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## Kindred Spirits: John Stuart Mill And The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas

Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" is the perfect living depiction of the classic utilitarian perspective of which an action is morally right if it benefits the greatest number of people. For most people in the city of Omelas, life is as close to perfect as it gets and is characterized by happiness, tender friendships, health, wisdom and bounty (Le Guin 3). However, this perfection necessarily rests upon the chronic suffering and abuse of a small nameless child who lives in a basement under the city (Le Guin 3). In the following essay, I will argue that contrary to what the majority of the people in Omelas may think, it is never morally acceptable to sacrifice the life or liberty of one or a few for the sake of the majority's happiness. I will do this by presenting my interpretation of some of theorist John Stuart Mill's central utilitarian arguments, and by offering my own commentary and critiques of these arguments in regard to the context of the city and people of Omelas. Ultimately, I will argue that while Mill himself may walk away from Omelas, his utilitarian theory does not go far enough to ensure the protection of the life and liberty of minority groups that is foundational to a truly moral society.

According to the majority of people in Omelas, sacrificing the liberty and life of one or a few for the sake of the many is clearly a morally acceptable thing to do – and they do it, every day. As the people of Omelas joyously parade around the streets of the city on one gorgeous afternoon, the child sits and suffers below them in a small damp room (Le Guin 1-3). The people of Omelas are aware that the child is suffering, but they also know that too much is at stake for it to be released; "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, depends on this child's abominable misery" (Le Guin 4). For this reason, the people of Omelas do not feel a sense of guilt (Le Guin 3). It seems as if there is a common understanding in Omelas that the suffering of just one small child is a miniscule price to pay for the ever-present euphoria that everyone else is permitted to experience. If not consciously, the majority of Omelas has unconsciously aggregated the pains and pleasures experienced by the city's residents and has come to terms with the fact that while maybe not ideal, the state that they live in is the best for the most people and is therefore morally acceptable. There are, however, a few who walk away from Omelas—those who cannot live with knowing that the city's happiness is dependent upon a lone child's misery. These people leave Omelas alone, never to return.

Had John Stuart Mill ever set foot in this utopia-like place, he too would meet the fate of walking straight out of the beautiful gates of Omelas, never to return. According to Mill, democratic societies experience a recognizable type of tyranny that differs largely from traditional societies of which the struggle was between liberty and authority, or the masses versus tyrannical rulers (Mill 5). Mill coins this tyranny as the tyranny of the majority, or the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling" (Mill 4). Mill would view Omelas as a perfect example of a tyranny of the majority in which the masses unethically oppress the few, or in this case, the one. Mill views this type of tyranny as especially immoral and warns that societies should be cognizant of the vast negative implications of oppressing a small group in the name of highest aggregated happiness. He states that such a tyranny is blatantly wrong as it "leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the

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soul itself" (Mill 8). To this point, I agree with Mill; Omelas is clearly characterized by a tyranny of the majority, and while only one person is physically enslaved, the people as a whole are enslaved by the sociopolitical makeup of their society.

Mill explains that the only instance in which regulation of one or a few is morally permissible is when that minority is harming others— he coins this idea the "harm principle" (Mill 55). In the case of Omelas, Mill would argue that since the child is doing no harm to others, it is immoral to oppress and silence them. Critics would likely reject this argument of Mill's in this context, arguing instead that the child actually would be harming others if released, as the happiness of the people of Omelas is contingent on the child's very captivity. My own position on the matter is that critics are right to question this of Mill, as I believe Mill's harm principle simply does not go far enough to protect the individual. In my own position, majority populations simply should not be permitted to infringe on the personal right to life of the minority group for any reason, regardless of if that group is causing potential harm to the majority. Without this moral code, there will always be room for minority groups to be oppressed in the name of happiness for the most people; under Mill's harm principle, there is simply too much risk for oppression of the minority to occur.

Mill would walk away from Omelas for another reason: he would think that the people of Omelas are simply aggregating the pleasures and pains of their own society incorrectly. Mill agreed with the traditional utilitarian view that utility is defined by the maximized happiness in a society, and that happiness itself is "pleasure and the absence of pain" (Mill 121). To Mill, however, utility is not just about the quantity of pleasures, but about quality of those pleasures; this difference of opinion marks a clear departure of Mill's opinion from that of the people of Omelas. The people of Omelas have decided that the act of keeping the child hostage is a moral one simply because there is only one child and many more people that are free and happy. Mill, on the other hand, would aggregate the pleasures of those living in Omelas differently. Mill contends that "human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites and, when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification... pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments" (Mill 122). Given this, Mill would argue that once each resident of Omelas becomes aware of what their happiness depends on (and they all do eventually at a certain age), they cannot possibly be experiencing the highest quality of pleasure because they simply know too much about the tragedy living beneath their own streets. At the same time, Mill would note that the child's pain is so incredibly severe and chronic that aggregating overall happiness by only quantities is far too oversimplified for this specific case.

Again, I feel that Mill does not take this argument far enough. I argue that the quality of pleasures and pains is simply too subjective, and rather than being about higher quality pleasures, the morality of any action should be based upon whether that action is morally acceptable in and of itself, regardless of the consequences it will produce. This moral theory that I propose delineates that the situation in Omelas is wrong not simply because of the outcome of the child being held hostage so that others can be happy, but because the act of keeping anyone hostage, in and of itself, is morally wrong, even if it produces a sort of social good. Under Mill's theory, there is simply too much room for oppression, even with the harm principle in place.

Furthermore, Mill's basic perceptions of justice would cause him to join those who walk away from Omelas. Mill acknowledges that various societies hold common beliefs about justice, such

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as that justice involves respecting one's moral rights, respecting one's legal rights, respecting impartiality and equality, and giving people what they deserve (Mill 157-158). He defines justice as "a name for certain moral requirements, which, regarded collectively, stand higher in the scale of social utility, and are therefore of more paramount obligation, than any others" (Mill 176). By this, Mill means that there is a critical connection between justice and utility itself: society should defend and uphold the rights of every individual because doing so is the only way to fully maximize general utility for the society as a whole. To Mill, the very moral codes that guarantee such critical rights are the key to maximizing utility in a society. Therefore, to maximize utility is to preserve justice and individual rights at all costs. Mill would view the social setup of Omelas as a gross violation of justice and individual rights, and would view these violations as absolutely detrimental to the Greatest Happiness Principle itself. At the foundation of the Greatest Happiness Principle is the perception that each person in a group is treated and considered equally, but clearly that is not exemplified in Omelas; the child is specifically being treated differently so that everyone else can flourish and thrive. On top of this, the legal and moral rights of the child are not being respected nor even acknowledged, which Mill would see as a flawed foundation for maximized utility. To Mill, infringing on the child's rights to the extent that they are being infringed upon in Omelas fundamentally runs counter to the basic necessary conditions for maximized utility. For these reasons, Mill would say that the child in Omelas is not the only one suffering. He would say that society at large is suffering, too. I contend that this is Mill's strongest argument and I very much agree. The situation in Omelas runs counter to basic conceptions of justice, and it is impossible for utility to ever be fully maximized in an unjust society.

I have argued that while Mill would walk away from Omelas due to his views on tyranny of the majority, aggregation of pleasures, and justice, his theory alas does not go far enough to truly prove that the protection of individual life and liberty of a minority is crucial for the existence of a moral society. I have argued that Mill's harm principle does not extend far enough to guarantee individual life and liberty, and that his concept of higher quality pleasures is too subjective. Mill may be right to walk away from Omelas, but his reasoning for doing so is ultimately flawed. Under Mill's theory, it seems that it is sometimes permissible to compromise one's individual life or liberty for the sake of the majority. I disagree, and have argued that it is always immoral to do so.

## Works Cited

1. K., Le Guin Ursula. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. Townsend School, 1996.
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