

**The Intersection of Universality, Duty, and Trauma:
Understanding Ethical Validity through Complex Problems**

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Universality, duty, and trauma are among the most exigent concepts in moral thinking; And the relationship between these three already demanding topics only complicates matters further and raises more difficult questions about how we are to understand ethical behaviour. One of the questions which rises from the intersection of universality, duty, and trauma is that of how we, as moral thinkers, are meant to regard the ethical value of actions which are informed by the past, and perhaps past trauma. The question regards the degree to which the past should control our ethical thinking and the hazards that arise when we allow our past, in the form of trauma, dictate our behaviours and control our ethical lives. The concern with ‘trauma’ in this question refers strictly to trauma which is restricted solely to the past: Past-tense, lived trauma rather than enduring, present-tense trauma. We can acknowledge the correlation between a person’s present life and (possibly traumatic) past, but must also recognize that the implications of this correlation are inherently problematic.

My paper makes the argument that we have an obligation to challenge ethical thinking which is rooted in trauma because it leads to inherently ingenuine behaviours. My argument that attempts to become “ethical” which are centered around an individual's past are ethically impure is directly tied to conceptions of redemption; We cannot act ethically solely for the purposes of earning some redemption or grant others who have done so redemption, because it is an inherently selfish motivation and therefore ethically hollow. Because any self-serving motivation to perform virtuous actions devalues the ethical value of those actions, we cannot excuse individuals who establish a relationship with ethics in order to rectify a past experience and/or grant these gestures ethical value. Moreover, we cannot exonerate people who have committed unethical actions in the past on the basis of their later actions because a person cannot overcompensate for their past crimes with what are inherently insincere gestures. All of this

stems from the fact that when our ethical behaviours become about redemption we immediately forfeit the ethical value because we are motivated by an impure sense of duty to ourselves, rather than duty for the sake of duty itself. Additionally, when our actions become about redemption we risk turning other individuals into means for our own personal redemption rather than treating them as their own ends.

Often we, as ethical thinkers, are inclined to grant broad, sweeping allowances in the case of trauma and actions committed under adverse circumstance because the options of the individual are likely more limited under these conditions, therefore necessitating a more forgiving ethical framework. However, the question of how far can this trauma be used as an “excuse,” for lack of a better word, when it exists in the past is more challenging and therefore neglected in much of the discourse over universality and duty in ethics. Although the question is more challenging, it is important not only because the answer determines the appropriate ethical responsibilities of victims of trauma and/or adverse circumstance, but because it enforces ethical universality. That is to say, by turning our focus to an area of ethics where it becomes difficult not to grant leniency to ethical actors, we are engaging in an exercise of anti-hypocrisy; When we are capable of upholding duty in its purest sense and enforcing it universally, we reinforce these doctrines and reject superficial ethical posturing. We have a moral obligation to recognize and challenge the reliance on the past for maintaining a relationship with ethical living.

The basis of this ethical framework which criticises actors seeking redemption through ethical living is Kantian ethics. Specifically, the argument that basing virtuous behaviour in a selfish motivation rather than a purer obligation to the universal and to duty is directly rooted in the Kantian definition of virtue ethics. Kant writes that the virtue in any given behaviour comes from the interaction with the categorical imperative and consideration of the common good.

Essentially, our duty is to the universal good which is externally imposed upon us, rather than finding duty from internal motivations like personal redemption. Therefore, using ethical behaviours as a means to earn redemption rather than acting ethically for the sake of ethics is unacceptable under the Kantian ethics. In other words, Kant's emphasis on the categorical imperative as a universal framework through which we should determine what behaviours are ethical is connected to his ideology on duty; "The maxim on which the person is acting doesn't have the moral content of an action done not because the person likes acting in that way but from duty" (Kant 8). Here Kant writes that ethical behaviour is only truly ethical if it is clean of internal motivations and instead the result of only one external, universal motivation: duty. The categorical imperative helps us get to this universalized understanding of duty because it roots the ethical responsibility we hold ourselves to in the consideration of what is best for others, ie. the universal, common good rather than the individual good. Kant tells us that ethical reasoning by any rational actor will lead to this "the maxim on which I act should be a universal law" (Kant 11). Kant believes that rational actors are capable of removing their own personal convictions, emotions, and vendettas from their understanding of the universal law; We can come to an understanding of what is morally right by committing ourselves to objectivity and service to the common good. Assuming that this is the case, those who seek an ethical framework and sense of duty in the past make a grave mistake. Kant wrote "only the conviction that... with reason's commanding - on its own initiative and independent of all appearances - what ought to be done" is what will "stop us from abandoning our ideas of duty, and preserve in us a well-founded respect for its law" (Kant 15). Here, he is saying that having the ability to determine through the categorical imperative what we "ought" to do in order to best serve the universal, common good is what allows us to be truly virtuous and maintain a relationship with duty that is pure of selfish

motivation. This argument which challenges relying on the past to motivate our ethical lives draws heavily on this Kantian definition of “pure duty.” When we rely on trauma, the past, and/or a journey towards redemption to inform our ethical behaviours, we are disregarding the universal, common good. We make a mistake by turning inward to determine our duty because it is a duty only to ourselves imposed by an internal, self-serving incentive.

Chang-Rae Lee’s novel, “A Gesture Life,” opens a dialogue about the relationship between our past, traumatic experiences, and our ethical behaviours. Throughout the novel, Lee entwines the main character Doc Hata’s traumatic past and his present desire to live a virtuous life. When Lee swings between flashbacks and present-time plot progression, he develops a conversation about how ethics are constantly being challenged by our past, personal adversity. His character in Doc Hata reflects this common human condition of being tormented by trauma such that we build our ethical lives on the desire to rectify our past wrongdoings, even those which we performed under traumatic circumstances. At the same time that he appreciates the correlation between Hata’s past and present and evokes *some* sympathy for the character’s lived trauma, Chang-Rae Lee also clearly passes judgement on Hata’s inability to separate his ethical behaviours from his guilt about his past later in life. Hata becomes, in his life in the United States, a character of a person overcompensating for their past crimes with insincere gestures rather than moving forward from a traumatic experience with a commitment to the universal good. Lee determines, through Hata’s character, that we cannot act ethically solely for the purposes of earning some redemption, because this is an inherently selfish motivation which is not compatible with the universal good or sensitive to the categorical imperative. When Hata acts in a way he sees as virtuous in order to find some redemption in his new life, he ends up

undermining the ethical validity of his actions and carries out a meaningless life of empty gestures which harms those around him and detracts the universal, common good.

One example where Hata's confused understanding of what is an ethical behaviour is detrimental to others is in his relationship to Sunny. Sunny is his daughter who he clearly adopts out of guilt about his relationship to women throughout his life and in his traumatic time during the war. Sunny becomes more an act of penance for the unethical actions he carried out in the war and a means for his own self-soothing than a meaningful familial relationship. Hata is incapable of experiencing the love of raising Sunny because he is consumed with the gesture itself and symbolism of their relationship than their actual relationship. Sunny, the victim of his shallow gesture, recognizes the insincerity of their relationship in a way Hata either cannot or will not: "I don't want your love and I don't want your concern. I think it's fake anyway. Maybe you don't know it but all you care about is your reputation...You make a whole life out of gestures" (p. 94-95). Sunny observes the hollowness and the ethical fallacy in his behaviour. She observes that his duty is to himself, rather than to her, their relationship, or the common good. That is, that she is being treated as a means for Hata's to attain redemption rather than her own end. Here, Lee reinforces his criticism of Hata's emotionless relationship with duty through Sunny's criticism of his paternal relationship to her.

The problem with the duty Hata is serving throughout his life is also shown in his obsession with becoming a doctor. Becoming a doctor is an ambition which is based in his own desire for redemption and a way for him to allay his own guilt, through duty, rather than a genuine desire to help and serve others. Having the personal identification with the title of "doctor" is another way for Hata to be satisfied with the gesture rather than the feelings that warm the gesture. He lacks the ability to look outside himself to understand how his becoming a

doctor could benefit the universal, common good because his desires are rooted only in his own trauma and guilt. This is yet another example of how he invalidates the ethical validity of these gestures because he prioritizes his own self-interest. Hata becomes so entrenched in the service of his own self-interest you would hardly know he has guilt over the selfish actions he committed in his past. The problem is this guilt and obsession with redemption leads him to continually carry out behaviours that are morally hollow. Again, Hata is blind to his own limitations but those in his life see it clearly. Captain Ono says of his ambition, “How do you think you will ever become a surgeon? You, Lieutenant, too much depend upon generous fate and gesture” (p. 266). We see that Ono recognizes Hata’s inability to consider duty to any other but himself in his gestures, and therefore is ill-suited to a profession which requires a duty to the universal, common good.

Overall, Lee’s novel exemplifies the dangers that occur when we base our actions in a desire for redemption which is rooted in some past trauma. There are moments throughout the novel in which Hata could look from the outside to be potentially earning his redemption, but from the perspective of others like Sunny seem self-serving, and to the reader who is aware of his motivations seems hollow and unfeeling. Hata is ultimately unable to separate his ethical endeavours from guilt about his past, a problem which leads him down a path of ethical devaluation wherein he fails to carry out any truly virtuous gestures and/or relationships. His motivations make his actions self-serving and his behaviours become nothing but empty gestures. Doc Hata’s condition speaks to the greater ethical problem of redemption in ethical thinking, specifically how it complicates the relationship between the actor and those they involve in their journey towards redemption. Essentially, Chang-Rae Lee’s “A Gesture Life” serves as a cautionary tale on the problems that arise when morality is exclusively rooted in one’s

own self-interest. Lee is saying that the intertwined relationship between trauma and ethics does not excuse ethics centered in duty for the sake of duty. We, the audience, are meant to understand that trauma should not be a foundation on which we build our ethical lives and base our ethical behaviours through Hata's failures.

In closing, we have an obligation to reject "ethical" behaviour which is rooted in past trauma and/or a desire for redemption because these motivations lends itself to inherently ingenuine behaviours and a selfish form of duty. Under the Kantian definition of duty, when our behaviours become about redemption we forfeit true virtue because we are motivated by an impure sense of duty to ourselves, rather than duty for the sake of duty itself. When we perform what we see as virtuous actions out of an internally-imposed sense of duty, we immediately devalue the ethical value of those actions. Not only do we fail to connect with the true meaning of ethics when we become preoccupied with our own past experiences but we risk turning other individuals into means for our own personal redemption rather than treating them as their own ends and violate their humanity. In the example of "A Gesture Life," when Hata treated his daughter as a symbol of his own growth, he not only stripped her of her humanity but failed to truly benefit from any ethical validity which could have come from their relationship; He performed the gesture of adoption, but without having done so out of a pure sense of duty, undermined the ethical validity of this action. The essential lesson from this is that gestures which are not rooted in consideration of the categorical imperative and/or are in service to a universal, common good cannot be granted ethical value, lest we detriment the universal, common good and turn others into a means for our own personal gratification. Although the question of how we are meant to balance sympathy for people who have experienced trauma

while still enforcing these fundamental laws of ethics is a challenging one, it is imperative that we enforce the doctrine of pure duty and the categorical imperative universally.