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## Consolation

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## Consolation

*We only begin to live when we conceive of life as tragedy.*

— William Butler Yeats

There are different ways of thinking of moral philosophy, some more ambitious than others. One way to see the enterprise is in pragmatic terms. We find ourselves together and must figure out how to coexist. Hence, we need an idea of what you can demand of me and I can demand of you. These and other elements of basic social life are no small stuff, so I don't mean that moral philosophy is easy or unimportant when it takes this pragmatic turn. This approach is modest compared to the one suggested in Plato's *Republic* when Glaucon challenges Socrates with the ring of Gyges. Glaucon wants Socrates to tell him why justice should really matter, why anyone who might ignore it would make a genuine mistake by ignoring something supremely important.

The crucial point here is what matters. I don't mean what matters for someone who has come on board, so to speak. An athlete determined to play by the rules and excel will not look for reasons to participate. Likewise, Glaucon is not really prepared to abandon the sport of justice, but he wants to know why anyone should play this game. Gyges, the shepherd with the magic ring, can have the external rewards of justice without the sacrifices. So Glaucon wants to know how and why a just life should matter to someone who isn't already committed to the cause. Glaucon wants a compelling account of how to live, one that orbits around what really matters.

Now imagine that it might always be possible to live true to what is really important, either because you can have everything that matters or because you can at least have what matters most. If this were possible, if human beings could always steer their lives faithfully by these lights, this would be very welcome news. In this case, you might say that consolation would never be beyond us. No matter what we might lose or miss in life, we could always have the comfort of living true to what is most important. This would be no small thing.

## 1. The Stoics: The Invulnerable Life

Consider the stoics in this vein. They paint a picture where consolation is always ours for the taking because the only thing that truly matters is good character. Of course, as the stoics would tell you, nobody ever said that being good would be easy. They recognize that human beings must travel an arduous road to attain that kind of character, divesting themselves of all sorts of stubborn, tenacious attachments along the way to good character. During that journey, the promise of virtue-to-be is the one true consolation, the star by which we should guide ourselves. Of course, not all people will stay on the straight and narrow; the spirit may be willing, but the flesh weak. But for those that stick to the road and see their way to the promised land, the rewards are beyond chance. Good character is invulnerable and its consolation complete. Come what may, no harm can come to the good person. Virtue is all that matters.

Few of us buy this view, and the reason is straightforward. The implications are profound. Nothing matters but good character. Nothing. Not friends, family, loved ones. Not personal projects or pursuits. Indeed, the very idea of *consolation* is stretched for virtuous stoics. On this view, there are no losses to console when talking about those who have achieved stoic virtue.

Let me leave stoicism aside because I can't fathom a world where good character is the only thing that matters. I can understand the idea, but I cannot accept the axiom that people matter only so far as their character is concerned. Let the stoics try to soften this view with all the "preferred indifferents" they like, but the bottom line must be that my grief and anger in the face of profound misfortune for those I love are manifestations of incorrect valuations. Some may believe this, but this adoration of character eviscerates concerns at the heart of our humanity.

## 2. Kant: The Rejection of Tragedy

I could say more in this vein, but I'll ignore stoicism in favor of a more plausible alternative. Like the stoics, Kant believes that consolation is always possible, that we can always have the genuine solace of living true to what is most important. Where he differs is that he doesn't think that moral goodness is the only thing that matters. There are different kinds of value for Kant. Moral goodness is just one variety. But it is the supreme value, more important than any other, different in kind and not simply degree. We know that moral value matters most for Kant because if moral value comes into conflict with other values, moral value must win. Notice that the sheer fact that moral goodness can come into conflict with something like happiness — where Kant thinks of happiness in terms of the things you happen to desire — leaves open the possibility

for a kind of loss that the stoics could never recognize. For instance, if someone like Thomas More must choose between survival by swearing an oath to King Henry or living true to his principles and losing his head, moral goodness commands the latter. The choice comes at some real loss, the loss of his life and the happiness of his family. Unlike the stoics, Kant doesn't dismiss these non-moral values as nothing at all, but he makes them subordinate to moral goodness. And since Kant believes that it is always possible to be morally good, he holds out an ever-present promise of consolation: Come what may, you can always do the right thing, and by so doing, you can always have the consolation of knowing that you lived true to what matters most. Moral goodness isn't everything, but such goodness is the most important thing — period.

Notice that for Kant's vision of consolation to be more than an idle wish, we must be able to steer our course by the lights of moral goodness *and* that goodness has to be supreme. In other words, it must always be possible to do the right thing, and by so doing, to stick to what matters most. So we have to be able to *know* the right thing and be able to *do it*. Kant thought this was so. On the other hand, most people in everyday life have serious doubts. For one thing, what matters most isn't always so clear. Sometimes we have an idea of what things matter, but try as we might, we just can't figure out what is most important. In other cases, we may have a sense of what matters more than what, but the contest may be such that the winner hardly feels like a victor that can provide much consolation. What matters more may only barely beat out what matters less, and the consolation from the contest of the more and the less may seem slim indeed.

Kant acknowledged the phenomenon of apparent conflicts between duties (the things that ultimately mattered most for Kant). He certainly didn't play up the experience, but he wrote about it briefly in his *Metaphysics of Morals*.<sup>1</sup> There he says that all such conflicts are only apparent, that the grounds of obligations collide in such a way that once they are on the playing field together, one or the other inevitably gives way to reveal your true duty. So Kant wants to account for this everyday sense of being in the moral dark or stuck between a moral rock and a hard place. But he insists that this psychological sense of dilemma — of not being able to tell what truly matters or not being able to avoid soiling your hands in a clash of things that matter — is really just a call to moral arms: Look closer and think harder and you will see your way clear to a doable answer. Those who don't are to blame for their own supposed quandary.

In the end, so far as Kant is concerned, human beings are spared any truly *tragic* fate. We can experience sadness. Plenty of it. Very bad things can happen to us — misfortune, grief, disappointment. Kant departs from the stoics because he believes that good people can have terrible lives. But come what may, we can always have the consolation of moral goodness. We are spared the possibility of a fate where moral goodness

might be impossible, whether it be that we cannot see the moral light or that we are called by conflicting demands that make goodness impossible. All life's good things may not be ours, but the supreme good — moral goodness — can always be had.

Let me come clean: Kant is wrong. Though his aspiration is understandable, his persistent belief in this kind of consolation is a philosophical fantasy. Most people do not buy it, but this reluctance needs explanation. After all, not every fantasy is equal. The danger in any particular one is directly proportional to what is at stake. In the case of Kant's consolation, what hangs in the balance is the way we understand human life and character. So I would like to cast doubts on this fantasy about consolation, not because I do not wish it were so, but simply because it isn't so. Moral philosophy is about seeing us as we are and might be at our best, not about constructing a spurious defense of what we desperately wish were so.

I'll use two literary examples to help explain why Kant is wrong. The examples flesh out the claim that sometimes there can be no true consolation for us. Sometimes there is precious little consolation in the all-things-considered right thing, and sometimes it stretches our imagination to think in terms of one alternative being better than the other. The deepest forms of tragedy defy the very idea of consolation. The examples suggest that Kant's hope is a false hope.

### 3. Sophie's Choice

The first example comes from William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*.<sup>2</sup> A young mother finds herself with her two young children in Auschwitz, facing a drunken German doctor who holds their fate in his hands. In a moment of desperate fear, Sophie Zawistowska tries to influence their ominous lot by telling the doctor that they are devout Catholics, not Jews. The move backfires when the doctor offers Sophie a sadistic choice: She can choose which of her children will go the gas chamber, or they will both die. At first Sophie doesn't understand, and when she does, she momentarily refuses to choose. The doctor impatiently exhorts her, and at the last second, just before both children are whisked away, Sophie makes her choice.

“Mama!” She heard Eva's thin but soaring cry at the instant that she thrust the child away from her and rose from the concrete with a clumsy stumbling motion. “Take the baby!” she called out. “Take my little girl.”

At this point the aide — with a careful gentleness that Sophie would always try without success to forget — tugged at Eva's hand and led her away into the waiting legion of the damned. She would forever retain a dim impression that the child had continued to look back, beseeching. But because she was now almost completely blinded by salty, thick, copious tears she was spared

whatever expression she wore, and she was always grateful for that. For in the bleakest honesty of her heart she knew that she would never have been able to tolerate it, driven nearly mad as she was by her last glimpse of that vanishing small form. (*Sophie's Choice*, 529)

Sophie never recovers from her terrible choice. She survives Auschwitz, but she never knows her son's fate. Eventually she makes her way to America and takes up with a charismatic schizophrenic, Nathan Landau. A young writer moves into their Brooklyn apartment building and is smitten with them. But Stingo eventually sees the dark side of Nathan's madness. Deeply in love with Sophie, Stingo tries to rescue her from her increasingly violent lover. They escape New York briefly and Stingo paints a hopeful picture of a life they might have together. But after sleeping with Stingo, Sophie slips away back to Nathan, leaving Stingo a final note.

My dearest Stingo, your such a beautiful Lover I hate to leave and forgive me for not saying Good-Bye but I must go back to Nathan. Believe me you will find some wonderful Mademoiselle to make you happy on the Farm. I am so fond of you — you must not think bei this I am being cruel. But when I woke I was feeling so terrible and in Despair about Nathan, bei that I mean so filled with Gilt and thoughts of death it was like Eis Ice flowing in my Blut. So Must be with Nathan again for whatever that mean. I may not see you again but do believe me how much knowing you have meaned to me. You're a great Lover Stingo. I feel so bad, I must go now. Forgive my poor englisch. I love Nathan but now feel this Hate of Life and God. FUCK God and all his Hände Werk. And Life too. And even what remains of Love.

Sophie (*Sophie's Choice*, 545)

Stingo hurries back to Brooklyn, only to find Sophie and Nathan laying dead together in bed.

## 4. Sethe's Choice

My second example comes from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.<sup>3</sup> Sethe, an escaped slave from the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky, makes her way to free Ohio with the impossible burden of a child soon to be born. There she is finally reunited with her mother-in-law and the three children sent ahead via the Underground Railroad, and a fierce resolve takes shape in her mind. She will never let her children go back to slavery because now she fully appreciates the depth of slavery's horrors. Having tasted freedom, she sees that they must never go back. Never.

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up...Whites might dirty her all right, but

not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing — the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, footless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband of Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. *She* might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter. (*Beloved*, 251)

But after just twenty-eight days, Sethe's grim resolve is put to a terrible test. She spies an all-too-familiar hat on one of the white horsemen riding down Bluestone Road and quickly gathers her children to a woodshed, there to commence the grim business of taking their lives and her own. She succeeds in taking just one life, but when the Sweet Home overseer surveys the grisly scene, he concludes that Sethe has gone mad and goes home without her.

After a short stay in jail, Sethe returns to 124, her mother-in-law's house. Her sons eventually run off and Baby Suggs dies, leaving Sethe and her daughter Denver in a haunted house. When Paul D, one of the Sweet Home slaves, makes his way to Sethe eighteen years after *The Misery*, the ghost of the slain child returns in the form of a mysterious young woman, Beloved. When Beloved finally reveals herself, Sethe retreats from the world with her two daughters ("Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room.").

Sethe's attention gradually turns entirely to Beloved. For eighteen hard years Sethe stubbornly refused to explain herself. As she saw it, what she did was right because it came from a mother's love. As far as she was concerned, she owed nobody an explanation but the slain child. But try as she might in her obsessive quest to make Beloved understand, her child cannot see things as Sethe saw them. Denver watches her mother unravel under the strain.

Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. Yet she knew Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning — that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant — what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life — Beloved might leave...Whispering, muttering some justification, some bit of clarifying information to Beloved to explain what it had been like, and why, and how come. It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out. (*Beloved*, 251 & 252)

In the end, *Beloved* is driven off by the women in the community. Having lost her child for the second time, Sethe gives up, taking to her bed under a patchwork quilt, just as Baby Suggs had done years before. And then Paul D finds her.

He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back; the delicious mouth still puffy at the corner from Ella's fist. The mean black eyes. The wet dress steaming before the fire. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry — its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers.

"Sethe," he says, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers.

"Me? Me?" (*Beloved*, 273)

There is no telling whether Sethe can come back, whether she can rise from her bed and live again. But consolation's odds seem very long for her.

## 5. Sophie, Sethe & Tragedy

Kant would have a ready answer for both these cases. Take Sethe. Kant would applaud Sethe's conviction that some things are more important than life itself. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant shows a degree of admiration for Cato's decision to take his own life rather than be captured by Caesar.<sup>4</sup> Such resolve demonstrates strength, but Kant sees the strength as misdirected. Had Cato used this strength to endure whatever Caesar might have done to him, he could have avoided wrongdoing. Suicide is always wrong for Kant.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, taking an innocent life could never be right, so even if Sethe kills her child to spare her the evils of slavery, she does wrong. So while there is no consolation for Sethe, this is because she did the wrong thing. Under the circumstances, maybe she had no real chance for happiness, but she could have had the consolation of keeping her hands morally clean. For Kant, we always have that chance.

With Sophie, the Kantian response is harder to pinpoint. On the one hand, were Sophie in the middle of a lake and had she to choose which child to save, surely Kant wouldn't say that she should save neither if she couldn't save both. Sometimes people cast Kant as uninterested in consequences, but this cannot be right. Genuine respect for a person would have to command a deep regard for that person's well-being. Respect without this regard would make no sense at all. So it would be perverse to imagine Kant telling a mother to let both her children drown, even though by saving one,

she would effectively be letting the other drown. At first glance, saving one child seems like a simple case of making the best of a bad situation.

However, Sophie's situation is different in two key ways. She is being asked to hand over a child. Maybe the difference between letting a child drown and handing over a child seems small. After all, dead is dead. But in Sophie's case, she has to aim intentionally at having the Nazi doctor take Eva. She doesn't slay her daughter with her hand, but she tells the doctor whom to kill. Sophie's word condemns her daughter.

Furthermore, there is an element of evil manipulation here. By choosing which child will die, Sophie cooperates, however begrudgingly, with the Nazi doctor's cruel game. True, she does so to save her son. Nevertheless, she goes along. Perhaps Kant would rule out such cooperation with evil. Maybe he would advise Sophie to wash her hands of the cruel choice, to cast the decision back on her sadistic oppressor.

I'll be honest. I'm not sure what Kant would or should say here. If the question is posed in terms of which child must die (as opposed to which can live), I strongly suspect that Kant would forbid an answer. Fortunately, nothing hangs here on a definitive answer. Whatever Kant's answer might be — hand over one child, refuse to choose, fight the men who would lay hands on her children — Kant would say that Sophie can do the right thing and when she does it, she can find genuine consolation in the choice. Again, we can always do the right thing, so we can always have the consolation of doing what matters most.

Stay with Sophie for a moment. If I put myself in her shoes and imagine a choice between my own two daughters, I'm not sure what to say. If asked whether I'd rather lose one daughter or both, the answer is perfectly clear. But the difference between *losing* one and *choosing* one is no little thing for a parent. Let's imagine I see that resistance is futile and that my love is such that I cannot let both die. Sophie had no coin to toss when she made her choice, but suppose I do, and suppose I can leave things to chance. Heads for Flannery; tails for Madeleine. This way, one will live, and at least the one who dies will see her sentence as a matter of pure chance, not a consequence of my greater love or preference for her sister.

If you don't like this strategy, formulate an alternative. For instance, I could beg the doctor to kill me. When he refuses my offer and insists on my choice, I could defy him. "Do what you will," I might say, "But I will not condemn my own child. Never." When his aides put their hands on my children, I could fight like hell, but I am just one man and I am powerless to stop them. They are too many and too strong. So on this alternative, both my children die. But at least I have refused to buy the life of one at the expense of the other, coin toss or no coin toss.

I cannot see how I can escape this situation unscathed. Either way, my hands have blood on them. Either way, my hands are dirty. Someone like Kant would protest.

“You are confused. *You* are not morally responsible,” he would say, “because this bad man kills your children, not you.” For Kant, there is a right answer (at least one) for any situation. So long as you do the right thing, guilt and shame are misplaced. If you feel these emotions, they are irrational feelings that you should discount. Whichever it is — saving one or refusing to choose — I cannot be caught with no moral way out. Kant believes I can always remain clean. I disagree.

Clear dichotomies are very alluring. Up or down. True or false. Good or bad. Right or wrong. We like to know for sure, with no gray areas or complications to muck up the understanding. We find understandable comfort in such things. Kant and contemporary Kantians explain a sense of dirty hands as a psychological reaction to certain kinds of difficult choices. Make no mistake — doing the right thing can be plenty hard. Kantians can readily acknowledge this fact. But they insist that you must take care to focus on *moral* responsibility. Sure, say Kantians, you often should feel bad for those negatively impacted by doing the right thing. While it can't make any sense to feel morally guilty or ashamed for doing the right thing on a Kantian view, all sorts of other emotions can make perfect sense. A good person may have to do many things after doing the right thing. It may behoove me to impress upon a justly harmed party how sorry I am that the moral law called for this harm. But in this case, there is no paradox of something being right and wrong at the same time.

This legalistic way of seeing the world is a comforting philosophical fantasy, and a malicious one at that. Sophie suffers from terrible guilt for handing over her daughter. So would I. This guilt would be fully compatible with thinking I'd done the best thing, all-things-considered. My sense of guilt would not be fleshed out in terms of the thought “I could and should have done otherwise.” Whether I might hand over one daughter or neither, I would have to work directly against my deepest attachments, to betray my most cherished loves. If someone tried to comfort me with the idea that at least I saved one or that I wasn't implicated in their deaths, this solace would be cold comfort or no comfort at all. True enough, the thought “I did the right thing” can be a powerful balm and rightly so. But not in this case. I love my children. And in the case at hand, I fail one or the other or both — period. If I could find meaningful consolation in the abstract thought that I did the right thing, if this thought could somehow buoy my psyche, I wouldn't be much of a father. I doubt that thoughts of right or wrong would even enter into the picture, but if they did, they certainly wouldn't operate as a simple dichotomy. Right and wrong, like good and bad, exist in degrees. Even in the all-things-considered right (or good) choice there can be profound elements of wrong (and badness). There would be in Sophie's case (if there is even any sense to one choice being right). She must hold hands with evil, one way or another, be it by handing a child over, or by remaining mum while they take her children. In this case, even the all-things-considered right thing can dirty you. Failing to acknowledge this fact

about human lives and character is a case of sticking one's head in the philosophical sand. You can try to define away this kind of experience, but doing so is just playing with words.

The notion of *cost* is absolutely vital here. All our choices involve some cost, though most everyday choices do not carry costs that rise to the level of the tragic. With tragic costs, the price is so dear that it strikes at the very heart of who we are. Whether I have to forsake one beloved thing for another or endure something evil to avert something worse, the cost can be such that “winning” is losing. This is Sophie's case. She purchases her son's life at the cost of her daughter's. Imagine little Eva's last thoughts. Her mother, the one who is responsible for keeping her safe and sound, the one who is supposed to love her without fail or question, gives her up for the sake of her brother. Sophie has to know that her choice must feel like nothing short of betrayal to Eva. Try living with that for the rest of your life as a mother and see how you do. So-called words of comfort like “It's not your fault” or “What else could you do?” can't change the fact that you abandoned one child for the other. Yes, you were under extreme duress. Yes, the situation was not your making. Yes, you saved one child. But to think that you might wiggle out of a crushing sense of responsibility by appeal to some narrow conception of responsibility is to turn a blind eye on what it means to be a parent. We certainly cannot blame Sophie, but just as surely, Sophie cannot exonerate herself, at least not if she is a loving mother.

Kant might chalk all this up to the unfortunate, ever-dangerous vagaries of our empirical psychology. In his book, reason must always rule over our affective proclivities by serving as a kind of filter that gives the seal of approval to all our motivations. Only reason's dominion in this sense can keep us on the straight and narrow. And what reason ultimately tells us is that we can always do the right thing — period. Yet Kant's picture turns human life and character on their heads: We must fit Kant's theory, rather than Kant's theory being consistent with the facts of our empirical psychology. Consider this. When Kant says that Cato could have resisted Caesar's tortures no matter what (and thus he did not have to take his own life for fear of what Caesar's methods might do to his character), this faith certainly cannot come from pure reason as Kant seems to believe. The facts of our empirical psychology cannot be discovered in metaphysics, no more than metaphysics can tell us how fast a person can run the mile. In this regard, we must bow before the empirical facts — period. How fast can we run? This fast. What does it mean to love someone? This is what it means. The answers are only to be found by looking at us, not to metaphysics. So when Kant and company rule out cases of dirty hands — instances where you are caught between a rock and hard place and cannot avoid profound ethical costs — they engage in flights of fancy that make the world a safe place by ruling out such phenomena by definition. Come what may, you can always remain morally whole. Even in the midst of numbing

heartache, disappointment, and loss, you can always have the invaluable consolation of living an upright life. It is said, so indeed, it must be so. But Kant and company are wrong. There is no such safe place, however much we might wish for it.

In this light, consider Sethe. Perverse as it may sound, Sophie may actually have it easy compared to Sethe. At least Sophie has the clarity of the terms of her choice: one death or two. Again, were she not forced to have a hand in the choice, clearly one death would be the uncomplicated lesser of two evils. Sethe is not so fortunate. Think about her circumstances. Flight is not an option. She cannot escape with four small children. She could resist, but she would stand no chance against four armed men. So as she sees things, her choices come down to taking her children's lives by her own hand or surrendering. Think about the latter. Sethe knows what they would face at Sweet Home. Once upon a time, when Sweet Home was run by Mr. Garner, his slaves were a different lot. They were allowed unusual freedoms and they took a special pride in their status. Even Garner prided himself on his class of slaves: "...Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men." (*Beloved*, 11) But when Garner dies and Schoolteacher takes over the plantation for Mrs. Garner, everything changes. The iron fist emerges from the velvet glove. So Sethe knows that her children will be bound, broken, used and abused without end. Schoolteacher's nephews may someday steal her daughters' milk, just as they stole hers. Sethe got through it, but she knows the profound toll it takes on a person, the toll it took on the Sweet Home slaves. Years later, Paul D suffers from the deep-seated shame that he was only a man at Sweet Home and that his manhood was Garner's whim. Only Sixo seemed incapable of being broken, and the price of his strength was being roasted alive while tied to a tree, laughing and singing all the while so that his captors might know what it meant to be a man. And Sixo had the benefit of many years under Garner before he faced Schoolteacher's trials. Sethe's children would not be so lucky. They would be reared by Schoolteacher, not Garner, and that would make all the difference.

Stay with this crucial point for another moment. If her children go back to Sweet Home, Sethe would certainly do everything in her power to shield them from Schoolteacher. But every day would be filled with large and small moments of compromise and cooperation with evil in order to survive. Her children would have to watch her bossed about, beaten down, and degraded, and she would have to witness the same for them. Any righteous protest or indignation would simply rain down more of the same on them all. So Sethe would have to "let" Schoolteacher and his nephews defile her children and defile their mother in front of them. Her begrudging cooperation for the sake of sheer survival would militate against the very attachments and commitments that define her psychologically, but anything short of obedience would not do with a man like Schoolteacher. He'd have no interest in leaving any shred of a slave's self-

respect intact. Quite the contrary. A master's dominion would demand homage and deference. Thus, she would have to work with evil to survive each day, just as survivors in places like Auschwitz had to curb their impulses to help or to cry out against the profound injustice and inhumanity around them. Each and every day would work against who Sethe is at her very core — a loving mother who cannot bear to see “her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing” systematically defiled. Of course, Kant might tell Sethe that she and her children could suffer degradation and remain morally whole, just as Cato could have endured whatever Caesar might have done to him. But anyone who knows anything about how the spirit and body can be relentlessly broken by those with the will and the power and a taste for cruelty should recognize such faith for what it is — pie-in-the-sky theorizing. Simply put, we are not the creatures Kant imagined in his flights of wild fancy.

So next to this wicked fate at Sweet Home, death seems like a friend to Sethe. But this is not just death. This is death by her hand. A mother's hand. With no time for any thought save “No. No. Nono. Nonono,” Sethe flies to the woodshed. After she is done, she refuses to acknowledge any cost because she did what she did from love. She meant to spare her child from something worse, and that is all that matters to her at the time. For eighteen years she beats back the past, carefully managing her memories and emotions to rule out any disquieting doubts. When Paul D appears, he brings Sweet Home with him, and he speeds banished feelings to the surface. When Beloved reveals herself, Sethe must finally explain her actions.

Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her own life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears. Did she know it hurt her when mosquitoes bit her baby? That to leave her on the ground to run into the big house drove her crazy? That before leaving Sweet Home Beloved slept every night on her chest or curled on her back? Beloved denied it. Sethe never came to her, never said a word to her, never smiled and worst of all never waved goodbye or even looked her way before running away from her. (*Beloved*, 241)

Think about Beloved. From her point of view, her mother killed her — end of story. Of course, there is more to the story. Much more. But no explaining can change the fact that Sethe aimed directly at taking her own child's life. Of the two things — a life of slavery or a quick death — Sethe chose what she saw as the lesser of two evils. When Paul D questions her and insists there had to be some other way to protect her children, Sethe's response is unmoving: “It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.” (*Beloved*, 165) When he criticizes her by saying that her love is “too thick,” she says

that “Thin love ain’t love at all.” She even feels contempt for Paul D because he should not pass judgment on something he cannot understand.

Too thick, he said. My love is too thick. What he know about it? Who in the world is he willing to die for? Would he give his privates to a stranger in exchange for a carving? Some other way, he said. There must have been some other way. Let schoolteacher haul us away, I guess, to measure our behind before he tore it up? I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. (*Beloved*, 203)

Yet, as Sethe tries in vain to explain herself, she finds that there is no clear way of measuring out these two evils, no way to make her child see the wisdom of her motherly calculations. The solace that has buoyed her for years can no longer keep her afloat. *Beloved* in the flesh destroys this false hope. Having to answer to her makes a mockery of Sethe’s defiant certainty. Denied this certainty, Sethe eventually disintegrates under the weight of her terrible burdens.

This is the worst form of tragedy, where we cannot get a measure of the relative costs of the alternatives and inch our way toward some small consolation. The problem in such cases is not that we simply lack the right tool for precise measurement. There is no such tool. Some things defy measurement by their very nature. Computations are not part of the picture. In Sethe’s case, the horrors of each bad thing — killing her child or seeing that child systematically defiled—are such that they defy the possibility of taking comfort in the idea that things could have been worse or that at least something good was spared. Try as she might, she cannot make any sense of one thing as better (or less bad). And when she faces that realization, it crushes her. Even a mother’s love is no refuge. Perhaps Paul D’s loving hand can coax Sethe back from the abyss, but if so, this will have nothing to do with taking consolation from the best thing, all things considered. No such consolation can be had.

## 6. Human Lives Without Tragedy?

I suspect that Kantians (and others with faith in ethical theories) may balk and insist that there is a serious equivocation at work here. Perhaps the notions of what *matters* is the culprit. After all, all sorts of things can matter to us in the sense of caring deeply about something. Kant’s moral law, or any other moral law for that matter, cannot guarantee that any given person will care about the right things, in the right way. Maybe the inconsolable are idiosyncratically inconsolable because they are blind to things that matter in some more important sense. Perhaps the inconsolable do not see and appreciate what really and truly matters most.

We should keep in mind who bears the burden of proof. Nobody has to plumb any arcane mysteries to understand how and why their children matter to Sophie and Sethe. Anyone who insists that something else matters more or that there is some deeper sense of mattering as opposed to Sophie and Sethe's love must do more than state this claim. One can talk about "views from nowhere" or categorical imperatives trumping the facts of our empirical psychology, but I'm not sure what such claims are really supposed to mean. Any philosophical perspective that substitutes theory for a clear depiction of us and what we are really like makes a terrible mistake. And one basic fact of our empirical psychology that any theory must come to grips with is that our lives are deeply constituted by the loves around which they tend to orbit.

Indeed, step back for a moment and consider the implications if there were no such possibilities for profound tragedy, if Kant were right that consolation were always to be had. What would it mean for all our loves to be reconcilable by necessity? If we are very lucky, our deepest loves can coexist in everyday life, at least for the most part and to a large degree. Mind you, I don't mean some blessed harmony where we can have it all without any significant loss or compromise. This is a childish fantasy. Even Kant didn't believe that we could have it all. He just thought that we could always have what matters most. So he believed that the things that are important are reconcilable in the sense that they are ordered canonically and we can always be faithful to the best thing. Kant believed that our deepest interest as rational beings — whatever our psychological inclinations might tell us — should be in living a life true to a deliberative process that could always discriminate between right and wrong. All we had to do was give ourselves to this process and exercise the will to live true to its results.

Even if this deliberative process held the water that Kant and Kantians believe (it doesn't, but this is a different issue), think what we would be like if we were creatures whose highest interest — indeed, whose absolutely supreme interest (again, where this interest is different in kind and not just degree) — were in living true to the moral law. Such a picture of human life and character would leave out and distort many things, but most importantly, it would leave out all the love. As Sophie and Sethe's stories suggest, we are capable of all sorts of loves, and they do not fit a Kantian profile. If we go through life without any deep loves, we do so at our own great peril. For the vast majority of us with deep, disparate loves, we ply the waters of life beset with all sorts of conflicts and compromises. We must sacrifice this for that, look here rather than there, devote ourselves to this thing and not the other. Not all these choices are tragic. Far from it. But so long as our loves define us — as they must if they are true *loves* — then we are given to the ever-present possibility of tragedy. Indeed, our lives are authentically human only when we heed Yeats' wise words about tragedy and accept the fact that our loves are diverse and inexorably prone to conflict. If we are very lucky, we can keep from getting pervasively dirty. But we can never guarantee the purity of complete

cleanliness — save at the price of our humanity. We are messy, complicated creatures. This is not only our sad fate, but a large part of our beauty. Of course, those who hold fast to beloved theories that offer a different vision of our humanity will not see things this way, but so much the worse for them.

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## Notes

1. Kant discusses such conflicts in *Metaphysics of Morals*, in Immanuel Kant, *Ethical Philosophy*, translation by James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994, p. 24).
2. William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Vintage International, 1992)
3. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987)
4. Kant discusses Cato in his *Lectures on Ethics*, translation by Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1963, p. 153). He admires Cato's resolve, but he believes he did the wrong thing by not directing his strength to enduring whatever Caesar might have had in store for him. As he says, "No matter what torments I have to suffer, I can live morally." (156)
5. Kant discusses suicide in a number of works — his *Lectures on Ethics*, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, *The Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Anthropology from a Moral Point of View*, and *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. He is clear in these places that suicide is always contrary to duty.