian ethical insight.

4. Data Analysis & Results

The application of Kantian Categorical Imperative on the literature by Ursula K. Le Guin explores ethical dilemmas from a universal standpoint. Each of Kant's formulations distinguishes between the will to act, on moral grounds, regardless of the productive consequences. Using ethical maxims of Kant, one ascertains an action on the grounds of moral values.

The first formulation of Categorical Imperative is **The Formula of Universal Law**, dealing with the action that is done by one and at the same time could be applied to everyone. This prefers a universal case for an action. According to Kantian ethics, an action in line with universalization should be observed when everyone is doing it without contradiction. In the context of this formulation, the characters and their actions in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* are distinguished respectively. Describing the intentions of Omelas' citizens, the author mentions:

" 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 3 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."

Just to highlight the context, in the story, A child is in prison. And the citizens of Omelas believe that their happiness and prosperity rely on the child's being in the prison. They are all aware of the child's suffering, indeed. As aforementioned description highlights the dual sense of awareness, their happiness and miseries. Now their actions regarding this decide the moral codes. Before putting the text into a universal maxim, the point, "**will to action**," should be considered while discovering the intentions of the citizens under the Kantian ethical framework. Since the philosopher believes in the intention of an action rather than the result, therefore "**will to action**" needs to be taken into consideration while examining an action under the Categorical Imperative.

However, the above-mentioned textual reference advocates individual suffering for the greater good. In light of the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, could the maxim of individual suffering for the contentment of many be universalized without contradiction? What if the same practices were done and became a universal law? Resultantly, universalization of individual suffering for the greater good induces a perpetual violation of individual rights. So, Omelas' citizens intentionally endorse the child's suffering without guilt for the collective joy. This shows that from a universal viewpoint, the rights of individuals matter. Violating those rights might be productive politically and socially, but it is an act of dehumanization universally. Therefore, such actions, despite achieving a greater good, are never justified until it is universally applicable.

According to the Formula of Universal Law, the suffering child's existence beneath Omelas' general happiness results in a moral impasse. This formulation raises the question of whether an action would still be guided by its principle if it could not one day come to will that this principle should become a universal law. Omelas (the dystopian city) can't be held together if you're able to universalize "It's ok to permit one innocent person to be sacrificed for the happiness of others". Individual dignity would be meaningless if all cultures were to buy into this notion. Because they are aware of the child's condition, the residents of Omelas live in a state of moral compromise. While some choose to visit the child, others choose to stay away from it, but everyone accepts its suffering as needed. This unspoken consensus illustrates how everyone has failed to follow a rule.

"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."

Kantian ethics argues that the happiness of many could never be justified by the suffering of an individual. To assume that if this maxim were universalized, then in all situations, each of the individuals would be in a harsh condition for the greater good. As per Kant, universalizing the maxim leads to a contradiction where justice and equality are maintained with the promotion of individual suffering for the majority. Hence, the intentions of the citizens under the universal maxim in the story are impermissible under the Kantian Categorical Imperative.

The passage's description of Omelas' ethical framework reveals a society that has made the deliberate decision to uphold its happiness by sustaining one person's suffering. Under Kant's Formula of Universal Law, the reasoning behind this choice—that the comfort of a single child is subordinated to the happiness of thousands—fails. The idea of intrinsic human dignity would be eliminated if this principle were to be applied universally, which would suggest that any individual could be sacrificed for the benefit of the group. The contradiction is that a system that justifies suffering to achieve prosperity cannot coexist with justice and equality. The citizens exhibit a profound ethical inconsistency as they continue to live within a framework that transgresses the fundamental principles of moral law, despite being aware of the terms.

What's more, the permanency of the child's condition is not just a storytelling conceit but an effect that mirrors how society has institutionalized moral compromise. The refusal to provide even the smallest amount of relief, light, food, or ease underscores how much the people of Omelas have bought into this bargain. For Kantian ethics, it is not about the outcome of an action but about its principle. The point here is that one life can never be debased to save many, and any society insisting otherwise crumbles. When you look at the story through this lens, it is a kind of quiet critique but quite powerful."

The second Formula of Categorical Imperative, The Formula of Humanity, prefers to treat people as ends, not as means. According to this formulation, one should not use humans as a tool to fulfill any purpose rather treat them as ends in themselves with dignity. However, the case with the story is identical to the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative. It can be seen, the child has been put in a filthy dark place, and by doing the people of Omelas have achieved the city's prosperity and happiness. As the narrator describes,

"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 is actually 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."

Observing the given description, the people of Omelas treat the child as a tool for their benefit, disregarding human dignity and respect.

"The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, and 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!"

All the citizens of Omelas violate human values, using them as a mere means to an end. Therefore, the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative determines that this action of using a child regardless of his inherent dignity is morally wrong. The child's state as it is presented shows a total disdain for Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative. The child is viewed as a necessary sacrifice tool to preserve the joy of the city rather than as an individual with inherent worth. The child's request to be good, the locked door, and the caregivers' silence all indicate that the system has taken away the child's autonomy and dignity. The moral law that requires every human being to be treated as an end in themselves is broken by Omelas' people, who treat the child as a means to an end by allowing this suffering to continue. In addition to being tragic, the child's fear of mop heads, loneliness, and dwindling memories of love and sunlight are also morally repugnant according to Kantian ethics.

The moral failure is further highlighted by the citizens' silence, their refusal to acknowledge the child's humanity or speak to it. The child's cry, "I will be good," is not listened to with empathy but rather with ongoing disregard. The extent of the ethical violation is made clear at this point: the child is conscious, able to remember, and yearns for connection, but is not given even the most fundamental acknowledgement of personhood. According to Kant's Formula of Humanity, moral beings must never treat other people like mere tools. The child in Omelas is reduced to a state in which its humanity is disregarded and its suffering is accepted as normal. The citizens' acts are not only unfair but also essentially immoral as a result of this systemic dehumanization, which is in stark contrast to Kant's moral philosophy.

The third formulation is the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends. This formulation is based on shared laws in a community that are morally distinguished. Moreover, it provides an idea of the kingdom of ends where a community of rational beings is unified by shared laws. The formula in Categorical Imperative emphasizes that each individual should contribute practically as if they were legislating moral laws of the Universe. As the people of Omelas, particularly the ones who know the child's suffering, reject the established moral justification of the community, which promotes the child's suffering for the greater good. In addition, the residents who depart from Omelas decide to leave the city, which promotes injustice.

"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."

This stance of leaving the city, which is morally corrupt, advocates moral autonomy for **the kingdom of Ends**. The ones who walk away from Omelas act in a way that if their actions were legislating the universal codes.

"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."

The place they march towards is unknown and mysterious. But the decision of the departing people symbolizes a contrast between a joyful city and their leaving for a mysterious place where they intend to live with their own ethical values. Their will to action serves to kingdom of ends rather than Omelas' corrupt moral values for the greater good. The essence of the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends is reflected in the choice made by those who leave Omelas. According to this formulation, a moral community is one in which any individual not only behaves morally in harmony with universal laws but also acts as a legislator for those laws. They choose to leave a society that violates the dignity of a single human being, rather than try to overthrow the system or face it head-on. Their silent but determined act of moral autonomy is their departure. They demonstrate their dedication to a moral order where each individual is respected as an end in themselves by declining to take part in a system that views a child as a means to an end.

The mysterious place they are walking toward represents a realm outside the bounds of compromised ethics, where morality is determined by reason and respect for human dignity rather than by expediency or group benefit. Despite being silent and solitary, their action carries the weight of universal moral law. They behave as though their decision to leave would become a rule for all sane people. This is consistent with Kant's idea of the Kingdom of Ends, in which people defend justice by abstaining from injustice out of principle rather than by using force or rebellion. Using this perspective, the narrative transforms into a profound meditation on moral bravery and the silent power of ethical conviction.

In a nutshell, putting the storyline and actions of the characters under the universal maxim of Categorical Imperative, Kantian deontology explores contradictions universalizing the maxim. Therefore, moral dilemmas in the story of Le Guin through the Kantian Deontological lens are comprehensively reflected and distinguished from a universal viewpoint. Thus, the intentions and actions portrayed in this short story have explored morality differently, which, in Kantian Deontological Ethics, fail to be universalized.

5. Conclusion

To conclude the study, distinguishing an action based on emotional and personal levels might justify the ethical value at one end, but until it becomes a universal code of conduct without contradiction is morally degraded. However, the actions which are taken as a mere means to an end, though that result is morally justified but the intentions behind the will to action can never be justified. As in the case of the child, Omelas' citizens were blessed by the child's suffering, no matter how the human values were degraded, but the greater good was promoted by the people. To emphasize the rightness and wrongness of an action, one observes that the action can universally lead to a justified conclusion. Otherwise, man himself measures the things based on emotional and personal perspective, which is highly impermissible from Kantian Ethics.

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