Sifting Through the Grays of Morality Through Cinema

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Building from existing theories about ethics and the origins of our moral framework, in this paper I will argue that cinema and literature, through character and plot development provide us with an insight that only ethical theories cannot provide. I will argue that because humans are social creatures a lot of our knowledge comes from social conditioning. Censorship in art and literature are important because they are mediums through which ethical theories can be delivered to large numbers of people. I will illustrate how censorship and obvious portrayal of devious characters in stories we consume as children play a big role in developing our moral framework. Through the example of the Harry Potter movies, I aim to illustrate how censorship and portrayal of devious characters has evolved, how the character development and back story of Snape provides ethical conflicts demonstrating how to apply ethical theories. Ethical thought experiments laid out in art and literature can help us develop a stronger moral framework as a community.

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Abstract

Building from existing theories about ethics and the origins of our moral framework, in this paper I will argue that cinema and literature, through character and plot development provide us with an insight that only ethical theories cannot provide. I will argue that because humans are social creatures a lot of our knowledge comes from social conditioning. Censorship in art and literature are important because they are mediums through which ethical theories can be delivered to large numbers of people. I will illustrate how censorship and obvious portrayal of devious characters in stories we consume as children play a big role in developing our moral framework. Through the example of the Harry Potter movies, I aim to illustrate how censorship and portrayal of devious characters has evolved, how the character development and back story of Snape provides ethical conflicts demonstrating how to apply ethical theories. Ethical thought experiments laid out in art and literature can help us develop a stronger moral framework as a community.

History of Censorship

Aristotle's eudaimonia is the state of flourishing/wellbeing/contentment that comes from a lifelong practice of virtuous acts. Aristotle in Book 1 of *Nicomacean Ethics* suggests that virtues are practices of doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right amount. Suggesting that any trait can have extremes, but that virtue lies in the median of the extremes. For example, courage is a virtue but when excessive it is considered to be rash, on the other hand, when deficient it is considered to be cowardly. But because every person is unique, Aristotle suggests that the median for different people is different (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Tr. W.D. Ross, Book 2, s1). For example, the average appetite/consumption of food for an athlete would be very different from that of a person with a desk job. Even though virtue is practiced it is first learned through mimicking exemplars presented to us at a young age, when our minds are impressionable. It is imperative for a flourishing society to show the young virtuous moral exemplars.

Arguably, this is also why Plato prescribed strict laws of censorship in his ideal city, as described in *The Republic*. Plato argued that due to the malleable nature of our minds, in his ideal city, he would ban all tragic deceptive poets (Plato, Republic, Tanke & McQuillan, Book 2). Plato emphasizes censorship, specifically when considering the malleable minds of the youth. Plato justifies this form of censorship in the chase for stability and unity in Kallipolis. Plato suggests that the youth should be taught "Gymnastike for bodies, and mousike for the soul" (Plato, Republic, Tanke & McQuillan, Book 2), he suggests that the study of mousike which is music, poetry, and stories before the study of physical development. The youth of the city-state have malleable minds, and so stories of deceit or bad character would lead to the young minds absorbing such traits and later demonstrating the same deviant behavior. Considering the profound impact the stories of our childhoods have on us Plato justifies the censoring certain types of art, poetry, and stories. Plato suggests that all art-forms be reformed so that there are no stories of vice or any disorder as Kallipolis promotes stability and virtue. Plato proposes that censoring horror, tragedy, promotion of promiscuity, alcohol, food, drugs, anything that could alter and deceit the mind (Plato, Republic, Tanke & McQuillan, Book 3). In *The Republic* Plato establishes that he thinks that all poetry allowed should be in faith of the guardians and that we shouldn't fear death ultimately. Plato suggests that art is good when practiced harmoniously with rationality and temperance. While attributing poetry/songs to words, harmonies, and rhythm, Plato suggests we not only censor words but also rhythms or sounds that may lead to any disturbance to

the mind. Plato talks about the imitative nature of art and poetry; he believes that all "imitative poetry" should be censored as it diminishes the senses and our reasoning. Even though Aristotle was supportive of tragic poetry and even saw a lot of value in it, he also may be against the portrayal of devious characters as exemplars.

Application and Explanation

As social beings, a lot of our knowledge comes from what we learn through our surroundings. When we are young and our minds impressionable, we lack the tools to distinguish between the various grays of morality. In such a malleable state when we are shown characters with ambiguous moral frameworks, we are likely to exemplify them and frame our morals through those characters. This seems to me to be the reason why laws of censorship, as called for in *The Republic* by Plato, seem to have adapted to temporal contexts but their essence still holds value. The youth of the city-state have malleable minds, and so stories of deceit or bad character would lead to the young minds absorbing such traits and later demonstrating the same deviant behavior. Considering the profound impact, the stories of our childhoods have on us Plato justifies censoring certain types of art, poetry, and stories.

When considering storytelling after the 20th century it is impossible to leave out the influence of television and cinema. Censorship and portrayal of devious characters have evolved over time to adapt to socio-temporal contexts. For example, a lot of the fairy tales told to kids are edited to very obviously show the villain as someone to be afraid of. Disney movie adaptations of fairy tales illustrate devious characters/villains to have distinguishing features that make them look scary. It teaches the young not to follow in the footsteps of this obviously sketchy character. Even though more subtle than Greek theatre, Disney movies illustrate their villains in dark colored clothing, often with pale dismal features, and/or scars or deformities that make them look scary. For example, Voldemort, the villain in Harry Potter doesn't have a nose, has incredibly pale, almost purple skin, and is shown wearing a jet-black cloak, whenever Voldemort enters a scene the flora and fauna of the surroundings wither. This generally scary character when always filmed from a low camera angle, combined with dismal background music depicts him as an intimidating, morally questionable character. While Plato in *The Republic* suggested

that the education of people begin with music, poetry, and storytelling; the fact is that we do learn a lot of our core concepts from stories, from literature, and cinema.

When there is such an obvious and deep connection between our learning and stories, wouldn't we also expect more of a collaboration between ethicists and literary theories? I also agree that via literature and movies, ethical tensions can be worked out. Unlike ethical theories that are rather black and white; life, people, and circumstances are not such, when watching and learning through literature and cinema, we can learn through the mistakes and character developments of certain characters we connect with and often don't agree with. When we are older and have developed the tools to distinguish between the various grays of morality, literature and cinema meant for adults often provides us with deeper, more subtle moral dilemmas. In countless stories and movies about lovers where one partner commits a crime and the other uncompromising of their morals turns their partner in or doesn't help them out. We also see the other way around where the partner of the person who committed the crime will compromise on their morals to help their partner out. Either case we are faced with a dilemma: love or justice.

These kinds of ethical dilemmas when played out in literature or cinema give us a chance to learn and understand them in case we ever must deal with a similar situation. When watching a movie or reading literature we often relate to characters and try to put ourselves in their shoes to understand their dilemmas, to understand the story. In the 20th century, as the world became smaller and more reachable, media and literature spread more rapidly, franchises like Harry Potter have engulfed entire generations in its mystical world with real world ethical conundrums. In the progression of the story, across multiple books/movies, we learn about the background story of Snape who is faced with a moral dilemma, duty, or utility. Lily, who was Harry Potter's mother, was friends with Snape long before they went to Hogwarts, they had a strong intimate connection, Snape's love for Lily was so strong it felt like a duty to protect her. However, when they go to Hogwarts Lily and Snape are sorted into different houses, when Lily makes the acquaintance of James Potter. James Potter before he marries Lily and fathers Harry is a little bit of a bully to Snape, teasing and harassing him. In joining the dark army within Slytherin Snape finds friendship, belonging, and consequently feels a sense of duty towards them. When Voldemort, the Dark Lord, finds out about the prophecy that Harry Potter is the one that will kill him, Voldemort tries to kill Lily, James, and Harry. When Snape learns about this his duty towards Lily overtakes his duty towards the Dark army

and without thinking about the consequences, he begs Dumbledor to try and save Lily. When all attempts at saving Lily's life fail, Snape dedicates his life to saving what is left of Lily, Harry. In doing so, Snape demonstrates how we must pick what we feel morally obligated to more. Often in life, we face moral crossroads, where we must make a difficult moral judgement, Lily and James died protecting Harry, we see them choosing their duty towards their son over the consequence of their own death. We often also see this in real life, parents throwing themselves in the pits of death trying to save their children, soldiers dying protecting their country. While parents protecting their children may come from a deeper innate need to protect our kin, we gain strength and wisdom from learning about moral conflicts faced by characters. We feel akin to them in some way and can figure out internally coherent choices we would make if placed in a similar position. While we don't have to fight a Dark army or cast any spells, through this world of fiction and its character development we gain knowledge of how to practically apply ethical theories.

Ethical theories are so important to learn about in order to live a virtuous life, and so I think it is imperative that ethics collaborates with literature. Literature, stories, and cinema post the 20th century have had a significant rise in reach. Millions of people around the world have engaged with Harry Potter, millions of people have internally debated and possibly resolved what they would do if they were in Snape's place. Such ethical thought experiments delivered via characters can also help ethicists actually formulate theories that help us figure out what the right thing to do is, what the right time to do it is, and what measure we should do it in. We learn about the subtleties of moral deviation through characters portrayed in literature and cinema. A lot of the ethical theories we see call for some form of absolute, while life and its circumstances are ever changing. How can a person then adopt ethical theories? Through stories in literature and cinema we discover the deeper point that no ethical theory is absolute. We must constantly adapt and recognize what the virtuous thing to do is in the moment. When we watch and learn from literature and stories, we can often learn how to act or react in certain moral dilemmas. This is why in agreeing with Nussbaum I argue for and see the value in the relationship between ethics and literature.

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About the Author

Shailaja Choksi, originally from India, is currently a student of Philosophy at the California State University, Sacramento. She also participated in the AAPE Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl and has a keen interest in how ethical theories are applicable to the real world.