

BEYOND THE SIXTH STAGE: MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S "THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS"

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Abstract: Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" presents a moral dilemma at the centre of an apparently ideal society: the happiness of the city depends on the continuing suffering of one child. This article reads the story through Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development and the model of reasoning exemplified by the Heinz dilemma. It argues that the citizens who remain in Omelas display stage-four reasoning centred on social order and stage-five-like reasoning centred on a rationalised social contract, even though that contract violates the rights it claims to protect. Those who walk away appear to embody stage-six reasoning because they reject the bargain on the basis of an uncompromising principle of human dignity. Yet Le Guin withholds their reasoning, leaves the child unrescued, and makes their destination unimaginable. These absences expose a limit in Kohlberg's justice-centred framework: moral action cannot always be classified solely by articulated principles. The story therefore both illustrates and challenges Kohlberg's hierarchy, presenting ethical refusal as a response that stands at, and perhaps beyond, the sixth stage.

Index Terms: ethics of refusal, Kohlberg, literature and psychology, moral development, moral reasoning, Omelas, post-conventional morality, utilitarianism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development proposes that people reason about right and wrong through a sequence of increasingly complex stages [2], [3]. Kohlberg used hypothetical dilemmas, most famously the case of Heinz, who must decide whether to steal an unaffordable drug to save his dying wife. For Kohlberg, the decisive issue is not the choice itself but the reasoning offered for it. A person who rejects theft because of possible punishment reasons differently from one who accepts it because the value of human life outweighs property rights. Morality, in this account, develops from externally imposed rules and self-interest through social conformity and, for some individuals, toward independently chosen ethical principles.

Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" [4] presents a related but more disturbing moral problem. Omelas is prosperous, beautiful, and joyful, but its happiness depends on one condition: a child is confined in degrading and miserable circumstances. Every citizen eventually learns of the child. Most are initially horrified, yet they later accept the arrangement and return to ordinary life. A small number refuse the bargain and leave the city permanently. Le Guin does not explain their principles or destination; she only suggests that they appear to know where they are going.

Much criticism reads the story as an attack on the utilitarian claim that the welfare of the many can justify the suffering of the few. That interpretation is essential, but Kohlberg's framework adds another question: not only whether the arrangement is acceptable, but how the citizens justify their responses. This article first places the reasoning of those who remain within the conventional and early post-conventional stages of Kohlberg's model. It then considers whether the walkers represent the sixth stage of universal ethical principles. Finally, it argues that Le Guin's deliberate refusal to provide their reasoning reveals the limits of a theory that classifies moral maturity primarily through articulated justification.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: KOHLBERG AND THE HEINZ DILEMMA

Building on Jean Piaget's work on cognitive and moral development [1], Kohlberg organised moral reasoning into six stages within three broad levels [2], [3]. The stages classify the structure of a person's justification rather than the action chosen. Two individuals may make the same decision while reasoning from very different moral standpoints.

A. Level One: Pre-conventional Morality

At the pre-conventional level, morality is governed mainly by external authority and personal consequences. Stage one, obedience and punishment, treats an act as wrong because it leads to punishment; Heinz should not steal because he may be imprisoned. Stage two, individualism and instrumental exchange, evaluates actions through self-interest, reciprocity, and personal benefit; Heinz may steal because saving his wife serves an immediate personal relationship. Reasoning at this level does not yet take the wider social order as its principal concern.

B. Level Two: Conventional Morality

At the conventional level, morality is understood through social relationships, approval, law, and institutional stability. Stage three, interpersonal conformity, emphasises being a good person in the eyes of family and community. Stage four, law and social

order, emphasises duty and the preservation of a functioning system; Heinz should not steal because laws must be upheld. Kohlberg regarded conventional reasoning as the dominant level for many adolescents and adults [3].

C. Level Three: Post-conventional Morality

At the post-conventional level, moral judgement is guided by principles that may challenge existing rules. Stage five, social contract and individual rights, understands laws as revisable agreements intended to promote human welfare; the right to life may therefore outweigh a law protecting property. Stage six, universal ethical principles, describes reasoning from self-chosen commitments to justice, equality, and human dignity, even when acting on those commitments requires substantial personal sacrifice [3].

The Heinz dilemma matters here as a method rather than as a story about medicine. It demonstrates that moral assessment depends on the structure of justification. Omelas functions as an intensified version of this method: an entire population must interpret and defend a social arrangement, while a few people respond by refusing participation altogether.

III. THE CITIZENS WHO STAY: CONVENTIONAL REASONING AND THE RATIONALISED CONTRACT

The analytical focus of Le Guin's story is the response of those who learn about the child and choose to remain. The narrator describes a recognisable sequence: a young citizen sees the child, feels disgust and anger, wishes to help, and eventually accepts the arrangement [4]. This acceptance is not presented as simple ignorance. The citizens develop justifications, and those justifications reveal the moral structure of their decision.

Their first justification concerns the maintenance of social order. They believe that the prosperity, art, health, and kindness of Omelas depend on the child's suffering and that freeing the child would destroy their shared world. This resembles stage-four reasoning: the stability of the system outweighs an individual claim, and the rule sustaining the system must be preserved because the alternative appears to be disorder. The citizens interpret their acceptance as maturity or wisdom rather than indifference.

Their reasoning also resembles a stage-five social-contract calculation. They weigh the well-being of thousands against the misery of one and conclude that the arrangement produces the greatest aggregate benefit. They further persuade themselves that the child has been so damaged that freedom would provide little compensation while costing everyone else everything [4]. The reasoning has the form of a social contract, but it exposes a contradiction. Kohlberg's fifth stage assumes that a legitimate contract protects basic rights; the Omelas bargain systematically denies those rights to one person. Formally complex reasoning can therefore support a profoundly unjust outcome.

The bargain is also naturalised. The citizens treat the child's suffering as a fixed condition of reality rather than as a choice renewed by their continuing participation. By representing the arrangement as unavoidable, they convert conformity to an existing order into an apparently principled position. Kohlberg's framework helps identify this movement from shock to rationalisation, while Le Guin shows how the language of social necessity can conceal responsibility.

IV. THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY: TOWARD THE SIXTH STAGE

Those who walk away initially appear to exemplify Kohlberg's highest stage. They see the same child, hear the same justifications, and reject the bargain. They do not seek comfort in the majority's calculation. Instead, they surrender certainty, community, and happiness because they will not accept a social order founded on the degradation of one person. Their action can be read as adherence to a universal principle: human dignity cannot be sacrificed for collective comfort.

The contrast with those who stay fits Kohlberg's hierarchy. The stayers preserve the social system and maximise collective welfare; the walkers appear to follow a principle that transcends both the system and the preferences of the majority. The Heinz dilemma asks whether a person may break a law to protect human life. Omelas asks whether a person may break with an entire society to preserve human dignity. The walkers answer through departure, and their willingness to bear personal loss gives the action the appearance of stage-six moral commitment.

This interpretation is persuasive, but it is incomplete because it depends on information Le Guin deliberately withholds. The walkers' action looks principled, yet the text never states the principle from which they act.

V. THE LIMIT OF THE SCHEMA: REFUSAL, SILENCE, AND WHAT CANNOT BE SCORED

Kohlberg's approach relies on expressed reasoning. His method identifies a stage by examining the justification a person provides, as in the Moral Judgment Interview [3]. The walkers provide no such account. They do not condemn Omelas publicly, announce a universal principle, or explain themselves to the community. They leave silently and alone, moving toward a destination the narrator cannot describe [4]. The apparently highest moral response in the story is therefore marked by an absence of words.

This silence places the walkers beyond the straightforward reach of a system that measures morality through the quality of articulated justification. The citizens who remain can be classified because their arguments are visible: social order, collective welfare, inevitability, and maturity. The walkers cannot be scored with the same confidence because the evidence required by the schema is missing. Le Guin encourages a stage-six interpretation and then withdraws the very explanation needed to confirm it.

Two further details sharpen this limitation. First, the walkers do not free the child. Their refusal preserves their own moral non-participation, but it does not alter the victim's condition. A principled act may therefore remain ethically incomplete when measured by its consequences for the person who suffers. Second, the walkers' destination remains unimaginable. Their action is not presented as a clear programme of reform or as movement toward a fully described alternative society. It is less a completed conclusion than an uncompromising refusal of the available terms.

This tension clarifies the title of the article. To interpret the walkers as stage-six agents is to recognise the universality and personal cost of their refusal. To notice their silence, their failure to rescue the child, and their unknowable destination is to recognise that the story also exceeds the boundaries of the stage model. Carol Gilligan's care-ethics critique argues that Kohlberg's justice-centred theory can undervalue responsiveness, relationships, and attention to concrete suffering [5]. Le Guin's narrative raises a related concern: the purity of refusal coexists with a child who remains abandoned. The story leads the reader to the highest rung of Kohlberg's hierarchy and then asks whether moral seriousness may also lie beyond what that hierarchy can measure.

VI. CONCLUSION

Read through Kohlberg's theory of moral development, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" becomes a study of moral reasoning as well as a critique of utilitarian ethics. The citizens who remain appeal to social order and collective welfare, revealing how conventional and stage-five-like arguments can be used to defend an unjust arrangement. The walkers appear to approach the sixth stage because they reject the bargain in the name of a principle that seems universal and accept significant personal loss.

Le Guin nevertheless denies the reader their explicit justification, any successful rescue of the child, and any clear account of the world toward which they move. These denials mark the boundary of Kohlberg's framework. The model provides a precise vocabulary for distinguishing the reasoning of the stayers from the apparent principle of the walkers, but the story shows that moral action may also take the form of silence, refusal, and uncertainty. The result does not invalidate Kohlberg; rather, it demonstrates both the explanatory power and the limitations of a justice-centred developmental schema when confronted with complex literary representations of moral choice.

The analysis also suggests a further line of inquiry. If the walkers cannot be confidently placed within Kohlberg's stages because their reasoning is unavailable, future work might examine how actual readers - especially adolescents and young adults - explain their own responses to the Omelas dilemma. Such research would extend the literary argument toward the developing moral mind while testing whether ethical refusal can be understood within, or only at the edge of, stage-based models.

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