

How do Asimov in “Liar” and Le Guin in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” thoroughly address the idea of “truthfulness” and “morality”?



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“Morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of all morality” (Mahatma Gandhi, civil rights activist). The Stanford University Ethics and Society center defines ethics as the rightness or wrongness of actions depends solely on their consequences/their outcome and the morality of the action is based on whether the action is right or wrong based on a set of rules (Stanford Website 2019). Although the university brought up valid points, the complexity behind upholding those ideals may be a challenge in some people. Many actions or rules in place can be misinterpreted or the consequences from this can be far more damaging than beneficial.

Unfortunately, I have been in this ethical dilemma of whether or not to do the right thing or to steer away and mind my own business. A close friend of mine had disclosed to me that she had been assaulted but was too afraid to take any action, but being the protective friend, I decided to take matters into my own hands and retrieve justice for her behind her back. At the time it happened, there were more consequences than benefits because I ended up betraying my friend who confided in me and ended up getting into a huge fight with her. Although I thought this was the “right” thing to do to help my friend, it was “wrong” because it wasn’t my story to tell which ties in with the fact that morality can be misinterpreted and the repercussions can be damaging. Isaac Asimov who wrote “Liar” which addresses the theme of saving face, raises the ethical dilemma: what do you do when you have information that can benefit someone but hurt them all at the same time? Ursula K. Le Guin also addresses the theme of morality in the sense where the citizens have to decide whether their happiness is more important than a child suffering. Both theorists Hannah Arendt and Lawrence Langer likely would evaluate the two stories “Liar” and “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” as thoroughly addressing Arendt’s statements between someone’s decision to be honest and maintain morals or to exhibit acts of evil.

The topic of ethics addressed by Asimov is using the aspects of morality to show the division between telling the truth and lying. The story depicts a robot that is able to read minds and dictate the truth and nothing more. The robot, Herbie was built by a company and was able to surpass all levels or advancements to be able to gain the ability of telepathy that became a huge problem. However, the robot must follow the first law therefore he cannot cause harm to others which includes not harming people's feelings, so he consistently tells the truth. This ethical dilemma is something that can happen realistically because technology is advancing more and more every day. If the ability of reading minds became available, most people would be in fear or take advantage of that power in order to use it for their own selfless reasons. Nevertheless, the ability to not lie and only tell the truth could have its own consequences within itself especially if it's to protect someone's feelings. Regardless, the ethical dilemma presented in Asimov is complicated and might need an even deeper solution because there are many scenarios a person can be in where they need to lie to protect themselves or others. A children's story named Pinocchio also addresses the lying issue within our world because every time he lies, his nose gets bigger so in order to maintain normalcy he must not lie. This is important and relatable to "Liar" because it expresses the downfall of lying and the priority of always telling the truth.

One character who faces an ethical dilemma is Herbie, although fictional and practically unreal he had an influence of those around him. Herbie was created and therefore programmed to do and say what the creator's abilities can achieve. Herbie proclaims "I'm a machine, given the imitation of life only by virtue of the positronic interplay in my brain — which is man's device. You can't lose face to me without being hurt. That is deep in your mind and won't be erased. I can't give the solution." (18, Asimov) This quote is important because it was said after Herbie

was asked to answer a math equation, even as a robot he became overwhelmed, imagine the other circumstances he was put through. According to first law of robotics, a robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. However, in the final scene, Herbie is put to the ultimate test of giving a solution to psychologists and is given the ultimatum of hurting them by not giving it them or hurting himself, but as stated before he cannot cause injury including hurt “feelings”. “You can’t tell them,” droned the psychologist slowly, “because that would hurt, and you mustn’t hurt. But if you don’t tell them, you hurt, so you must tell them” (18, Asimov). This quote is important because the pressuring of the psychologists ultimately led to Herbie’s demise because it pressured him to the point of a shutdown. Herbie faced the ethical dilemma of pressuring for the truth by completely powering off and ultimately dying to avoid the situation entirely. Herbie was created as a robot to hopefully help the greater good but was ultimately made out to be an advantage for those around him. After Herbie being destroyed Dr. Calvin proclaimed “No, not dead — merely insane. I confronted him with the insoluble dilemma, and he broke down. You can scrap him now — because he’ll never speak again” (19, Asimov). This shows the lack of emotion as she’s bursting into laughter as the robot will never be able to work again. Although Herbie is unreal, he was made with good intentions and his destruction was granted but only because of the fate he was given. His impact on Lanning was huge after he was destroyed as he was on his hands and knees crying over his passing. Although this was sad, Lanning could have had a part in preventing his passing if he recalled the way he was programmed and remembering the laws of robotics. After being taunted by the knowledge of the inability to cause injury to others “Herbie screamed! It was like the whistling of a piccolo many times magnified — shrill and shriller till it keened with the terror of a lost soul and filled the room with the piercingness of itself. And when it died into

nothingness, Herbie collapsed into a huddled heap of motionless metal” (18-19 Asimov). This quote is important because it shows how the ethical dilemma of telling the “truth” regardless of circumstance can affect someone in a negative way, especially with how overwhelming the scenario might be.

The decision of the character who faced the ethical dilemma, Herbie, ended him leading to a fatal ending. Although mentioned earlier with the First Law of Robotics, Herbie did not want to cause any of them “mental injury” so he lied. When confronted he felt extremely pressured that the truth had more of a negative effect on them and it may hurt their feelings and will not tell them because of that. Due to their eagerness and extreme instigation Herbie ended up collapsing to the ground and went silent, emphasizing his life being finalized. This relates to an interview with Lawrence Langer written by Gabriel Finder where he was writing a journal of Holocaust Research dedicated in Langer’s name. Within this article he explains “A woman in the ghetto has enough medicine to treat one patient, but both her husband and his brother are sick. Should she give her husband the medicine, or divide it between the two brothers? Elie Wiesel stands next to his father while a Kapo beats his father. If he intervenes, he will be beaten. If he does not intervene, he must watch his father be beaten. The choices are between bad and worse” (Finder, *Interview with Lawrence Langer*). This quote can personally relate to Herbie because he has to choose between making people happy or allow them to continue being miserable, so he used his ability for not being able to cause injury or pain to enhance people’s days for the better, so he thought. However, relating to Lawrence Langer’s statement, the people in the Holocaust can relate to Herbie in the way that they did what they thought they had to do to survive and please those around them. Additionally, Langer emphasized at the conclusion of his statement that the “choices are between bad or worse” which can directly be related to Herbie’s situation because

while trying to better and preserve the feelings of those around him he and with that has to make the immediate decision to hurt or protect but with laws in place is left with no choice. Whether it came from making undesirable choices or harsh ultimatums, both the Holocaust victims and Herbie had to make their choices in order to manage their lives accordingly.

Ultimately, Herbie's decision to protect those around him has led to his demise however his life made the people around him begin to have life realizations. Herbie's ability to be able to communicate and gain trust with different people allowed him to be able to gain relationships and serve as a lowkey therapist who listens to those around him. He initially lied to Bogert that Lanning was retiring and that he could not identify the error in his manufacturing process. With the first law of robotics in place he refused to tell them the issue because he believed the answer would hurt them. "The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil" (Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*). This quote is important because the sad truth is that the people around Herbie had to face the reality that Herbie was trying to protect everyone's feelings around him and had to make the ultimate sacrifice of death to preserve his main morality. Hannah Arendt stating that emphasizes the fact that most evil is done by people who don't know the truth behind good and bad but because Herbie has that realization already implanted within his software, he makes the consensus decision to protect the feelings of others and sacrifice himself. Herbie's decisions impacted his inner circle by first unsettling them by telling them what they wanted to hear or discreet rumors in order to benefit those around him, but eventually backfired where he wasn't realizing he was causing mental injury that led to his death. After this reading, Herbie's decision can impact the larger society by somewhat being able to preserve the feelings of people around him and personally the need for robots seems to be

meaningless and unreliable especially with the constant reference of blowing up and defying their simple rules they are programmed with.

Writer and Holocaust scholar Hannah Arendt addresses evil behavior within unethical behavior in the article “Hannah Arendt on Standing up to the Banality of Evil”. She argues that “Evil is not monstrous; it takes place under the guise of “normality” (Arendt). Arendt would disagree that character Herbie’s behavior results of evil with her thoughts on the acknowledgments of our biases and learned behaviors. The article states “For Arendt the answer to these questions is largely no-it is precisely our tendency to adopt judgements without thinking that allows evil’s banality to flourish”. This quote relates to Herbie’s because although he is programmed with his set of rules, I believe within this fictional world he is able to manage his own thoughts and programs too be able to feel certain ways and act in a certain manner. The simple definition of banality would be the lack of originality and when relating to the banality of evil, this thoroughly explains Herbie’s character because at the end of the day he was created a certain way so any evil that is created would be considered unoriginal and ultimately up for him to decide what he proceeds to do with it. Lastly, the article’s statement of “the banality of evil is the idea that evil does not have the Satan-like, villainous appearance we might typically associate it with. Rather, evil is perpetuated when immoral principles become normalized over time by unthinking people”. This statement can be directly related to Herbie because he can be considered an “unthinking-person” being a robot however with that being said we cannot assume he has the ability to be evil when he is made to be a certain way.

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula Kroeber Le Guin, is about a seemingly perfect society where everyone is happy. However, something always sounds too good to be true, and with this society there is no exclusion. The city hosts its annual Festival of

Summer, but in a dark, windowless basement beneath one of the city's public buildings lives a child that is physically and mentally malnourished. The child is visited rarely and is only brought food and water scarcely. Although, this isn't kept a secret from the society itself, they all believe that their happiness is all based off of the child's suffering. "Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery" (5, Le Guin). In all, the ethical dilemma addressed in this story would be immoral acts against a child in order to gain power. The ability to overpower a child is simple and therefore unfair to be able to treat a child unfairly without them having the power to defend themselves. This dilemma happens a lot in real life, where children are abused or mistreated in order to satisfy their personal urges because realistically a child is unable to cause detrimental harm where the consequence should be abuse. The right answer for this dilemma is to not take advantage of those who are underage and with no knowledge from right and wrong, because there will be no growth from their abuse. The consequences for abusing a child go as far as the death penalty, because in most cases children who are abused suffer from mental and physical health damage that deny the child of tools needed to become successful. A similar story that portrays an ideal society is "The Hunger Games", likewise though the society depends on the suffering of children to determine the superior district. Both the "Hunger Games" and "The One's Who Walk Away from Omelas" all base the happiness's of their society based on the suffering of children and the mental and physical torture they are put through. In conclusion, the topic of immoral acts against a child addressed by Le Guin is relevant because it is a problem within our society to this day.

The main character who faces an ethical dilemma is the child, who is addressed as it. The narrator states “The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, “eh-haa, eh-haa”, and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves too its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day” (5, Le Guin). Here, we learn fully about the child’s suffering and how it is fed which is obviously below the bare minimum needed to satisfy a growing child’s diet. The point where the child is speaking less and less signifies the mental abuse it is enduring because a child’s mind is free and innocent, and filled with thoughts to be shared constantly. However, the city officials in Omelas are stripping this child of any happiness that it’s able to produce. The ethical dilemma within this story isn’t solved nonetheless because everyone within the Omelas society depends on the suffering of this child. “They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed” (6, Le Guin). This quote shows the importance of the child suffering in order for this society to succeed. Additionally, the narrator writes, “It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer” (7, Le Guin). The society’s solution to the suffering child is to be aware of it and to treat others fairly and well, because without the suffering of that child there could be no happiness. They rely on that child to be there and suffer in order to maintain balance within their own lives because without the child taking the fall, they would have nothing.

Personally, the child is the one who suffers greatly in this situation and was given no choice of its situation and has to basically take on these consequences without a savior. The decision of the town to make this child suffer is the ethical issue as well because they all depend on the suffering of the child to maintain their happiness. "Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of the city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weather of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery" (7, Le Guin). This quote is important because it signifies the realization that the children's suffering is needed for the society to remain utopic. The child is stated to be "so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits its own excrement continually" (5, Le Guin). In all, this quote signifies the condition the child resides in and even though it's not its decision whatsoever. Clearly the citizens of Omelas have made the decision for the child and the impact they made on it will be everlasting due to the suffering and trauma the child is enduring while living under the city and not experiencing the normal activities a child should be enjoying. In short, the child is affected by the decision made by the citizens of Omelas because it barely gets to eat, think, converse, or see the light of day and is stripped of their basic's human rights.

I realize there are naysayers who feel that Herbie and the child may have acted inappropriately at a certain time. In response to your argument, I say that although they may have made mistakes, that is no reason to be treated unfairly or abused. Honesty is key to being able to gain someone's trust and hold a reputable image, however there are instances where you must protect yourself because no one will come to your defense other than yourself. Likewise, with a

victim situation, you must speak up and do something for yourself to protect yourself in order to avoid dangerous situations. The relevance of suffering and the imbalances of life being spoken about is important and shouldn't be disagreed with because everyday someone is feeling powerless and needs the motivation to be able to step up and confront their emotions.

Both theorists mentioned in this essay have stated within their writings that they would evaluate the two stories "Liar and "The Ones Walk Away from Omelas" as thoroughly addressing someone's decision to be honest of exhibit acts of evil. The banality of evil mentioned in Arendt's article and Langer's statements are present and directly relate to the two main characters who face these ethical issues because they have no control over the influence, they are exposed to because of the environments they are born/created into. These issues of negative influence can be considered a problem today and even in the future especially with the ideas of the critical race theory being implemented in schools and the country dividing how they teach the new coming generations that can cause means of disagreement in future environments.

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