

Arielle Hornbaker

Professor Farrell

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In the Context of Omelas: The Consequence of Choice

“Your decisions today define your tomorrow.” However cliché, this quote by John Maxwell, a leadership author and speaker, rings true throughout our lives in relation to our own destiny. In fact, many of our choices affect more than just us. With so many factors and people to consider in our daily lives, every choice we make – however small – impacts the course of others’ lives. Whether it is deciding to move, applying for a job, or even choosing what to eat for the day, each of these decisions alters the very society we are a part of. Even more impactful than the decisions we make are the decisions that govern the manner in which American society chooses to operate. Though a majority of these choices are made for the benefit of most of the population, some of the decisions that benefit us raise real ethical dilemmas in the manner in which they hurt others. The question then must be asked: do we have a choice in the ethical decisions made by our society? At what point do we become complicit in the choices made by others that we do not agree with? Is it possible to simply walk away? For purposes of remaining integrated within society, individuals have no choice but to comply with the ethically questionable practices of our government and national businesses. The best way for individuals to bring about change is to fight unethical systems from within society, rather than to give up and walk away from the choices made for us.

In the short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” author Ursula K. Le Guin examines ethical integrity, and the role of accountability in a society that violates the human rights of others. The short story follows a dream-like utopia that harnesses its power from an

imprisoned child “so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes” (Le Guin) and “its buttocks and thighs...a mass of festered sores” (Le Guin). The condition of this small child is horrific. Destined to live his life in a windowless cellar surrounded by his own excrement and the mops he fears, his suffering is the fuel for the continued function of Omelas. Even more horrific than his condition is the knowledge this supposedly glorious society has of his suffering and their active decision not to help this child so long as they benefit from his suffering. When the other children of Omelas eventually discover the fate this child is subjected to, they resolve to judge those around them that allow the child to endure this madness. Eventually, after years of enjoying the benefits of their society, these same individuals transition from feelings of indifference, to rationalization, and lastly to acceptance of the boy’s condition. Though these citizens are aware of the misery and abuse of this young child, they actively choose their happiness and a world in which “not even a kind word [is] spoken to the child” (Le Guin) rather than a dismal world where everyone is free. In their rationalization of this decision, the people of Omelas fail to take accountability for the consequences of their actions. Though they recognize the child suffers, they accept their society’s methods of functioning in an act of helplessness. They fail to attempt any means of rescuing this child or improving his quality of life at the cost of their utopia, though they are fully capable of doing so. It is the widespread belief of Omelas that nothing can be done. Instead, citizens not only choose their life of perfect extravagance and beauty, they assume this is their only choice. In actuality, they fail to confront the idea they are bound by choice of the abuse of the child in exchange for their utopia over an unknown future of freedom for all. These citizens are not helpless to the powers that be that torture the child, rather they are the executioners of his fate.

Despite the complicity of most of Omelas, there are some who do not accept the unethical treatment of the child. Within Le Guin's utopia, there are only two viable options for the people in Omelas after they learn the secret of the town's success. Most citizens choose to stay and helplessly accept the abuse of the child. Still, a small number of others choose to walk away and not participate in this society. Throughout the text this is described as admirable, as these people "leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back...but they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas" (Le Guin). The cryptic last sentence of the text implies the ones who walk away from Omelas are on the right path as they are the only citizens that have a sense of direction and know where they are going. They are boundless. Though this free way of living is desirable, it still fails to confront the issue at hand. While citizens have the choice to walk away and choose to do so to free themselves, there is still a child suffering in the basement while they walk around assuming the moral high ground. The ones that walk away are revered and pat on the back for a job well done, while the moral atrocity they were so disgusted by in the first place falls to the wayside. These citizens only walk away to save their own moral compass, rather than out of revulsion and concern for the state of the child. If they truly were dedicated to the human liberty and freedom they claim to protect, they would make attempts to rescue the child and improve his quality of life no matter the cost. For the people of Omelas, it is not as simple a decision as either passive acceptance or walking away. Citizens have every means necessary to rescue this child at their expense. Instead, they choose not to.

Though the people of Omelas live an idyllic life in a glamorous society, their choices and the themes of the story directly correlate with modern industrialized society. Comparable to the people of Omelas, members of developed nations make unethical decisions daily. For example,

the vastly popular fast fashion brands like H&M and Forever 21 that dominate clothing supply in developed countries “contract out the production to unregistered vendors that do not have to abide by any laws” (Nguyen) and are not required “to provide safe working conditions to these workers” (Nguyen). This means many of the clothing purchased around the world today is not done so in an ethical manner. More specifically, the individuals that manufacture these clothing items are not being treated with humanity in the wages they are paid and the factory conditions they are subjected to. As members of a developed nation, most Americans have knowledge of the horrors of sweatshop labors, despite purchasing and regularly using the items manufactured in them. Although individuals are aware of these practices, they blatantly ignore the appalling conditions employees are forced to endure and continue buying products that contribute to these abhorrent practices. Additionally, widely purchased beauty and cleaning brands like Johnson & Johnson, L’Oreal, Clorox, and Revlon employ experiments on animals as a tactic to test products and ensure product safety for consumers (PETA). Though individuals may not recognize these specific brands for these practices, it is an accepted fact in society that the beauty and cleaning industries rely on animal testing when developing their products. Still, these brands are some of the most famous and popular beauty and cleaning brands in the industry. In the same way all the people of Omelas are responsible for the abuse of the child, individuals in modern society are responsible for the continuation of unethical real-world practices like sweatshops and animal testing through their continued business with these companies. In the digital age, individuals have every opportunity to research ethical brands and choose not to use them. Instead, modern citizens are just as complicit in these actions as the people of Omelas.

In the world of Omelas, Le Guin suggests individuals have the option of walking away from a society they do not agree with morally. This is neither a viable option nor solution in a

modern context. Integrated within our society are unfair practices meant to take advantage of consumers and protect the best interests of corporate America. Many of the items produced unethically are necessary for the societal function and life of the consumer. For example, the inclusion of boilerplate contracts following the terms and conditions of common technological, medicinal, and even food purchases – each industries with questionable moral practices and working conditions – force the consumer to consent to practices and side effects that cannot be understood due to the dense and confusing language within the agreement. Moreover, this manner of written contract provides the consumer with no choice but to agree to things necessary for them to not only function in society, but also to survive. If some individuals were to refuse the necessary medicine needed for their health, they could guarantee the onset of illness, poor quality of life, and even death. These high stakes do not entitle businesses to the right to take advantage of people simply because they have no other choice but to use these products. In this instance, though individuals are forced into complicity, this is not the answer to ethical dilemmas of the consumer. Although it should not be the burden of the citizens to demand reform of these practices in business, the issue ultimately does fall on the consumer to inspire change. Rather than walking away from the problem or helplessly ignoring it, the best way to create change is from within society. Similar to the success of the Delano Grape Strike, Ghandi's Salt March, and the 2011 Bank of America petition (Thorpe), different forms of protests have been successful. Between strikes, boycotts, and petitions, if a given issue garners enough attention, it is entirely possible to demand change from the government and major national corporations. Instead of walking away in a form of disagreement, individuals have an opportunity, and civic duty, to be vocal and demand change of the rampant unethical policies enabled by the lack of regulation in developed countries.

“Your decisions today define your tomorrow.” At the time these words were first spoken, John Maxwell could not have known the impact they would hold, not just in relation to the individual, but also to society at large. Whether making a conscious choice or allowing a decision to fall by the wayside, there are always broad and vastly reaching consequences to an individual’s actions. Even worse than the repercussions of one’s choice, is the knowledge of the atrocity their decision can inflict on others. We are active participants in the fates of others. Our choices define their tomorrows. It is up to us to make choices and participate in activities that will improve the lives of those around us.

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