

Assignment #5

1 Question

Comment on the story "*The ones who walk away from Omelas*" by Ursula Le Guin

2 Answer

This story illustrates the various concepts we have studied in the lectures:

Pareto Optimality. The Omelas society is Pareto optimal: one cannot improve the situation of anyone without degrading the situation of someone else. If, for instance, one would like to improve the situation of the child, and bring him/her out of prison into a normal life, *all* the other citizens would suffer, because it is explicitly stated that Omelas society would collapse. Note that *all* is unnecessary: for Pareto optimality, one is enough. If only one of all the other citizens would see his/her situation decrease as a result of the child's freedom, then its imprisonment is Pareto optimal

Welfare Maximising The welfare of Omelas society, according to utilitarian theory, is given by the sum of its citizens' individual utilities

$$W = \sum_{i=1}^N u_i$$

Every citizen of Omelas (except the child) is perfect and an increase in a single one. Since there is a large number of happy citizens and just one unhappy one, the decrease, added over all citizens except one, would not compensate the increase of one. So the situation in Omelas is welfare-maximisingly happy, so every of the u_i is at its maximum level, except one. Any other situation would lead to a decrease of all the u_i except one,

A just society ? Aristoteles According to the Aristoteles criterion, one must treat equals equally. It is stressed in the story that the child at one point was like all the others, so there is no apparent reason to treat him/her unequally. This is not a just society

A just society? Rawls As indicated in the course, Rawls gives three conditions for a just society:

1. Each person is to an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all

2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both
 - (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and
 - (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

Clearly Omelas society contradicts all three. The fate of the child is clearly built in to contradict 2.a : the least advantaged in this society has a horrible fate, and bringing him/her out of prison will decrease the welfare, but may improve Rawls 'criterion

Walking out? An interesting question: why do some people choose to leave Omelas ? If they do not like the situation, why do they not get together and try to change it from inside ? Perhaps because Omelas society is so happy that it is impossible to change from inside. This echoes the thought of some social thinkers, such as Herbert Marcuse