Beetle in a Box, Issue 1

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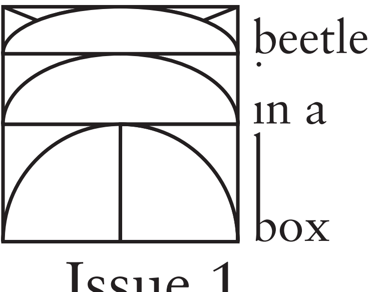

Issue 1

On the name *Beetle in a Box:*

In the iconic *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein posits that we can have meaningful conversations about certain things even if our mental or sensational conceptualization of them differs.

The thought experiment goes as follows: imagine a group of people, each one with a box. Inside each box is something everyone calls a "beetle." While each person can look into their own box, no one is allowed to look into anyone else's. Yet they all chatter meaningfully about beetles–beetles are gross! Beetles are fussy! Beetles are small!

Whether each person's box contains the same thing seems irrelevant. Meaning comes ultimately from the way we use language.

At Beetle in a Box, we hope to prevail in the same way despite potential internal differences, to make our most unique ideas communal. Hopefully, whatever discrepancy there may be in our beetles will only cause more coalescing thoughts and out-of-the-box reasoning.

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To our readers,

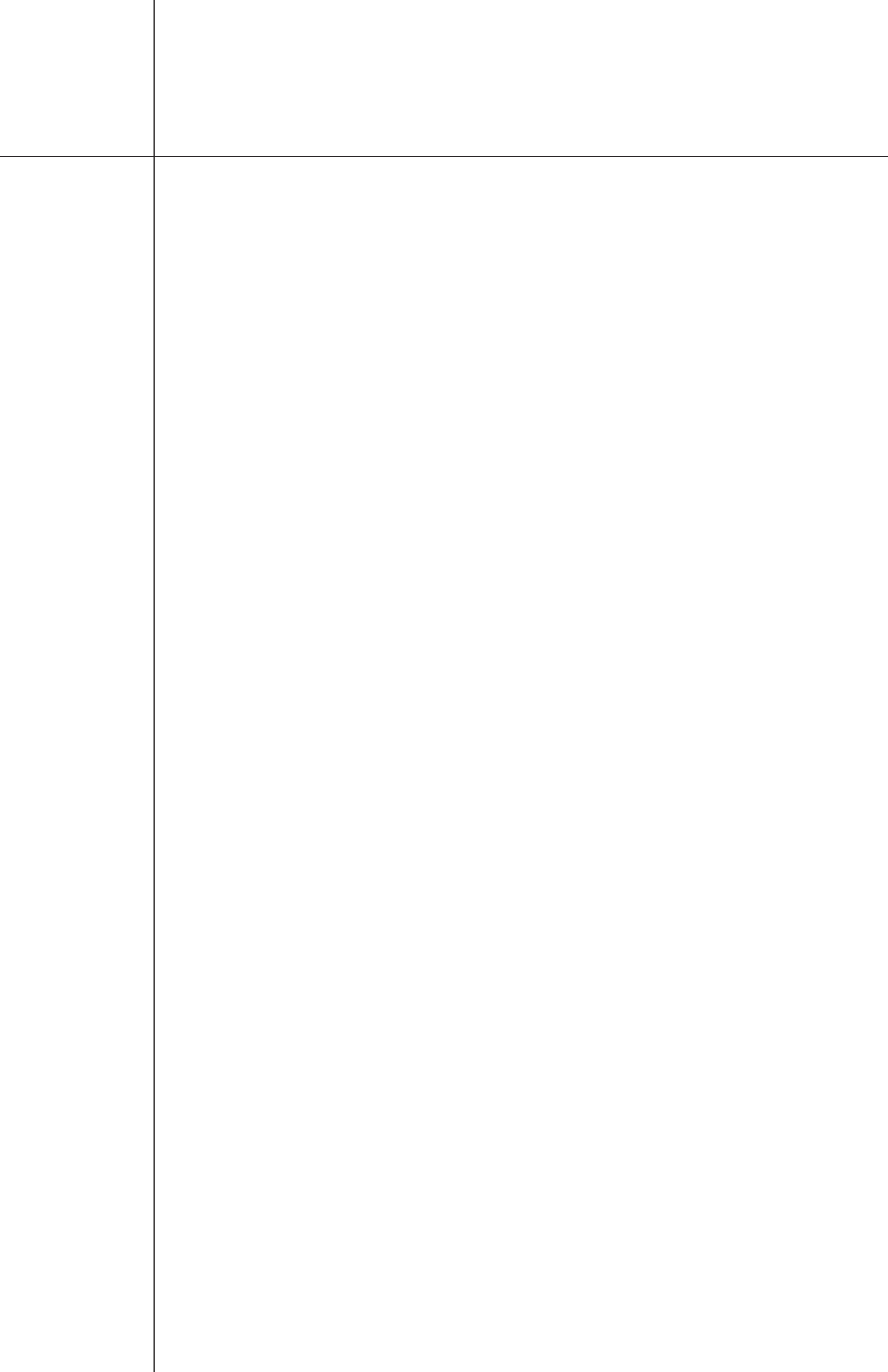
The idea of creating a magazine began over Thai food at Racha Café. We wanted a place where late-night ruminations and far-fetched ideas in crumpled Post-it notes became something tangible. In our minds exist fragments and shards of ideas, in motion. They flicker briefly and are then lost forever. This is beautiful but writing is necessary. Our thoughts may only become real when written down.

So, a magazine. Inspired by the community that bubbled up in the minutes right before and after our classes, we looked to build a place to connect.

With the inaugural edition of Beetle in a Box, we are eager to begin fostering a community. From our peers we gain new levels of understanding—not only of philosophical debates and puzzles but of what philosophy is and why we do it. Discussion with our peers is challenging and fulfilling. It both drains and replenishes us. The act of presenting your most passionate thoughts and absurd musings, laying them bare for the world to see, is deeply humbling yet rewarding. It forces out the very best that one has to offer and enables us to produce something novel.

We seek to center this club and this magazine around what we believe philosophy to be as a discipline. To do philosophy is to affect one another. We envision a space through which philosophy students at UC Berkeley and across the country and even the world can engage with each other. To our readers, we hope that our work affects you–that it brings you into a dialogue with us, challenges you, and transforms you.

Lastly, we want to express gratitude to Berkeley and all of our teachers, peers, and those who contributed to the undergraduate philosophy journals here before us. Take Beetle in a Box as an attempt for us to give back to the intellectual community that has shaped us.



Making beauty in ugly things

By Sichen Li

Perhaps you've also overheard the puzzlingly proverbial "I like men who are a little bit ugly." Or you've faced *David* or *The Starry Night* only to feel a brief pulse of awe before disappointment. You've attended the spectacle, and you can put it in the family newsletter or an instagram story, but where was the promised sublimity?

These two events could be motivated by the same desire.

I think there is a natural longing in all of us to participate in the things we perceive. This participation turns more passive perception into an experience, often by providing amusement or emotional value. We of course remember the day we flirted exhilaratingly with our third-grade crush more than our introduction to fractions.

When faced with beauty, we prefer it when our perspective is a crucial part of that encounter. This special class of beautiful things, which elicit chatter, controversy, and participation, exists primarily in objects we would not initially call beautiful at all.

My paper is about how the things that we find the most beautiful are not exactly conventional, because it is often imperfections that encourage us to participate with our perspective.

* * *

Two things about seeing are worth borrowing from the first essay of John Berger's popular collection, Ways of Seeing.[1] First, the act of seeing more or less involves a choice.

---

1 Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Pengiun

Here I will clarify that my reading of Berger is that we can still receive sensory data passively or absentmindedly, but when we are consciously looking at something we are active and liable. The agency invoked when we look is the beginning of what I call **participation** in the act of seeing.

The question provoked is: how can participation be encouraged?

Secondly, what we see is in a close and curious relation to what we know and who we are. At the height of our participation in seeing, "we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves." This phenomenon would be impossible without what I will call **perspective**. A perspective entails a certain subjectivity. When invoked in an act of seeing, perspective turns it from a one-way event into a relationship.

This is Giorgio de Chirico's 1914 *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*.

I recall looking at it on my computer screen
and bringing to it the perspective of someone
stranded at home in the midst of the pandemic.

It was moving and relatable in a way I cannot replicate
anymore–even the title had a different ring to it back then.

That is a little example of meaningful partic-
ipation. To participate is to bring a certain
perspective. The stronger the perspective, the more
you participate in the act of seeing.

The question now becomes, how can something
encourage participation particularly by empha-
sizing or creating a certain perspective?
Chirico certainly didn't give me the context of the
pandemic. It is accidental that his art should have so
fittingly captured that prevailing physical and mental
state of the world. Sure, you could call him lucky. Or
maybe his craft is just in creating something with the
potential to be universally relatable – the yearning we
find when motion clashes with stillness, or that lonely
mood Edward Hopper also evokes. Somehow, though he
did not release the virus, Chirico has long been complicit
in the creation of a perspective that, like mist, envelops
his art. And from the title we certainly know that a
lens of mystery and melancholy was his intention.

* * *

Let us return to exploring what we find beautiful,
and how some beautiful things gain aesthetic
meaning through our participation with it.

There are certain things so beautiful that you cannot
help but feel, intuitively, that their beauty would
persist even if you did not perceive it, or even if
no one perceived it at all. It is both impossible and

unnecessary to anatomize its beauty with language.
They seem to trigger something in us that we take for
granted. I call these things conventionally beautiful.

Consider Michelangelo's David.

No further discussion of his beauty is required for the
layman viewer. It has become so hailed as beautiful
that he feels it has defied the subjectivity of beauty.
It's as if the sculpture has the same aesthetic
value in the objective world of things and
the subjective world of perception.

But that is not the kind of beauty I want to discuss. Rather,
I want to propose a new kind of beauty, even a new class
of subliminal things, which are not granted to be beautiful,
but explicitly seen to be beautiful. Beautiful objects which,
without perspective, would be utterly unremarkable.

I want to write about how different art forms create
these objects through an emphasis on perspective.

* * *

The Red Wheelbarrow

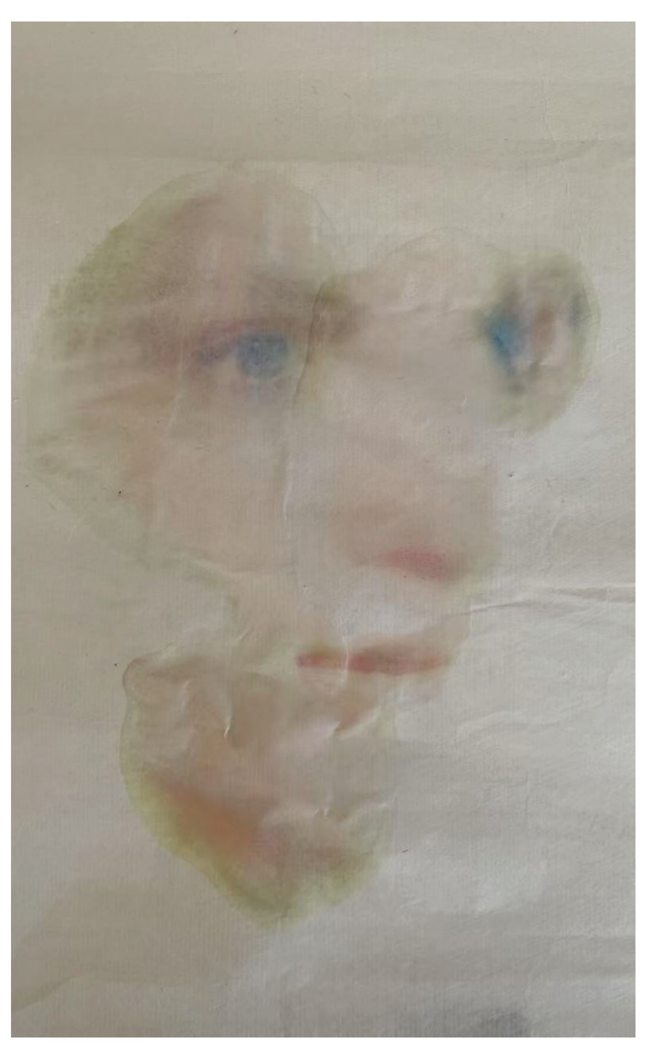
so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Making beauty in ugly things



Art by Sophie Yi

In this William Carlos Williams poem, the wheelbarrow's meaningful existence depends entirely on perspective. The subject of the poem is not so much the wheelbarrow but the speaker's experience of it. The beginning notion of dependency immediately signifies the attachment of human perspective and feeling. There is an unshakable feeling that the wheelbarrow is explicitly being seen. And this feeling intensifies with Williams' many subtle uses of the pathetic fallacy–attributing human qualities to inanimate things. "Glazed" stands out as an adjective. While the notion of "beside" as indicative of spatial relations seems natural enough, considering something "glazed" feels too aesthetically-driven to not be the result of human perception. When we read the poem, we see the wheelbarrow from Williams' perspective, which he has so graciously lent to us.

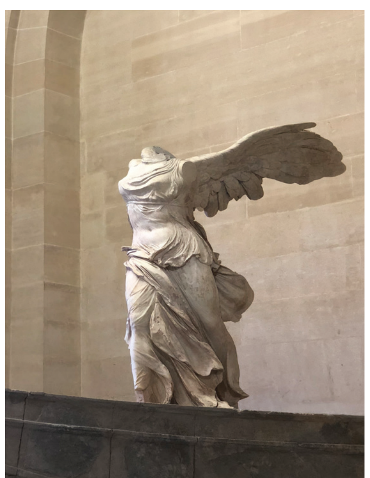
In this way, Williams turns the wheelbarrow into something beautiful without relying on conventionally beautiful language–without rhymes, repetition, certain adjectives or complex phrases. His language is instead careful and attentive, conveying the attentiveness of his experience that alone can make something like a wheelbarrow so sublime.

* * *

Winged Victory presents another function of participation. While in Williams' case it turned something mundane to something beautiful, here we are faced with something deformed. Now perspective is encouraged by imperfection, not ordinariness.

Crucially, the head and arms of the statue are missing and have never been found. One may argue that it is precisely these deficiencies that make the sculpture so striking. Its garment and wings

appear in motion despite being so incapacitated.



Somehow, Winged Victory modifies our naturally-given perspective as living human beings with our heads and limbs attached, so that when we face her we no longer take our biology for granted. We can see our ableness in a new light. She stirs in us an awe for potential. And as we hold her to a high esteem for her perseverance she becomes more than the goddess of victory. Headless, Nike is a symbol of earthly strength.

* * *

Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes are exact replicas of Brillo's commercial packaging for their soap pads. They are constructed out of plywood, not cardboard.
In being so unashamed and audacious, Warhol draws out the art critic and theorist in us all. Most conceptual art induces reactions like this. The beauty at hand is intellectual. By daring us to doubt, we are all forced to engage in

the controversy of this artwork. We can hardly help but ask how is this art? At what point did it become art? And even as we walk past the exhibit sighing at what the art world has now become we find ourselves unable to forget the intellectual exasperation or delight we experienced.

Image © pedrosimoes7 / Brillo Boxes © Andy Warhol 1964

* * *

The three art pieces encourage participation. And what they all have in common, from the mundane to the damaged, is a certain amount of relatability to ourselves. That isn't to say winged women are at all familiar to us, only her deficiencies make her less god-like and more mortal. If she were as divine as intended, she would be perfectly inaccessible. In having the capacity to be personal, they become personable. This is the most foundational kind of participation an art piece can encourage.

And in contrast to the things that are conventionally beautiful, so much that they can appear stale to us, the freedom in our act of looking is amplified by our choice to look at something ordinary, and finding excitement not just in them but in ourselves. For as we experience these things, we confront a relationship between them and ourselves. They are meaningful in such-and-such

ways only because so-and-so are significant to us.

Let's return to the everywoman desire for ugly men. The same thought is applied here.

We like it when "her body is unreal," but when it is really unreal, it becomes foreign. The thought of touching it is slightly discomforting. But we still appreciate it like we do David. In some cases we even pursue a sex symbol, someone representative of attractiveness on society's scale, probably to make ourselves feel valuable. But in doing so we often forgo our aesthetic preference. We forgo the part of us that wants to rebel against the geometrically perfect, against precision, in exchange for personal, endearing beauty we can participate in.

The convenience of illusion

—are we truly committed to reality?

By Nicole Kadi

Imagine you could live your life experiencing the greatest pleasures of the world. All your dreams and greatest desires would come true, whether it's making groundbreaking scientific discoveries or becoming a world-renowned politician. The imaginations are endless. This is what Robert Nozick's experience machine offers: a chance to live your greatest, most pleasurable life. What of reality? Would you choose this reality? More importantly, what does your answer reveal about how committed you truly are to reality?

In Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974), Nozick introduces this thought experiment to counter hedonism. Hedonism is the philosophical view that prioritizes pleasure and avoids pain, claiming that humans are motivated to seek pleasure over pain. In his thought experiment, he poses the question: would you plug into this machine for the rest of your life, knowing you would experience the maximum amount of pleasure your life could bring you? This pleasure would be the same as you would feel in the "real world," as if you had just accomplished something you worked hard for. You would experience that great sense of pleasure within you. Additionally, upon entering the machine, you will have no recollection of doing so. None of your pleasurable experiences will be ruined by the memory that you are now plugged into the machine.[1] However, Nozick argues that many would not opt into the experience machine. He claims that most would feel as though it was "fake," and their lives

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1 Buscicchi, Lorenzo. n.d. "The Experience Machine | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://iep.utm.edu/experience-machine/.

would be void of other factors.[2] For example, let's say John's goal is to run a marathon. In the machine, he can feel the triumph without any of the effort, pain, or perseverance it would take in real life. The physical and mental challenges are not always pleasurable. I believe that many would say that the process matters. The struggle itself gives meaning to the success. It seems as though most would prefer the ability to perform the actions, rather than simply experiencing it. Many also prefer personal development, free will, and relationships and connections with others rather than simply experiencing them.

This reveals something profound: even though we say we enjoy pleasure, we also seem deeply committed to reality. From Nozick's argument, it seems like he believes people find something valuable in living within what is real. But are we really, truly committed to reality? What would happen if the question were flipped? If you were not living within a reality, would you make an effort to seek what is real?

I do not believe people are as committed to reality as they say they are. However, first, let's differentiate perception and reality. While perception is how one understands or interprets things or the world, reality is the way things exist in this world. For example, Sam and Nora are a married couple. Sam believes they are in a happy marriage, both true to their love for one another. Nora, however, is having an affair. Sam's perception is that he and Nora are in a truthful marriage. The reality is that they are not in a truthful marriage. Many may believe and claim that they are committed to the reality of the world. They prefer to live in the real world rather than be blindsided. In Sam's case, most would want to

2 Nozick, Robert. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

know that their spouse is cheating on them. Yet, I also believe that when it comes to most situations, faced with real decisions, most do not follow this commitment to reality. Let's take veganism and animal cruelty, for example. Many agree that animal cruelty is immoral and that we should not mistreat and abuse animals. They know animals suffer in factory farms or are exploited in the fashion industry. Yet only about 1-2% of the global population is vegan.[3] If so many people are aware of this reality, why don't they act on it? Because facing the truth is inconvenient. Changing diets, habits, or wardrobes requires effort, discomfort, and sometimes social alienation. People's values seem to be inconsistent, constantly dependent on what is most comfortable to them.

In the case of the experience machine, Nozick suggests that most would not opt into the machine, claiming that there are other factors, rather than simply pleasure, that people value. However, what if your position was reversed? Imagine you are told your current life is the one being experienced in an experience machine, like the one described in Nozick's thought experiment. You do not know what lies beyond the world you are currently experiencing. You also have no information on what is in the real world either. Additionally, if you choose to stay, you will forget this encounter ever existed. Your current life would not be haunted by the fact that you are currently living in an experience machine that has been and will continue to stimulate all your experiences. Would you choose to leave? Most people probably wouldn't. If they are happy in their current lives, have meaningful relationships, stable routines, and fulfilling

3 Osborn, Jen Flatt. 2023. "Unveiling the Numbers: How Many Vegans Are in the World?" World Animal Foundation. March 30, 2023. https://worldanimalfoundation.org/advocate/how-many-vegans-are-in-the-world/.

The convenience of illusion

Art by Judy Qu

goals, they may feel no need to risk it all for an unknown "reality." Once again, people tend to favor comfort over truth, just as they do when ignoring animal cruelty or environmental degradation.

That leaves the question of how committed we are to this notion of real. Can we truly say that we are uncommitted to it if we do not choose to leave this experience machine that has become our reality? Firstly, I believe people's commitment to this notion of reality is dependent on its convenience to them. Many choose to ignore that many food or fashion brands practice animal cruelty, simply because it is more convenient for them to enjoy those pleasures than face what is going on. People may ignore the ethical problems behind their favorite brands simply because everyone else does too. It feels socially acceptable. However, in the example with the married couple, Sam might ignore Nora's infidelity if no one else knows about it. But if the affair becomes public and threatens his reputation, he might be more motivated to act. Perhaps the social cost, rather than a commitment to truth, is what pushes him to confront reality. In the case of the experience machine, the idea that we would forget that we are told we would be living in an experience machine is the same. Our lives would not be affected. We would have no recollection that our lives are fake. We enjoy and are comfortable with our established lives in the experience machine, so why would we leave? Only those with a deep commitment to truth, dissatisfaction with their current life, or a strong moral compass might choose to leave. But once again, the decision depends on how it impacts them personally.

This preference for convenience shows up in our daily routines too. We're drawn to solutions that promise results with minimal effort: fad diets that require no exercise, AI tools like ChatGPT that deliver answers

instantly, and productivity hacks that streamline work. This isn't inherently bad. It reflects a desire for efficiency. But it also reveals how rarely we choose the difficult path, even if it's more honest or real.

So, are we committed to reality? Only conditionally. Our desire for the truth is often outweighed by the desire for ease, comfort, and familiarity. Whether it's ignoring ethical dilemmas or choosing simulated pleasures over real struggle, we often act in ways that favor convenience over authenticity. Maybe this also leaves us to reconsider Nozick's thought experiment. The experiment was from 1967, but we now live in an age in which easy and quick solutions are more sought after. Perhaps many may prefer to just live in an experience machine, where pleasure is accessible without struggle.

In the end, our answer to Nozick's question, "Would you plug in?", may say a lot about hedonism. But flip the question. Would you unplug? This says more about us. Perhaps the real question is: When faced with the choice between truth and comfort, which do you choose?

The only thing we fear is you

—how *Chernobyl* turned fear of the unknown into fear of ourselves

By Deniz Durusoy

No one familiar with the history of "Weird Fiction"[1] can say that the books of the genre have as important of a role in our lives as they did at the end of the 19th century. Back in the good old days when death by polio was a common occurrence and the world was getting ready for the World War(s), writers such as Arthur Machen and E.T.A Hoffman and their sometimes gruesome, or dreadful, or other times thought-provoking stories has shaped what we now call fiction. Nevertheless, those days are long past. Apart from the rare sighting of a horror geek (such as myself) one would rarely see anyone interested in "Weird Fiction" or be aware of the writings of the controversial Lovecraft or the underappreciated Ramsey Campbell. This inability of "Weird Fiction" to find a place in our contemporary media intake is, I believe, not simply a sign of people being bored of it. Instead I argue that our media intake has undergone a great shift, and what we fear and what we no longer fear, or in other words what we nowadays care and not care about, has inevitably changed with it. The impossible–the external forces that might seem out of our control–no longer seem to scare and instead we fear the possible–what we, as humans, are capable of doing. As time moved on and our grasp on nature became more and more firmer, we started to dismiss this external world and imprison ourselves in our internal one. Simply put, I proclaim that *Chernobyl* (the TV show) is able to satisfy a unique need of the contemporary consumer that Weird Fiction is no longer capable of.

The reason why I am able to argue for the existence of

1 To the uninitiated, "Weird Fiction" is a genre of horror fiction which was pioneered by Lovecraft and his fellow writers in Arkham publishing which focus on Cosmic Horror and concepts beyond our understanding.

such a cultural shift lies in the fact that HBO's *Chernobyl* is one of the most important shows of our modern age. In our current age such a proposition may seem absurd, as the manner in which what can be identified as being "important" is still a topic of contention. For example, the proponents of Literary Democracy back the claim that popularity is a clear indication of literary merit, for they believe that the popular opinion carries unassailable wisdom. On the other extreme, literary elitists argue that anything having a taint of popularity is unworthy of even being considered to have passable literary merit. Such extreme takes on the discussion have, as a result, brought out a more relativistic answer to the question of how one can identify a piece of media as being significant. It is now commonplace for individuals to deny the existence of an objective "greatest" (or the most important in our case) when they are faced with such a question and argue that it is in flux dependent on the preferences of an individual. Such a solution at first might seem to be a fulfilling answer, an answer that satisfies everyone in a manner unique to each individual.

In his essay "Establishing the Canon of Weird Fiction," S.T. Joshi refutes such a relativistic solution. His argument mainly stems from the fact that humans by nature have in possession only a finite amount of time to drink up the infinite well of literary, musical, artistic, and other aesthetic products. He argues that whether humanity realizes it or not there must be an ideal way of demarcating which to consume and which to justifiably bypass. He adds that such a demarcation (or canonization according to S.T. Joshi) would "establish certain criteria that will result in the exclusion of or, at any rate, the setting up of a hierarchy for certain works that are seen to be deficient or sub-standard."[2] This argument by the book critic might

2 S.T. Joshi. "Establishing the Canon of Weird Fiction." Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 14 (2003): 333

be seen as making a full circle back to our inability to answer. He however makes the distinction that to form a canon one has to look into contemporary relevance. He agrees with the relativists' claim that the canon (or "the most important") is in flux, yet he disagrees with the point that it is according to the person that the canon changes; rather it is according to the era that the inquiry is being made.[3] Thus when I dictate that "*Chernobyl* is one of the most important tv shows of the current age," I do not praise its popularity, as one would have done for Game of Thrones (at least for the first few seasons), or for the quality of its screenwriting , as one would have done for Breaking Bad. Rather, I would prefer to praise the show for being fitting of the contemporary aesthetic outlook.

What do I mean when I say "ability to produce works fitting the contemporary aesthetic outlook"? Take for instance Lovecraft: according to S.T. Joshi, as people became more and more secular in the late 19th century, the prominence of creatures (such as werewolves, vampires and many others) which had their roots in religion decreased. This in turn let writers such as Lovecraft or Blackwood give "voice to the myriad terrors facing a rapidly changing Anglo-American culture."[4] It was secularization that changed the "contemporary aesthetic outlook" which in turn made Lovecraft and "Weird Fiction" in general as popular as it is now. It is my argument that a new kind of need has emerged for the contemporary for the writer, and it is this need that *Chernobyl* is able to satisfy while writers of "Weird Fiction" are unable to do so. In order to understand this new need of the contemporary audience I believe

3 To be more clear he argues that there exists a set of literary works written in that particular era which form "the canon" of that era.

4 Joshi, "Establishing the Canon of Weird Fiction", 7. S. T. Joshi, "Establishing the Canon of Weird Fiction," Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 14 (2003): 340.

it is first important to understand why Lovecraftian horror became unsatisfactory in the first place.

Similar to how secularization made the classical tropes of vampires and werewolves less and less significant, the rapid progression of technology had the same effect on Lovecraft's work. Take for instance Lovecraft's relationship with the sea. Most of his iconic creatures such as "Cthulhu" or "the Deep Ones" carry with them an amphibian appearance. This stemmed from Lovecraft's deep fear/obsession with the sea in general. For him it represented what was beyond the reach of the human mind to understand. It was from the Ocean that the monstrous "Cthulhu" burst out of, it was in a ship voyage where the "Deep Ones" first showed themselves. The sea harboured too many secrets in its dark depths for Lovecraft not to fear. It was something completely foreign to him and something that his readers could resonate with. It was the relevance of this "fear of the unknown" which made Lovecraft and many of his fellow "Weird Fiction" writers popular. Nevertheless, the relevance of this fear was not something to last. Monsters of Lovecraft, which symbolized the "impossible" external terror, a realm beyond understanding or control, has lost the special "umpf" that it once had. Though much of the oceans still remains to be explored in our contemporary age, the rapid progression of technology dispelled the terror people felt alongside Lovecraft. Places and concepts which were completely alien to human comprehension started to become the center point of human sciences, politics and war. As science progressed, many things that seemed impossible became possible:, we were able to compute a stupidly large amount of distance in mere hours, perceive images from long long distances, measure microscopic details with neverseen clarity… Seeing the impossible take place, people stopped fearing the impossible and rather started dreading what was possible. The fears one

might have had about this "external" are now being replaced with anxiety about "possible" outcomes—human errors and choices that lie squarely within our control.

To have a better understanding of this switch from fearing the impossible to the possible, one has to know how science helped escape the fear of the unknown. It was Rene Descartes who was able to find a way of making sense of what the senses could not present. According to Hannah Arendt, the invention of the telescope not only facilitated our understanding of the universe, it was also the catalyst that made Descartes start to resent his senses. It was the long held belief of Descartes and many others that the faculties of our senses and our reason were enough to uncover the realities of the universe, yet the fact that it was a man made tool that was able to refute the illusion that "common sense" dictated, shattered the given belief. It was this particular event that made Descartes dictate "cogito ergo sum"[5] and gave birth to the "Cartesian solution." According to the Cartesian solution, the only place one is able to find certainty is in concepts created by one's mind. Instead of relying on the senses or measuring instruments, one could only depend on his own mental faculties, as according to Descartes the mind could only truly understand the concepts itself produced and retained in and of itself. This is the reason why Descartes gave significant value to the use of mathematics, which due to being a product of our minds, had a certainty that the human mind could depend on. This, I argue, is the thrust of humanity against the unintelligible; it was this innovation introduced by Descartes that let humankind challenge the incomprehensible.

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5 To have a more clear understanding of how Descartes came to the conclusion of "Cogito Ergo Sum" (or to quote what Descartes really wrote in Latin "ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum") I recommend reading his 1st and 2nd Meditations.

The manner in which this "thrust" makes unintelligible things intelligible in our daily lives is portrayed (either intentionally or unintentionally) in the 2nd episode of *Chernobyl*. Valery Legasov (played by Jared Harris) is aware that the only manner in which he can motivate the cabinet members to take action against the *Chernobyl* disaster is to use terms that they can understand.

"Every atom of U-235 is like a bullet traveling nearly the speed of light, penetrating everything in its path… Three million billion trillion bullets in the water we drink, the food we eat, in the air we breathe."

Valery knows that if he were to attempt at describing the effects of Uranium-235 on the human body as how it is, the council would not even be able to make sense of what is happening for it is beyond the understanding of the human senses much like what was revealed by the telescope during Descartes' time. Valery's only chance of appealing to his fellow man was to withdraw away (or in other words alienate himself) from what it really was about (neutrons and radiation) and move towards concepts produced by and thus understandable for the human mind (numbers and bullets). It was the certainty and clarity that was brought by the appeal to units that were the product of the human mind that facilitated the Soviet government's taking action against the catastrophe that went beyond human comprehension. It was this clarity that gave Valery enough strength to facilitate the Soviet Union to contain this calamity.

It is not that this metaphor regarding bullets and neutrons altered Valery's argument in a substantial manner. Even if he were to not use the metaphor his request would have been the same, to take action regarding *Chernobyl*. With the clarity brought by the metaphor however he became

Art by Sophie Yi

not only more understandable but also more persuasive. Let me give another metaphor in order to explain the significance of this move by Valery. Take the insight of the ancient mathematician, physicist and engineer Archimedes who said "Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world."[6] It is not that Archimedes has the strength of Atlas but instead what gives him this power is the distance the Archimedean point provides.

In Valery's case however, in order to find the strength to convey the objective truth regarding the calamity at hand, he had to distance himself from what was really occurring (the external) to his own mind (the internal). This can be seen as the Cartesian solution to the nightmares of uncertainty that plagued Descartes himself. For Descartes this was the solution for the massive rift appearing between what we were able to see (appearance) and what it really was (reality). In order to reckon with the consequences of this separation between the appearance of an object and what it really was, Descartes pulled the Archimedean point within himself. With his "nightmare of non reality" he was able to distinguish between the tree that one's own senses provide and the "seen tree" that is perceived via introspection. This "seen tree" does not exist independently of us but instead is the representation of the tree that we sense via our sense organs, in our mindscape, and it is in this concept belonging to the mind where Descartes finds certainty. "Though one cannot know truth as something given and disclosed, man can at least know what he makes himself."[7] At this point, as Hannah Arendt states, objective reality dissolves into subjective states of the mind, for the Archimedean truth lies within these states.

6 Tzetzes, John. Book of Histories (Chiliades). Book 2, lines 129–30. Translated by Francis R. Walton

7 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 282.

The mathematization of physics is a clear symptom of this. For Descartes the main appeal of mathematics was that it was a concept of the mind.[8] Much like his “Cogito”, it had a certainty which the senses could not capture. Thus, when men were faced with the unknown of Lovecraft, they were able to rely on concepts of their minds to be able to react or even understand. One could say that in order to make sense of what was external to us, we –via the use of concepts such as those of mathematics– characterized it with our internal concepts. The significance of what I am saying is that the manner in which we are making sense of what can be seen as “impossible” or in other words something that is external and incomprehensible to our human mind and senses, is made “possible” by rationalizing it into something that exists internally, such as math. Take for instance the tree that I just mentioned. According to Hannah Arendt’s exemplification of Descartes’ move, we do not perceive the given tree itself but instead in order to have a more clear understanding of it we attribute it to numerical concepts. The given tree transforms into a brown extended object with a height of y and a width of x. Even though answering each and every question given by nature with mathematical patterns resulted in man getting answers only in “abstract concepts, no more than that man can always apply the results of his mind,”[9] we thrived using it. We were able to calculate how celestial bodies move, make sense of how gravity worked and most importantly were able to harness the power of the atom. Hungry for the power able to bend

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8 As many of my peers have made it quite clear, the view that numbers are the creation of one’s mind is not an uncontested view. There exists a myriad of views regarding the nature of numbers but as one might have guessed this paper is not necessarily about the philosophy of mathematics. Instead I am simply portraying how relevant Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the Cartitian solution is to the contemporary age. I simply use this way of viewing mathematics as a way of depicting a broader concept presented in the book “The Human Condition”.

9 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 287.

the will of nature, as Hannah Arendt argues, we became obsessed with entombing the Archimedean point within our mindscape. We stopped caring about what something really was and instead started focusing on what we have attributed it to in our minds. Instead of appreciating what is external to us, we voluntarily entombed ourselves in our own minds for the sake of power. In short, we were able to put up a fight against the impossible/external that Lovecraft so greatly feared for. The impossible became only another concept made up of numerical data that we attribute to it. Instead of fearing what was outside our own capacity we started to dread what we could do.

It is due to this clarity , provided by our own obsession with what we attribute to what is external to us, that the TV show was able to portray the *Chernobyl* calamity solely from the human perspective. This is evident as throughout the show what was criticized was not the attempt of humankind harnessing forces beyond itself, but instead the half-hearted manner in which this was attempted. The source of the horror which we saw in the first episode was not the explosion itself but rather was the human cause of it. Take for instance the first scene of the show where the power plant emitting the iconic ethereal light is dwarfed by the firefighters wife who watches it from her house. This can be seen as the first of many instances where human prowess is deified or even fetishized while the actual event is portrayed to be a mere imitation of it. It is not the ethereal light coming out of the power plant which has the center stage but instead the character of Lyudmilla Ignatenko. The audience does not even see the explosion occur until the last episode of the show. Another instance is from this last episode of the show. As clearly stated by Valery before the court, the reason why such a calamity occurred was mainly due to the Soviet Union's desire to have nuclear energy working for them in the cheapest manner possible. It

was their need to use cheaper materials that prompted the Soviet Union to use graphite and made the fail safe protocol into a doomsday device. It was not the external immensity of the energy provided by the splitting of the atom but instead the internal (or the human need as one could say) need of cutting corners which is portrayed to have led to this calamity. As Valery continues to recount the causal chain that caused the catastrophic events we see flashbacks from the first episode, the ethereal light, the lovecraftian-like force that burned people without flames, people saying that the impossible just occurred… All of these find their root in human negligence. What is portrayed as this Lovecraftian horror was only an effect of our human actions and nothing more.

When I claim that HBO's *Chernobyl* is able to satisfy a unique itch of the modern consumer, the manner in which it is able to do this is by appealing to the self centered view of the world that was brought by the Cartitian solution. I do not believe that the producers of *Chernobyl* actually read Hannah Arendt and were planning on reflecting this aspect of her writing in their tv show. Instead, I believe that their self-centered way of storytelling attest to Hannah Arendt's correct analysis of the contemporary world.

Chernobyl is not a story about the dangers of nuclear energy, instead it is the story of what human negligence can bring about. This migration of fear from physical realities to social –or more precisely, to human– ones is a sign of how times have changed how we view reality itself. Even though the effects of *Chernobyl* (the cataclysm itself) were quite physical, the show forces one to inspect what occurred there from an alienated/inward-facing lens. It asks us to withdraw within ourselves in order to reach clarity in a situation where none can be found externally. And even though the audience is able to

rationalize what just happened, we are, nonetheless, stuck in prison made by our own minds. This inward perspective that *Chernobyl* asks us to look from marks a broader cultural shift: from valuing the external world to prisoning ourselves in the internal one.

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Cultural hyperreality

By Vienna Gaspar

The term 'simulation' brings to mind images straight out of *The Matrix*. Thousands of human bodies in vats, powering the outside world. Simulated lives that can be woken up from once they reach the realization that "this isn't reality." Post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard's conception of 'simulation' is much more nuanced. In his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard puts forward his theory that signs have come to constitute and replace reality. The author proposes that this will culminate in the stage of the hyperreal, where reality and simulation cannot be told apart or separated. Examining cultural monarchs such as Disneyland and The Sims, I will argue that we've reached the stage of the hyperreal.

'Simulacra' is defined as representations and copies that have either come to replace reality itself, or never had originals. 'Simulation' refers to something that emulates reality. Jean Baudrillard proposes his theory of the four stages of simulacra that mark a degradation of reality:[1]

1. It is the reflection of a profound reality.
2. It masks and denatures a profound reality.
3. It masks the absence of a profound reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

The first two stages are easily identifiable in the real world, exemplified by photographs and simple photoshop jobs. The third and fourth stages are

1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University Of Michigan Press, 1981), 6.

harder to identify, as they stray further from reality. Baudrillard observes that the fourth stage of pure simulacrum sets the stage for the hyperreal—where reality and simulation cannot be distinguished from one another. In order to demonstrate this idea, Baudrillard gives the example of Disneyland. He writes:

> Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with it is a play of illusions and phantasms: pirates, the frontier, future world, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the operation sucessful. But, what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturized and religious revelling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks.[2]

Disneyland embodies the levels of simulacra in every aspect of its existence. From the forced perspective of Main Street to the costumed adults on parade floats, it only seems right to denote the theme park as its own land. Disneyland is quintessentially American, a consumerist haven that lacks real substance. It is more American than America itself, a simple utopia branded as the 'happiest place on Earth'. The unspoken agreement to lean into the illusion and pretend that Disneyland differs from the rest of the world holds the entire corporation together. Once enveloped in this fourth order simulacra, the real and simulation become one and the same. Real discomforts and problems become part of Disney's charm, further entrancing visitors. Nearly anything can be forgiven when under the spell of Disney magic.

The term "Disney adult" was coined in the early 2020s to describe millennial fans of Disneyland who base their entire identity off of the Disney universe. As an article by

2 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 12.

Rolling Stone jokes, "a Disney adult is someone who lives and breathes the brand, buying limited-edition mouse ears and popcorn buckets and branded fitness trackers the moment they drop, constantly posting free advertisements for the park in the form of Cinderella's Castle and Purple Wall selfies."[3] Disney is more than just an interest for this group, it's a lifestyle. Many spend thousands of dollars on each trip to the theme parks, and thousands more on seasonal merchandise drops. Disney adults have garnered much criticism online for having childish interests and spending their money irresponsibly—yet in 1981 Baudrillard suggested that Disneyland deliberately targets adults. He wrote, "it is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness."[4] Disneyland is touted by Disney adults as a way to keep one's inner child alive, but if anything it exists to legitimize the concept of adulthood. It suggests that adults exist, if not in these cartoons, then in the 'real world'. Adulthood is written into the code of society, a natural destination for every person. It is more than the mere act of working a 9-5 and paying one's own bills, it's the acceptance of the social structure as fact and an unquestioned obedience to authority. It's a high level of responsibility and good judgment that is expected to be upheld at all times. 'Adults' are the product of social conditioning and expectations; they don't exist outside of the social structure. In the Disney corporation, 'adults' only exist to fiscally support the commercial interests of 'children'. Disneyland preserves the idea that the adult exists as the pinnacle of capitalist

3 EJ Dickson, "How 'Disney Adults' Became the Most Hated Group on the Internet," *Rolling Stone*, June 21, 2022, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/disney-adults-tiktok-hated-internet-1370226/.

4 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 13.

Cultural hyperreality

Art by Judy Qu

and imperialist interests. They work and work until they can take a vacation and visit "the happiest place on Earth", where they can revert back to children, oblivious to the fact that they are pursuing impossible ideals.

Similarly, people are attracted to digital life simulators. Simulators allow us to feel that there is merit behind rules and social conventions, cementing the systems in reality. It seems that the attraction of modern simulators is best analyzed using a combination of philosophical theories. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues that fantasy is closer to reality than to dreams: "What does it mean, more precisely, to say that ideological fantasy structures reality itself? Let us explain by starting from the fundamental Lacanian thesis that in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality: it is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'."[5] Simulators similarly support our conception of reality by reinforcing social conventions.

According to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, it's not that we don't know we're in a simulation; it's that we know but pretend not to. There appears to be no way out of the reality we've created, leading us toward smaller, easily controlled simulations such as virtual life simulators. With over 200 million copies sold worldwide, the prime example has to be The Sims franchise. Like Disney, The Sims has a cult following of chronically-online individuals. The Sims has a simple concept and gameplay, something that has only seemed to help boost its appeal to players. According to The Sims 4 game description, the franchise invites players to "play with life and discover the possibilities. Unleash your imagination and create a world of Sims that's wholly unique. Explore and customize every detail from Sims to homes–

5 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989), 44.

and much more." While playing The Sims, the possibilities seem endless — but are they? Lacan would argue that this is just another instance of ideological fantasy. Players have choices, but the options are pre-determined. The laws of physics can be challenged, but societal conventions still dictate what is allowed and what isn't. Players are made to believe that they're in control of the game, yet their every move has already been predicted by the gamemakers. Even the game's description looks to influence our perception of control; it claims that players are able to "customize every detail." The appeal of The Sims reaches beyond the game and peaks in the so-called 'real world'. Its existence comforts us, a contained simulation characterized by the illusions of choice and control. Baudrillard would say that The Sims is just another tool used to manipulate the minds of players.[6] It simultaneously reinforces the ideologies of our simulation whilst giving players reason to believe in a reality. Further, its cultural impact is simply the worship of simulacra.

In conclusion, life simulators and other forms of simulacra have passed beyond reflecting a 'profound reality,'[7] developing into their own worlds. These simulacrum structure our reality, shaping our minds and dictating the boundaries. It's impossible to tell ideology apart from reality. What interests me most about modern-day simulacra is the performance of it all. It's not just the private consumption of Disney movies or playing of The Sims, but the Disney influencers and Twitch livestreams of gameplay. It's the extensive creation of content based on the consumption of commercial products and the concurrent curation of an online persona for social media. On top of this exists thousands of people whose content is solely based on consuming and reacting to another creator's content. The web is endless; we have entered the hyperreal.

6 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 66.
7 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

Does liberalism understand people?

By Max Abubucker

The relationship between citizen and State is not one-sided. On one hand, individuals are shaped by the social and political systems that they live in. Our society plays a large part in our desires, fears, and conception of ourselves. On the other, political systems seek to govern individuals. Therefore, in seeking to justify a political system, a political philosophy must rely on a conception of human nature.

The political system of the United States is a liberal democracy. In fact, the United States was the first nation founded with an explicitly liberal government. Liberalism is a political philosophy that places individual rights and freedom above all else. Since the end of World War II, liberalism has been the dominant political philosophy of Western nations. Recently, however, liberalism in the United States and across the globe has been failing. We are experiencing widespread discontent with public institutions and the rise of populism and authoritarianism. In this context, liberalism can be questioned and criticized from many directions. However, given that much of the backlash to liberalism is driven by citizens who feel unseen and disrespected, I believe that it is especially important to ask: Does liberalism understand people? Is liberalism based on a robust, realistic conception of human nature? And if not, can it justify itself while accommodating such a conception?

One way to approach these questions is empirically, by studying modern liberal democracies. However, if we are

interested in the viability of liberalism itself, instead of a particular nation's system of government, these questions should be explored through philosophy. The liberal-communitarian debate, which emerged in the 1980s, sheds light on liberalism's conception of human nature. In 1971, John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice*, which argues for a particular flavor of liberalism. *A Theory of Justice* "was said to revive political philosophy when it was published,"[1] and while the book was a bold departure from the views preceding it, today its ideas have become deeply held. Rawls is held up as the "torchbearer" of modern liberalism.[2] In 1982, Michael Sandel published *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, which criticizes liberalism on the grounds that it offers an inadequate and wrong conception of human nature. Diving into Rawls' work and Sandel's rebuttal will give us a greater understanding of liberalism's appeal and its relationship with human nature and the identities of the individuals that it seeks to govern.

Rawls

"Justice is the first virtue of social institutions," is how Rawls begins *A Theory of Justice*.[3] Justice is more than just another value to Rawls. It is the yardstick on which other values are measured, the "value of values."[4] While utilitarianism—the dominant ethical system at the time of Rawls' writing—sees justice as instrumentally important to ensure happiness and well-being, Rawls sees justice as an end in itself. As a result, ensuring a just society is more important than any other concern.

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1 Paul Weithman, "Introduction." in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* at 50, ed. Paul Weithman (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 1.

2 Catherine G. Campbell, *Persons, Identity, and Political Theory: A Defense of Rawlsian Political Identity* (Springer, 2014), 22.

3 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*: *Revised Edition* (Harvard Univer sity Press, 1999), 3.

4 Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16.

Rawls writes: "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override."[5] The reasons that Rawls believes in the primacy of justice are complex, but two components are 1) he sees justice as universal and 2) he asserts that all people share a core idea of justice, namely, forbidding arbitrary distinctions between persons.[6]

What is justice to Rawls? First, he restricts his theory of justice to social justice. The justice that Rawls discusses has as its subject the basic structure of society, which is the way that major social institutions—not just the government—distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages that come from social cooperation.[7] Rawls sees society as characterized by cooperation and conflict. Justice is necessary because people in a society cooperate to their mutual benefit, but are also inherently in a state of conflict over their share of those benefits. This is one of what he calls the circumstances of justice.[8]

After asserting the primacy of justice and describing its role (distributing rights and benefits), Rawls moves to describing a just society. To determine the principles that govern a just society, Rawls employs the original position, an ingenious thought experiment that has become an inseparable part of his philosophy.

The original position imagines a group of people deciding together on the principles that will govern their society. The participants have equal power in the negotiation, and they are assumed to be rational and mutually disinterested (primarily focused on their own ends). What

5 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 3.
6 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 5.
7 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 6.
8 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 109.

is more significant, however, is what the participants do not have. They do not know their own social status or class position, or the distribution of their natural assets, such as intelligence, strength, or work ethic. No one even knows their own preferences, interests, or conception of the good. To make a decision possible, the participants get a general understanding of government, the economy, and human psychology, but any facts that would allow participants to distinguish themselves from others are hidden by what Rawls calls the veil of ignorance.[9]

Why is so much forbidden from our hypothetical decision makers? Rawls writes, “Somehow we must nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage.”[10] Rawls believes that the veil of ignorance ensures fairness. Without it, people will push for principles that favor their particular condition. A wealthy man, for example, would advocate against wealth redistribution—not because he thinks it is just, but to benefit himself.

Rawls asserts that the principles agreed to in the original position—which he calls the principles of justice—are the correct principles for a just society. Since the original position is fair, the agreements made in the position will be fair too. Thus, when social institutions satisfy the principles of justice, people can say that they are “cooperating on terms to which they would agree”[11] if their relations with each other were fair. This is the beauty of the original position. In this way, “a society satisfying the principles of justice as fairness comes as close as a society can to being a voluntary scheme.”[12] This provides political legitimacy:

9 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 16-17.
10 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 118.
11 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 12.
12 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 12.

In a society governed by the principles agreed to in the original position, everyone can be rightfully obligated to abide by the law. Here, Rawls' thought aligns with social contract theory, such as John Locke's Second Treatise of Government. However, where Locke's initial situation is a "state of nature", Rawls' is the original position.

After Rawls establishes that the principles of justice are the ones agreed to in the original position, he moves to a second question: What principles would in fact be adopted by the equal, free, and veiled participants?

The participants are rational and focused on their own well-being. They would understand that they only have one life and must abide by the principles even in the worst possibilities, so they would "insure themselves against the worst eventualities."[13] Therefore, Rawls reasons, the participants would reject the principle of utility, which requires an individual to sacrifice his well-being when it benefits others more than it hurts him. Instead, the participants would agree to two principles. First (and foremost), "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others." Second, "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all."[14]

The second principle, called the Difference Principle, is more controversial than the first. It entails that any social or economic inequality is acceptable only if it benefits the least advantaged member of society. For example, a businessman could only make more money than others—in fact, the position of a businessman could only exist—if the

13 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 154.
14 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 53.

poorest person was benefited by the businessman having more money and power. The Difference Principle has radical implications, but through the lens of the original position, it makes sense. Every participant has to consider the possibility that they will be the least advantaged member of society (no one knows that they are not). No participant would agree to others having more than they do, unless they know that they will benefit from it.

Kant

In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel's criticism begins by framing Rawls' relationship to Kant. Much of Rawls' philosophy stems from Kant: Rawls writes, "the theory of justice in turn tries to present a natural procedural rendering of Kant's conception of the kingdom of ends, and of the notions of autonomy and the categorical imperative."[15]

Kant believed that we know nothing from our passively received representations. Our experience is created by our innate mental rules for combining representations, which exist independently and prior to those representations.[16] He believed that our self-consciousness, the awareness that the different mental states that stream through our consciousness are experienced by one unified person, is an a priori judgement, which means that it is known independent of experience[17],[18]. Therefore, the thinking subject is unable to be reached empirically, by introspection, and must be presupposed. To Kant, the agent is prior to any experience.

15 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 233.
16 Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 26-27.
17 Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 31.
18 Self-consciousness here refers to objective unity of consciousness as opposed to subjective unity of consciousness.

Additionally, Kant differentiated two worlds: the phenomenal and the noumenal. The phenomenal world is the world as it appears to us. It consists of the appearances of things. The noumenal world, on the other hand, consists of things in themselves. However, it exists independently of our experience and is imperceptible to us.[19] Kant believes that we are rational agents, characterized by autonomy and absolute moral worth. Crucially, this autonomy exists in the noumenal realm. Physically and phenomenally, we are determined, but we must conceive of ourselves as being free. We are transcendentally or noumenally free.[20]

This metaphysical picture informs Kant's political philosophy. His political ideal is the kingdom of ends. The kingdom of ends exists in the noumenal realm. In it, rational beings exist equally, abiding by moral law and treating each other as ends, instead of means. In it, rational beings abide by moral law, regarding each other as having equal dignity and treating each other as ends instead of means.[21] A rational being must "act as if he were by his maxims in every case a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends."[22]

In this way, Kant argues, we are committed to a liberal social order that values freedom and equality.[23] This obligation is not rooted in empirical considerations such as happiness or well-being. Rather, we must obey moral law because it is in our nature as rational beings.[24]

19 Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 41.
20 Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 46-47.
21 Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 54.
22 Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Mor als*, trans. T. K. Abbott (1785; Project Gutenberg, May 1, 2004), Sec. 2, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5682.
23 Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 55-56.
24 Pinkard, *German Philosophy* 59-60.

Does liberalism understand people?

Art by Judy Qu

Sandel

Rawls shares many of Kant's conclusions. Both believe in the priority of the right over the good and deontology, the view that principles of justice should not presuppose any ends or determinate conception of the good. However, Kant's moral philosophy relies on his metaphysics and the idea that we are disembodied rational agents in the noumenal realm. This is unacceptable for Rawls and most other political philosophers. Rawls seeks to reach universal, Kantian principles of justice that apply to human beings in our actual, empirical circumstances. According to Sandel, "Rawls rejects Kant's metaphysics, but believes he can preserve their moral force."[25]

Rawls faces a tricky challenge: If his principles are derived from current social values, they will be contingent, not universal. However, if they are entirely divorced from current values and human nature, they will be groundless. Sandel describes Rawls as bringing together the contradicting Humean and Kantian conceptions of justice. Hume believed that justice is the product of human conventions and, therefore, not universal. Rawls also believes that justice is the product of human convention, specifically the fact that societies are in conflict over the distribution of the benefits of cooperation, but he wants to advance universal principles of justice. His tool to bridge this gap is the original position.[26]

Rawls writes, "the description of the original position interprets the point of view of noumenal selves."[27] Like the participants in the original position, the noumenal self is rational and fair, being stripped of contingent and therefore morally irrelevant social and natural

25 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 24.
26 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 35-39.
27 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 225.

influences. However, the original position does not have to "rely on a noumenal realm or on the notion of a transcendent subject wholly beyond experience."[28] Instead, the circumstances of justice are baked into the original position: the participants are mutually disinterested, want to maximize their own benefits, and are in conflict over the distribution of benefits.

A key contention in Sandel's criticism of Rawls is that Rawls' argument necessarily posits an account of the individual subject of justice. "Implicit in Rawls' theory of justice is a conception of the moral subject," Sandel claims.[29] This makes sense. A political philosophy must rely on a conception of human nature. However, Sandel also claims that Rawls' conception of the moral subject is reflected in the participants of the original position. This is not so clear. Rawls clearly states that, "we must keep in mind that the parties to the original position are theoretically defined individuals" and that "the motivation of the persons in the original position must not be confused with the motivation of persons in everyday life who accept the principles that would be chosen."[30]

Why does Sandel claim that it is appropriate to level a criticism at Rawls through the subjects in the original position? His answer points to the unique status of the original position as an argument. Rawls describes the original position as a "reflective equilibrium."[31] It puts forth claims about both principles of justice and human nature. Therefore, it must be evaluated from two sides: 1) our intuitions about the correct principles of justice and 2) our intuitions about the moral subject. While the people in the original position need not be exactly like us,

28 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 39.
29 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 49.
30 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 127-128.
31 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 18.

they must have some connection to us. Otherwise, why would the decision of imaginary people in a hypothetical situation be relevant to us? Their decision is binding to us because they are meant to have all the human qualities that are necessary for making moral decisions. The conditions of the original position come from "the nature of the moral subject as we understand it, which is to say by the constitutive understanding we have of ourselves."[32] Therefore, Sandel contends, "we must be prepared to live with the vision contained in the original position."[33]

What, then, is the vision of human nature contained in the original position? Based on the original position, we must be somewhat rational and mutually disinterested, although Rawls does not believe that humans are perfectly rational or individualistic. Crucially, the individuals in the original position are separated from their ends. They do not know what they believe or desire.

For Rawls, this is possible because "the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it."[34] Rawls conceives the relationship between the self and its ends as one of possession, where the self is "distanced from its ends without being detached all together."[35] The self being prior to the ends is seen in Rawls' moral view that conceptions of the good are not relevant to justice. It is also seen, Sandel alleges, in his metaphysical view that the self exists independently of its ends.

After arguing that *A Theory of Justice* entails a particular account of human nature, Sandel attacks this account. Rawls claims that the conditions of the original position track with our commonly shared

32 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 48.
33 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 48.
34 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 491.
35 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 55.

intuitions about the moral subject. Sandel disagrees, writing that "Rawls' conception of the person can neither support his theory of justice nor plausibly account for our capacities for agency and self-reflection." "We cannot coherently regard ourselves as the sort of beings the deontological ethic requires us to be."[36]

Sandel attacks Rawls' conception of the self by arguing that the Rawlsian self cannot form constitutive attachments. The Rawlsian self is "antecedently individuated." Its identity is "fixed prior to experience."[37] This subject is not constituted by his character traits, interpersonal relationships, and desires; he possesses these things. Possession means, Sandel writes, that "If I lose a thing I possess, I am still the same 'I' who had it."[38] The Difference Principle acutely exposes this feature of Rawls' philosophy. Rawls believes that the benefits that one earns from their own natural assets, such as intelligence, courage, and work ethic, belong to society. This appears as if it conflicts with Kant's imperative by using people as means rather than ends. To Rawls, however, stripping a person of the fruits of their assets does not use them as a means because a person's natural assets are not an integral part of their self.

The Rawlsian subject always stands at a distance from his interests and exists independently of his values. Therefore, no commitment could grip him so deeply that he couldn't exist as himself without it.[39] According to Sandel, the Rawlsian conception of the self "rules out the possibility of any attachment (or obsession) able to reach beyond our values and sentiments to engage our identity itself."[40] The Rawlsian self, Sandel claims, is "a person wholly without

36 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 65.
37 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 55.
38 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 55.
39 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 62.
40 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 62.

character, without moral depth."[41] Human beings are capable of self-reflection, in which we investigate who we really are by probing at our inner desires and formative relationships. This requires that our inner self be "constituted in part by our central aspirations and attachments."[42]

As a communitarian, Sandel gives special attention to community, one of the many attachments that, in Rawls' view, cannot be constitutive of our identity. Sandel believes that our community, which provides us with shared vocabulary, practices, and values, shapes our identity. We have allegiances "as members of this family, community, nation," he writes. "We are sons or daughters of that revolution and citizens of that republic."[43] Liberal justice assumes that individuals are unfamiliar. Since we are "encumbered in part by a history"[44] that we share with others, Sandel asserts, we have an obligation towards some people that goes beyond what justice requires or even permits.[45]

Sandel has painted Rawls' subject as abstract, disencumbered, and unrealistic: the Kantian moral self that Rawls set out to avoid. The participants of the original position cannot be thought of as resembling people at all. Since they are deprived of all distinguishing characteristics, they are identical.[46] The supposed plurality of individuals melts into an indistinguishable monolith. This is in stark contrast with liberalism's purported tolerance of diversity, an essential part of its appeal. Moreover, the participants in the original position do not in fact decide on the principles of justice. Making an informed decision

41 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 179.
42 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 172.
43 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 179.
44 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 181.
45 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 179.
46 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 131.

requires reflecting on our values and character traits.

Instead, the participants of the original position determine the principles of justice that are imposed by the conditions of the thought experiment.[47] Rawls' principles of justice are not based on the consent of multiple parties, which is required for a contract or agreement.[48] Therefore, his argument does not fit into the contractarian tradition. According to Sandel, Rawls' lacking conception of the self leaves his theory of justice unjustified.

Conclusion

Sandel's criticism of *A Theory of Justice* is from a communitarian perspective, although he disavows that label. He argues that in assuming that the self is antecedently individuated, Rawls, who claims to rule out no conceptions of the good, rules out communitarian ones. Liberalism is too individualistic. While community can be an aim of some of the subjects of a liberal society, the society itself can never be a community. In fact, Rawls rules out any ends whose adoption could engage with or transform the identity of the self.[49]

However, the complaint that liberalism relies on an unrealistic conception of the self is not an exclusively communitarian concern. Libertarian Robert Nozick, rebutting Rawls' Difference Principle in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia,* writes that Rawls, "presses very hard on the distinction between men and their talents, assets, abilities and special traits."[50] He agrees with Sandel: Rawls' subject, detached from its abilities and character

47 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 127-130.
48 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 132.
49 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 61-64.
50 Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1974), 228.

traits, resembles the Kantian disencumbered self.[51]

Additionally, liberalism is not the only political philosophy that has been criticized for not understanding people. Rawls himself criticized utilitarianism on similar grounds, writing that "utilitarianism extends to society the principle of choice for one man." "To do this is not to take seriously the plurality and distinctness of individuals."[52] This argument is taken up by Bernard Williams in *A Critique of Utilitarianism*. Williams asserts that utilitarianism "can make only the most superficial sense of human desire and action at all."[53] As a type of consequentialism, utilitarianism endorses negative responsibility. You are just as responsible for killing someone as you are for failing to prevent a murder.[54] Classically, utilitarianism also ignores equity. In its unyielding focus on maximizing happiness across all agents, only the total happiness matters, not its distribution—even if some agents are left with none.[55] Both of these points show that utilitarianism abstracts from the identity of individual moral agents.

The liberal-communitarian debate and the criticism of utilitarianism show that the identity of its citizens is something that a political system needs to consider. As political philosophers build empires in the sky, they must not forget to ground them in human nature. Our identities are constituted by—and inconceivable independent of—our values, community, and character traits. The State needs to speak to, attempt to provide, or engage with our deep-seated allegiances and conceptions of the

51 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 79.

52 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 26

53 J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism." in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82.

54 J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism." in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 93-95.

55 Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, 142-143.

good, not ignore them. Rawlsian liberalism, in taking people to be detached from their identities, is flawed.

It is important to note that *A Theory of Justice* is not the end of Rawls' political thought, and Rawls' liberalism is not the only form of liberalism. Nevertheless, even though the United States is not the well-ordered society that Rawls envisioned, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* resonates intensely today. Liberalism, Sandel asserts, "rules out the possibility of a public life in which, for good or ill, the identity as well as the interests of the participants could be at stake."[56] It "overlooks the danger that when politics goes badly, not only disappointments but dislocations are likely to result."[57] In the Trump era of American politics, it is clear that identity is at stake. Liberalism has attempted to put the self beyond the reach of politics, but this is not possible. In his conclusion, Sandel writes that the citizens of the deontological republic are "strangers"[58] and that the Rawlsian self "is less liberated than disempowered."[59] Today, despite unprecedented worldwide communication, we are strangers to our neighbors. Despite unprecedented freedom, we feel less liberated than disempowered. Liberalism has broken its promises, and its flawed understanding of human nature is a compelling explanation for why.

56 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 62
57 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 183.
58 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 183.
59 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 177.

Gossiping tweens & ending regimes

—the promises & pitfalls of the doctrine of double effect

By Karis Emily Morasch

Every day of our lives we are presented with choices. Some are as small as how much creamer to put in your morning coffee while others, perhaps deciding whether to forgive a friend in an argument or weighing how mad your roommate will be if you eat the last of their chips, have consequences with a direct effect on the lives of others. In the frequent times in which the effects of our actions cast a net larger than ourselves, we are forced to ask ourselves what is the right thing to do and what is wrong.

Oftentimes, we don't judge the morality of our actions based on any particular framework, but rather use our intuitive judgements to the best of our ability. The task of moral philosophers is to create a framework that aligns with our intuitive judgements that allows us to retrospectively or proactively gauge the morality of a particular action. One of the most common moral frameworks, consequentialism, decides the moral value of an action based on the ratio of good to bad results of the action. If the results of an action do more good than harm, the action itself is good and vice versa. While this may seem like a comprehensive system at first glance, it fails to account for another facet of actions that we intuitively know holds moral weight: intentions. We would not hold the person who engages in a morally blameworthy action while under threat of physical harm to the same standard as someone who committed an identical action completely of their own volition, even though the outcomes are the same. The lesson when it comes to our intuitive perceptions of moral appraisal is simple; intention matters.

The importance of intention is reflected in a formula for moral judgement known as the Doctrine of Double

Effect (DDE). According to the Doctrine of Double Effect, an action that brings harm to a person is permissible as long as that harm is an unintended consequence of bringing about a greater good, not a means to an end. Even if the actor is certain that harm will result, if the good is fulfilled, any unintended negative consequences are excused. As long as the goal of the action is good and the harm brought about is an unfortunate side effect, a harmful action may still be permissible. The DDE creates a pathway for actions that result in harm to still be morally excusable. In essence, the DDE makes a distinction between what we do and what we cause. Doing something that directly harms others is inexcusable but doing something that causes harm to others, if motivated by the greater good, is excusable.

In "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect," Warren S. Quinn outlines this Doctrine as well as providing examples, most of which relate to intense, dire circumstances such as war and medical emergency, including what he calls the Strategic Bomber Case vs Terror Bomber Case. In this example, a strategic bomber in a war destroys a key military target that will decrease the enemy's production capabilities. Unfortunately, several innocent civilians that live nearby are killed in the blast. Quinn contrasts this example with that of the terror bomber, who attacks the same location, but with the intent of killing civilians to weaken the enemy's morale. Intuitively, we view the morality of both of these actions differently, and the DDE reflects that difference. For the terror bomber, the harm is necessary to achieving their goal, but for the strategic bomber it is an unfortunate, unintended consequence and is therefore excusable.[1]

1 Quinn, Warren S. "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect." Philosophy & Public Affairs 18, no. 4 (1989): 334–51. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265475.

Although Quinn's examples are helpful in understanding the DDE, I believe that they incorrectly present the DDE as a framework of moral judgement that is restricted only to extreme cases in which human life is on the line. I will return to looking at the DDE through an extreme case later in this paper when I present my objection, but I first want to prove that the Doctrine can be used to judge day to day decisions. To accomplish this, I would like to propose an original example, one that illustrates that the DDE is relevant to moral choices present in everyday life. This pair of cases may have been experienced by several of us in our youth, a set of cases I will call Gossiping Tweens:

Becky: Becky tells Amanda that Brayden has been saying things about her behind her back. Becky knows that Amanda will be angry and it is likely that a conflict will start, but she thinks that Amanda has the right to know what is being said about her. As expected, Amanda is furious and rushes to confront Brayden.

Callie: Callie tells Amanda that Brayen has been saying things about her behind her back. Callie knows Amanda will be angry and she really wants the drama of seeing a fight between Amanda and Brayden.

It is readily apparent that both the Becky and Callie versions of the Gossiping Tweens case lead to the same result–Amanda sparking a conflict with Brayden. However, the Doctrine of Double Effect encourages us to morally appraise both versions differently. For Callie, the harm resulting from a conflict between Amanda and Brayden is not an unfortunate side effect, it is the entire goal of her choice. Alternatively, for Becky, truth is the goal and conflict is an unintended but expected result. Even though both girls can accurately expect the harm that will result from their actions, the

Gossiping tweens & ending regimes

Art by Judy Qu

Doctrine of Double Effect encourages us to view Callie's choice as morally blameworthy, but not Becky's.

It would seem that the Doctrine of Double Effect is an intuitive and straightforward formula for moral appraisal, infallible in both everyday and high stakes cases, but when we attempt to assess a new case, political assassination, it offers a judgement that our intuitive moral compass likely deems disturbing.

Consider a wartime predicament: members of a rebellion against a fascist regime know that assassinating the dictator will create a better society. Unfortunately, they don't have the ability to get fighters close enough to kill him alone. Instead, their only feasible method of successful assassination is bombing, which they are sure will also cost the lives of dozens of unlucky citizens. To put the situation in terms best suited for analysis by the Doctrine of Double Effect, the goal is to create a better society, the method is the assassination of the dictator, and innocent lives are an unwanted but certain consequence.

Of course, creating a better society is a morally praiseworthy goal and the DDE treats it as such. However, it deems the action morally wrong because killing the dictator causes a death that is necessary to the completion of the goal. Yet, since the action is committed for the greater good, it is not losing the innocent civilians that makes it morally wrong. This is directly opposite from our intuition about what would make this action morally wrong.

Intuitively, causing the death of several innocent civilians is morally reprehensible while killing a single dictator is far less so and, in some circumstances, may even be considered a moral good. So, how can it be that, in a formula supposed to determine the morality of an action, the assassination of the dictator holds moral

weight while the death of the civilians holds none?

The Doctrine of Double Effect excuses the unintended death of innocents but condemns the purposeful assassination of anyone, regardless of potential positive impacts their death could have on the world.

This disturbing consequence of the Doctrine seems as if it can undermine it entirely. However, if we reframe our views on what the Doctrine actually judges, this worry can be circumvented. We are used to judging actions through a consequentialist lens, focusing entirely on the results of an action itself to judge its morality. Even though the definition of the Doctrine of Double Effect is explicit in the fact that, when using it, we must focus on the actor, this objection comes from our instinct to judge consequentially. In this objection, we still lend our attention to the consequences of the action. We see that the killing of the dictator is morally wrong and the civilian deaths are morally neutral and wonder how an effective system of moral appraisal could lead to such counterintuitive conclusions. By doing this, we are still, like a consequentialist, weighing the morality of effects against each other. But this is not what the Doctrine of Double Effect asks of us.

When we make moral appraisals using the Doctrine of Double Effect, we must imagine that the actor and the action exist in a vacuum. The only considerations we need to make are what the actor's motivation is and what it is that they are motivated to do. If both of these things are morally excusable, so is the action. This assumption of a sort of "moral vacuum" eliminates the consideration of indirect consequences and is what allows the Doctrine of Double Effect to consider indirect loss of life resulting from an action morally negligible. The indirect loss of life is not morally neutral because it is considered and ruled neutral, but

because it is never part of the moral equation at all.

Even with this conceptual reframing that allows the Doctrine of Double Effect to survive the objection I have proposed, it may still seem distasteful to adhere to a system of moral appraisal that doesn't even factor the indirect loss of innocent lives into the moral equation. Yet the consequentialist standard, which holds people who engage in morally blameworthy acts to the same standard whether they are forced to do it or do it of their own free will, seems equally unrealistic in practice. Needless to say, the field of moral philosophy is extremely complicated. In a sea of complex human emotions and choices, it is nearly impossible to create a system for moral appraisal that can offer the proper judgement when faced with the almost endless number of motivations, actions and effects that occur over the course of every life. As we can see from the promises and pitfalls of the Doctrine of Double Effect, the job of the moral philosopher isn't necessarily to create a foolproof framework for moral judgement, the job is to *try* and to grow closer each time.

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