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THE WITCHER AND PHILOSOPHY

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THE WITCHER AND PHILOSOPHY

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THE WITCHER AND PHILOSOPHY

TOSS A COIN TO YOUR PHILOSOPHER

Edited by

Matthew Brake and Kevin S. Decker

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Contributors

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Matthew Brake is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Northern Virginia Community College. He is also the series editor for the Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture series from Fortress Academic. As the co-editor of this book, he would like to thank all of you who have bought it. Please tell your friends to buy it, too, so that they can also "toss a coin to your witcher [volume editor]."

Gerald Browning is an Instructor of English and Self-Defense at Grand Valley State University. He also teaches English at Muskegon Community College. However, when he isn't tipping a coin to his local witcher, he is training in martial arts and buying tickets to Jaskier concerts. Much like Jaskier, Gerald is a published storyteller. His novel, *Demon in My Head,* is his only horror novel, and he has contributed to other Popular Culture and Philosophy publications.

Yael Cameron is a Senior Lecturer at Auckland University of Technology and on Tuesday evenings occasionally dresses as a Vengerbergian acolyte. Her research is interdisciplinary, crossing between continental philosophy, religion, and occasional chaotic forays into forbidden fire magic. While she doesn't have superhuman senses, she does make up for this by being inhumanly beautiful and publishes widely in this guise on mythology and its relation to contemporary literature and film. So there's that talent in her bag of forgotten bones, and like horses, whores, and mages, a talent that's only useful 'til it's not.

Like a rambling minstrel, **Matthew Crippen** is a wandering professor who has plied his trade on four continents, taking up other jobs as well, such as performing music, coaching gymnastics, and sword (machete) work on tree farms. His publications parallel the hybrid monstrosities in

The Witcher. They mix cognitive science, history of Western and non-Western philosophy, environmental philosophy, ethics, politics, aesthetics, and philosophy of technology and science, also discussing other stuff like the intelligence of slime mold or gut bacteria influencing our brains.

Kevin S. Decker is Professor of Philosophy at Eastern Washington University and does odd jobs around the college like burying bodies and wrangling alligators. He is the editor or co-editor of 15 books in philosophy and popular culture, most recently *Dune and Philosophy* and *Star Wars and Philosophy Strikes Back* (with Jason T. Eberl), and the author of *Who is Who? The Philosophy of* Doctor Who. He giggles every time he hears the name "Mousesack."

Paul Giladi is a Lecturer in Philosophy at SOAS University of London. One of Paul's areas of research and teaching expertise is critical social theory, specifically topics at the intersection of the literature on epistemic injustice and on recognition theory. If Paul were a mage in the Witcherverse, he would probably be deemed too "woke" by the likes of Stregobor. Paul also tends to giggle inanely whenever he hears the word "Ragamuffin"—c'mon, you know why ...

In the realm of academia, **Corey R. Horn** roams the halls of Tulane University as a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy. A sorcerer specializing in the intricate dance of international relations and human rights, Corey's work seeks to push the realms closer together, toward a more just and prosperous world. When Corey isn't writing as fast as Geralt wields his sword, you can find him in a coffee shop, consuming caffeine potions—forever fueling intellectual conquests.

John P. Irish is an educator and independent researcher specializing in the works of John Locke and John Adams. He has earned master's degrees in Philosophy and Humanities, with a Doctorate in Humanities from Southern Methodist University. He wrote his dissertation on the intriguing and lesser-known mid-nineteenth-century Irish American speculative fiction writer Fitz-James O'Brien, often called the "Irish Poe." He is currently editing a three-volume collection of O'Brien's weird tales in collaboration with Swan River Press. Contributing regularly to the magazine *Philosophy Now: A Magazine of Ideas*, he also published an article in the edited volume *Asimov's Foundation and Philosophy: Psychohistory and Its Discontents*. An interesting facet of his teaching philosophy is his belief that literature only becomes truly captivating when vampires appear, which explains his immediate fascination with *The Witcher*. Residing in Bridgeport, Texas, he shares a lakeside home with his wife Elizabeth and their five children: Tom, Annie, Teddy, Lucy, and Holly—otherwise known as their pets.

Ceádmil! **Andriy Ivanchenko** is originally from the Eastern city of Kharkiv in Ukraine, where he is currently residing having spent 20 or so years abroad. He got his master's degree in English and Applied Linguistics from the University of Cambridge, then wrote a doctoral dissertation discussing some ways linguistic methods can be applied to interpreting literary (more specifically, dramatic) conversation. Afterwards, he spent some years teaching academic English in Japan, including a well-beloved seminar on cultural and linguistic aspects of fantasy literature and fantasy magic in particular. His appreciation of all things *Witcher* goes back many years—in fact, quite a while before the very first *Witcher* game was unleashed upon the world. He's currently gearing up to study other linguistic aspects of the Witcherverse, but let that remain a mystery for now, nell'ea?

Steven Kammerer is a writer, director, composer, and independent scholar of the encounters between East and West down through the ages, from Herodotus to Heidegger. His master's degree in German Studies is from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, while doctoral studies at Queen's and Simon Fraser University helped launch him on stints of archive research in Germany and Egypt. Since then he's led a fairly Witcheresque life of high adventure. During the "Arab Spring," he covered the million-strong demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Cairo, while his trips up and down the Nile saw him sometimes as the lone tourist in an ancient temple, village, or oasis. He put in three seasons of mineral exploration in the mountains of northeastern Yukon Territory, where he had many—all too many!—encounters with bears, bees, thick clouds of mosquitoes, and once or twice saw what he could have sworn was a leshen. A season as deck-hand on a salmon trawler in the rough waters off the craggy shores of the Alaskan panhandle (very Skellige!) seasoned him into something of a sailor. Among other film projects, he's the award-winning writer-director of *Ada* (2019), a biopic of Countess Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron and the world's first computer programmer. His moody piano compositions can be found on Spotify.

Graham Lee has undergraduate and graduate degrees in philosophy, which he appreciates is only slightly more relatable than having gone to mage school. He is newer to *The Witcher* than many of his colleagues, admittedly having been introduced to it through the television series (shame, shame). While it took him to the fourth episode to understand there were different timelines (and still longer to understand that the guard was more breaking the fourth wall than busting Jaskier's balls), it only took him to the fourth page of *Blood of Elves* to understand that the books aren't as confusing.

Wulf Loh is Assistant Professor at the University of Tübingen, Germany, where he leads a small research group on the ethics of AI and robotics.

When he is not boring his students with questions of algorithmic bias and discrimination, he still loves to go chasing after Ciri or explore the Skellige Isles on his PS4.

Victoria Lyle is a senior undergraduate completing degrees in English and in Religion/Philosophy. Much like those studying at the temple of Melitele, Victoria spends her time reading, studying, and trying to avoid the strife of life. Finishing up her undergraduate studies isn't quite as intense as undergoing the Trial of Grasses, but she may emerge as an entirely different creature in the end.

Tim Miechels is a PhD student and lecturer at the Radboud University Nijmegen. He mainly teaches courses in the field of metaphysics and philosophical anthropology and is writing a dissertation on the concept of "naturalism" in the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. He once aspired to become a witcher in the School of the Bear, but his constitution makes him unfit for any practical activity whatsoever.

Raised in the southern kingdom of Darwen, Fortunio Fang served the Serpent Clan as a formidable spearman. But after Merwyn's coup, Fortunio Fang fled to the forests, living as a spear-for-hire until the Conjunction of the Spheres thrust him to a place called Earth. Finding an earthling woman to mate with (producing two hybrid offspring), Fortunio Fang assumed the identity of **Edwardo Peréz**, setting aside his warrior ways to teach rhetorical and critical theory as a Professor of English.

Shane J. Ralston is the Dean of Wright College, Woolf University, and a scholar of philosophical pragmatism. He's authored two books, one on the philosopher John Dewey and the other on environmentalism. He also edited a collection of essays on international relations and pragmatism. In addition, he's composed over 50 articles and book chapters on topics as wide-ranging as gardening activism and distracted caregiving. Before joining the dark side of higher education administration, he was a tenured Philosophy Faculty member at Pennsylvania State University, a human resources director at the American University of Malta, a grant writer at the City of Santa Clarita, and a mechanic at too many bicycle shops to list. He's had so many jobs inside and outside of academia that he sometimes daydreams about living in the *Witcher* world, where he'd have a singular motivation: to kill demons. Similar to a witcher, being a college dean makes people think he's a freak, but that doesn't stop him from doing his job!

Corry Shores teaches philosophy at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. He works primarily on Gilles Deleuze and phenomenology, at times in relation to film and painting. He recently authored the

book, *The Logic of Gilles Deleuze: Basic Principles*. Easily startled, he asks that you observe the Law of No Surprises when you meet him.

Darian J. Shump is an independent scholar, a fledgling game developer, and the Administrative Coordinator for the Center of Excellence in Digital Game Development at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Outside of his work at RPI, his research focuses on visual culture in contemporary Japan, including representations of shape-shifting *yōkai* in print and digital media, and informs his broader approach to game development and narrative design. Through fall 2021, Darian pursued an MA in East Asian Languages and Cultures at Florida State University. He also previously earned an MA in Religion from Florida State University and a BA in History and Religious Studies from Stetson University.

Ryan Smock is from a rural town in Arizona and has taught both English and philosophy in higher education for 14 years. He currently teaches at Arizona State University, sometimes moonlighting at the Oxenfurt Academy when Dandelion is on leave. The last time they met, disagreement over Girardian perspectives on theater ended in a duel. Dandelion, wielding a rubber chicken, won.

Julie Loveland Swanstrom is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She received her PhD in philosophy from Purdue University. She teaches a range of courses across philosophy of religion, historical philosophy and theology, philosophy of science, and ethics. In her research, she explores medieval theories of causation, using odd and curious cases of causation to help understand causal presumptions people hold. Creation, witchcraft, and early medicine are helpful odd or curious cases, and her familiarity with medieval Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophy and theology (including especially Ibn Sina and Aquinas) undergirds such research. She also uses philosophical and theological methods and ideas to explore science fiction and fantasy works. The Brotherhood suspects her of witchcraft, which, given her studies, is understandable.

Fiona Tomkinson graduated from Oxenfurt and then saddled up Roach with the aim of traveling to the far reaches of the Eurasian Continent. Delayed for over 20 years in Istanbul, where she taught literature in Asia whilst studying to become a Doctor of Philosophy in Europe, she finally made it to Japan in 2017. She encountered numerous monsters on the way, but now chiefly battles with jellyfish in the Pacific Ocean.

Zoe L. Tongue is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Leeds, where she researches reproductive rights. She also works on law and feminism in speculative fiction, mostly as an excuse to write about her favorite movies

and television shows. She has published on representations of reproduction within mainstream and feminist science fiction works. When she was younger she was kicked out of Aretuza for failing to master her inner chaos, and now seeks her revenge by working to free the demon Voleth Meir.

Cisil Vardar is a second-year master's student in philosophy at the University of Utah. She works on the ways to approach the philosophy of action via imagination in Kant and Fichte. As a devoted follower of art and extremity in every possible form, she values Nouvelle Vague, Giallo movies, and Denpa visual novels. If the truth in fiction may refer to beliefs, she believes that bending chaos would be possible for her in the next conjunction of spheres.

Emily Vega is an educator, writer, and folklorist from Houston, Texas. Her grandmother was a *curandera* (a Mexican folk healer), which introduced her to the world of magic, witches, and the stories we tell about them. This led her to eagerly researching (and poorly practicing) witchcraft and eventually writing her dissertation on the subject. Her love of folklore and all things witchy also led her to *The Witcher*. Given the chance, she would most definitely listen to one of Jaskier's/Dandelion's songs, and perhaps even applaud.

By day, **Zachary Vereb** is a professor at the University of Mississippi, where he instructs courses in ethics, critical thinking, and public policy. By night, he practices martial arts and enjoys fantasy role-playing games. This is preparation for becoming a witcher, though Zach's long hair will take several more years to acquire the characteristic white color. Luckily, Zach's voice isn't as intimidating as Geralt's, since that would scare off his students!

Erin Williams is an editor and writer with RTI International, a large research nonprofit. She earned her master's in Religion at Duke University where she focused on religion and world-building in science fiction and fantasy novels, short stories, and video games. Her two thesis papers explored religion and technology in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAdam* trilogy and J.B. Rhine's research into parapsychology, which means she was really fun to talk to at parties. She just played *The Witcher 3* for at least the fifth time and made a point to discover every question mark on the map, which took about 118 hours.

Florian R.R. van der Zee obtained his bachelor's and research master's degrees in philosophy at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He specialized in social and political philosophy, and when he wasn't studying Kalkstein's *Transmutations and Metamorphoses*, he usually pored over Carl Schmitt's treatises. Since writing his chapter, he has become a PhD candidate working on issues in medical ethics, philosophy, and history at Erasmus MC in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Now he'd like a word with Vesemir about consent forms.

Introduction

Toss a Coin to Your Witcher ... and Your Philosopher

Matthew Brake

Thank you, dear readers, for picking up this volume! Some consider philosophers to be relics of a bygone era, creatures who live apart from society, with a moral code and way of speaking that might make them seem as, well ... as monstrous as the topics they attempt to tackle. With their ivory towers, and tweed jackets, and steel swords ... whoops! Did I mix up philosophers with witchers? My mistake.

But is this such a strange mistake to make? Anyone who has read the books by Andrzej Sapkowski (to say nothing of having played the video games or watched the Netflix series) knows that there are extended philosophical treatments of the nature of the world, meditations on monstrosity, and musings about the moral decisions that a person ought to make in such a world ... if they even have a choice in those decisions at all!

My own journey into the world of *The Witcher* is backwards compared to many other fans. I began by watching the Netflix series. One day I walked into the living room and asked a friend what they were watching: "A new show called *The Witcher*" was the reply. It was near the end of the very first episode, right before Geralt's fight with Renfri's men. After watching that first fight scene, I was hooked, and my plans for the day were cancelled so I could sit and binge the entire first season. Then I read the books. Finally, I played the video games, and I would consider *Witcher 3* one of the best games I've ever played.

The fantasy world Sapkowski created is perfect for the Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture series. In this book, you'll find the work of a number of philosophers seeking answers to the questions asked in the various adaptations of *The Witcher*. How do we navigate a world of imperfect moral choices? Should a person really avoid picking the "lesser evil"? If destiny exists, can we really speak of the existence of free will? What can the racism on the Continent show us about our own world? What does it mean to be a woman in the world of *The Witcher*—and in our world?

As you read this book, I hope you will be inspired to go back and engage with the world of Geralt of Rivia. If you play the video games, I hope you appreciate the complex moral world that has been fashioned, and if you haven't read the books, then I hope you will go back to the source material and spend time thinking about the philosophical quandaries that Sapkowski has filled his books with. *The Witcher* is a philosophical text in its own right. I hope this book makes that apparent.

ETHICS

A Friend of Humanity

On Mercenaries, Mutants, and Morals

Zachary Vereb

> Monsters do bad things to people … humans do bad things to everybody.
>
> "A Grain of Truth"[1]

Geralt is a witcher, and witchers are mutants. They are inhuman monsters, so why would anyone want to become one? Andrzej Sapkowski takes the word "witcher" from the Polish *wiedźmin*. But a better way to think about the word is to see its parallel with "wiccan," a person believed to practice magic. And of course, many such persons were really burned alive out of the thought that they were inhuman, satanic monsters.

In "Dear Friend" (season 2, episode 6) Geralt and his adopted daughter Ciri argue. Ciri wants to gain the power of the witchers to acquire their strength and magic. Geralt doesn't like the idea. To become a witcher means to undergo harsh medical trials, trials that might kill, or worse. If witchers are monsters, they certainly aren't born so. *They are made into monsters*. Ciri protests, imploring Geralt to let her partake of the Trial of the Grasses. Her motive is not strength and magic, but vengeance. "You want to kill yourself trying to become a mutant so if you survive, you can kill yourself trying to get revenge." Ciri responds: "You don't give a shit about what I want … all you care about is damn duty!" Wait a second. If witchers like Geralt are *monsters*, what is this talk of "duty"? Aren't duties a matter of ethics, of morals? Do monsters have morals? Witchers are not only mutants, but mercenaries that kill other monsters. Do mercenaries have morals?

Scenes like this in the Netflix series pull us in and make us question what we would do in the place of Geralt or Ciri. If Geralt worries about Ciri's humanity, what does that tell us about his humanity? *The Witcher* prompts us to ask important questions about why we should do the right thing in a world where evil often trumps virtue, where the good guys don't always win in the end. It turns out that these questions about ethics tell us a lot about what it means to be human. By depicting mutants like Geralt, *The*

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Witcher actually teaches us about *our* humanity. But it can only do so if we gather the courage to engage in a little moral philosophy.

Since Geralt is often portrayed as a heroic exemplar of the moral philosophy of Stoicism, we can start there. We will then see, however, that he is better appreciated as a representative of the Kantian ethical view. The Kantian view is the ideal philosophical frame to help us make sense of what a duty to be a friend of humanity means, even though Geralt himself has much to learn about becoming a true friend of humanity. Finally, as we compare Yennefer's selfish worldview with Geralt's evolution as a Kantian exemplar, we grapple with important questions of who we want to be. Whether we are mutants, mercenaries, or mediocre members of the human race, we must question the sort of lives we should live. Do we have a duty to become a friend of humanity? While the Stoic view has answers, the Kantian one helps us to better understand Geralt's progress as a moral mutant and the nature of this duty. This, in turn, gives us the opportunity to philosophize about how we see ourselves in the series, or even in Geralt.

The Mercenary with a Moral Compass?

In the Netflix series, Geralt of Rivia is portrayed, at first glance, as a stoic role model full of humility, courage, and trustworthiness. Yet the people of the Continent often stereotype witchers as emotionless and inhuman.

Historically, Stoicism is an introspective philosophy with a cosmopolitan perspective. It asks us to reflect on things in our control, and to see ourselves as citizens of the world rather than as representatives of nations or races. While its roots are in ancient Greece and the Roman period, it's currently popularized by websites like *Modern Stoicism* and *The Daily Stoic*.[2] Yet Geralt is also motivated by coin and self-preservation and indeed cares little for the plight of humans across the Continent—and these are very un-Stoic traits. Should witchers like Geralt be viewed as Stoic mercenaries?[3] A better and more basic question, however, is this: Can witchers like Geralt be true moral agents who freely choose to abide by ethical duties? Geralt lives according to the motto that "evil is evil.… Lesser, greater, middling … it's all the same" ("The End's Beginning," season 1, episode 1), but we might wonder if such a simple slogan makes sense in an increasingly complicated and brutal world.

Though Geralt undoubtedly evolves in season 3, the opening scenes of the show's first episode paint a compelling moral picture. After killing the wretched Kikimora, Geralt heads to a tavern to claim his reward. We learn that he, like all witchers, kills monsters for cash. But because of this, he is rejected by the community, as evidenced by how he's treated in the tavern. As the episode continues, we meet Princess Renfri Vellga, who attempts to convince Geralt to assist in her vengeance on Stregobor. He refuses to help, insisting on principled neutrality instead of giving in to her inclinations. In

the end, he recommends that she move on, to end the cycle of violence. We are thus introduced to Geralt as a kind of honorable mercenary, strong-willed, principled, and independent—all important Stoic virtues. Yet if he is a Stoic, his exploits have taught him little about how to be a friend of humanity, even as he helps humans. We even begin to notice resentment in Geralt's eyes. At best, Geralt is a superficial Stoic. Later in the series, Geralt does learn how to become a true friend of humanity, to see this as his ethical duty. However, it becomes hard to make sense of his character evolution from the Stoic perspective. Instead, we need a different ethical perspective.

Is Geralt a Stoic, and If So, Is He a Bad One?

It's natural to view Geralt as a Stoic seeking inner tranquility, evading the turmoil of politics in a world he can't control. Stoic philosophers, like the slave Epictetus (c. 50–c. 135 CE) and the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), teach us to focus on the things that are under our control.[4] Things that we cannot control, like the opinions of others, the world of politics, and the luxuries of food, drink, lust, and comfort, should be of no concern to us. The Stoics enjoin us to pursue justice and wisdom when it's in our power, but they remind us of our limitations. If you can't understand why the ills of the world exist (or that we can't change them), the Stoic thinks, you just need to expand your perspective, "zoom out" to see how the evils make sense in the context of the whole. This leads the Stoics to an optimistic view of the world; they adopt a *teleological* view, in which nature is organized for reasons and structured by purposes, around a logical center, or *Logos*. Geralt tries to act stoically. But if he's a Stoic, he's bad at it.

In the beginning of the series, Geralt's life centers around coin: he hunts monsters for the reward, caring little for the well-being of those he saves or for the monsters themselves (which is odd, since people often consider *him* to be a monster, too!).[5] In other words, contrary to the usual injunction of Stoicism to promote cosmopolitan justice within your control, Geralt's interactions with others early on in the series end up being largely contractual. Neither friendship with humanity nor Stoic concern for justice or wisdom factor into his work as a witcher. Coin is the main goal, and he follows these inclinations for some time in the series. Further, Geralt does not view others in the world as the Stoics do, as "citizens of the world." This less-than-Stoic sentiment is echoed by others in season 2, with the dark and hardly stoic observation that "Monsters do bad things to people … humans do bad things to everybody" ("A Grain of Truth," season 2, episode 1). Geralt is not really interested in two of the four main Stoic virtues, namely wisdom and justice. Yet, he does try to live up to Stoic virtues of moderation and courage. We might say that Geralt is Stoic-like, and this helps to explain the

popular appeal of his character in the series as an exemplar of Stoicism. By the same token, Geralt's decisions—especially given his philosophizing about the lesser evil—set him up to be more of a Kantian, as we will soon see. Even if Geralt lines up more with Kant's philosophical view, he still has a long way to go in the series to understand how this moral philosophy encourages friendship with humanity as a moral duty. But before we get to this, let's talk about evil.

Philosophizing the Lesser Evil

Returning to the Renfri–Stregobor conflict from the first episode of the Netflix adaptation, we see Geralt tell Stregobor, "Evil is evil, Stregobor. Lesser, greater, middling … it's all the same. I'm not judging you. I haven't only done good in my life either. But now, if I have to choose between one evil and another, then I prefer not to choose at all." This scene tells us that there are certain boundaries Geralt will not cross, even for coin.

Though Geralt is no philosopher, he shares the concerns of the ethical theory of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who was inspired by the Stoics but goes beyond them.[6] Kant's ethical theory is "deontological." *Deon* means "duty" in Greek. A deontological ethic bases right and wrong on correct principles for action rather than on the results of actions—as, say, utilitarianism does. Utilitarianism, a moral philosophy sharpened by John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), suggests that we should pursue actions that produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. On Mill's view, the only thing that matters for ethics at the end of the day is the final result of our actions. Utilitarianism is referred to by philosophers as a *consequentialist* theory rather than a deontological one. Kant's moral philosophy differs greatly from Mill's, and Kant argues that the consequences of our actions are irrelevant to their true moral worth. What really matters, he claims, is that we do the right thing for the right reason, consequences be damned.

For Kant, as he writes in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), we have certain duties by virtue of our nature as rational beings.[7] *The Witcher*'s hedonistic sorceresses and the Redanian Prince Radovid provide examples of Kant's idea that, in acting, we are often led astray by our desires. These include the desire to pursue our self-interest even when it conflicts with what we know to be right. For Kant, reflecting on our nature as rational beings, we find within ourselves a moral law that guides us in the face of bad choices. The key to finding this law is the *categorical imperative* ("act only according to that maxim [rule] through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law"). Kant refers to the categorical imperative as the supreme principle of morality, and he observes that this principle has similar counterparts in other cultures and religions. He refers to the golden rule from the

Christian tradition, as well as the more negatively phrased silver rule from the Confucian tradition.[8]

In one respect, Geralt embodies the categorical imperative in that he must do his duty, and that no duty can compel him to violate the rights of others, even if those actions could be rationalized as "lesser evils."[9] Humanity, on the Kantian view that Geralt represents, is deserving of dignity and respect. To be a friend of humanity involves respecting the humanity in others. Geralt realizes that killing Renfri, even to better the world (which is doubtful, since Stregobor is trying to manipulate Geralt), violates his moral duty to treat others as *ends in themselves*. Upon further reflection on the categorical imperative, Kant says, "Now I say: a human being and generally every rational being *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* for the discretionary use for this or that will, but must … always be considered *at the same time as an end*."[10] This means that as moral beings, we are *sources of value*: we choose ends and goals. We are invaluable *persons*, not things that have more or less value depending on circumstances. On the Kantian view, we have a duty to refrain from treating humans as objects to manipulate like Stregobor does. Wrong is wrong. Treating others as mere means (except acting in self-defense) is evil for both Kant and Geralt. A true friend of humanity would never do this. So as a witcher, Geralt doesn't pursue his own happiness or pleasure, as do other characters on the Continent. Rather, he adopts an ethical way of living in line with Kant's ethical philosophy.

Even if Geralt is unhappy, Kant would say that he is *worthy of happiness* and retains the dignity of being a moral agent. And moral agents, as Kant argues, have duties to promote the happiness of others, to do good to them when it is in their power. This duty holds, Kant thinks, even if we do not like those people: "To *do good* to other human beings insofar as we can is a duty, whether one loves them or not; and even if one had to remark sadly that our species, on closer acquaintance, is not particularly lovable, that would not detract from the force of this duty."[11] Geralt of course dislikes many humans, but this doesn't stop him—as the series progresses—from pursuing his duty, attempting to help others in need. A true friend of humanity understands the duty to love their neighbors. As Kant refers to this, the "maxim of benevolence (practical love of human beings), is a duty of all human beings toward one another, whether or not one finds them worthy of love."[12] Geralt might dislike the political strife on the Continent—the selfishness of humans, mages, and elves—but he nonetheless strives to do his duty.

An exchange between Yennefer and Ciri in "Unbound" (season 3, episode 2) confirms Geralt's deontological focus on duty rather than on weighing outcomes. Yennefer asserts, "In all those lessons, I should have taught you that sometimes, discretion is more important than valor.… We should have taught you about consequences." Ciri answers, "Consequences

are just an excuse not to act." At this point in the series, Yen has not taken on a motherly role toward Ciri: she's still shrewd and unprincipled. She sees things transactionally, not ethically. But as Kant warns us—and which helps to explain why Geralt and Yen's first attempt at a relationship fails—"friendship cannot be a union aimed at mutual advantage but must rather be a purely moral one."[13] Ciri's retort suggests that she has taken many of Geralt's Kantian teachings on duty, reciprocity, and respect to heart. It's obviously inhuman, Ciri realizes, to treat others as objects. Yet paradoxically, it also seems inhuman to let people die just because of moral scruples.[14] As the dialogue continues, Yen seems to reveal the monstrous underbelly of Kant's ethics: "You saved one, and the consequence has likely damned a hundred others in exchange."

Hard Upbringings and Harder Wits with Foxes and Ravens

Geralt believes in keeping promises, no matter the consequences. "But a promise must be honored," says Geralt, "as true for a commoner as for a queen" ("Of Banquets, Bastards, and Burials," season 1, episode 4). Yet there are problems with that approach. Kant would understand Geralt's hesitation to forgive Yen for selfishly betraying them, just to regain her magic ("Shaerrawedd," season 3, episode 1). It is a duty, Kant says, "of human beings to be *forgiving*. … But this must not be confused with *meek toleration* of wrongs … for then a human being would be throwing away his rights and letting others trample on them, and so would violate his duty to himself."[15] Let's explore the contrast between Geralt's Kantian outlook and Yennefer's egoism.

Yennefer of Vengerberg, like Geralt, is a complicated character. She's torn between a desire for the approval of others and her own self-realization. As a result, her interests and desires often come into conflict with those around her. Later in the series, she finds herself in complex political entanglements. Deeper tensions abound: *love vs. power, duty vs. control, friendship vs. egoism*. She cannot harmonize the ends of others with her own, as Kant's duty implores, nor does she want to. Yen cares little, at least early in the series, to respect the humanity of others. She is out for herself. At the end of the day, her egoistic worldview is antithetical to Geralt's duty to be a friend of humanity. It is unsurprising that Geralt and Yen end up providing dramatic contrasts that bring the series to life. After all, they represent very different ethical worlds, and very different takes on how we should relate to humanity.

Yennefer acts as if guided by the political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), who enjoins the wise leader to pursue manipulative means, to be a cunning fox when necessary. Machiavelli says, "a prudent ruler cannot keep his word, nor should he, when such fidelity would damage

him … those best able to imitate the fox have succeeded best."[16] This Machiavellian view appears to be the polar opposite of the Stoic and Kantian ones, leading us to question the attraction between Yennefer and Geralt in the first place.[17] Yen had a difficult upbringing. It comes as little surprise that she begins her adult life as an egoist: "There is no us, only me" ("Bottled Appetites," season 1, episode 5). Her selfishness is expressed in a calculating way, like Machiavelli's fox. Yennefer's symbol is the Black Kestrel. Later in the same episode, Yen reveals her way of seeing the world in terms of the slogan, "Nobody smart plays fair." The clever Kestrel is only out for herself. This Machiavellian Kestrel has no care for the worth of humanity. Friendship with humanity, on this view, is only important if it helps us to better exploit others. Yen's early view of the world clashes with Geralt's Kantian one, even if he still has much learning to do on what it means to be a friend of humanity.

Geralt's animal, the White Wolf, is symbolic of loyalty. Geralt is a realist about political struggles on the feudalistic Continent, but he doesn't conclude that the depravities of others justify joining them in doing evil. A stark contrast to the White Wolf, Yen prefers cunning over honor, for example, using mages as catapult fodder in season 1's finale. Her harnessing of the element of fire is meant to strike fear in the hearts of others. As Machiavelli argues, this makes sense, since "it is much safer to be feared than loved."[18] This egoistic and manipulative worldview is imported into her view of the Continent's politics: "Politics is just the personal wrapped up in a different package" ("Reunion," season 3, episode 3). Nothing could be more different than Geralt's selfless commitment to duty, as when he firmly states, "I won't abandon Ciri, even if it costs me my life," in the same episode.

Yennefer, unlike others in the Brotherhood of Sorcerers, becomes less Machiavellian over time. Whether this is due to the cultivation of family with Geralt and Ciri or her exposure to Geralt's deontological ethics is not for us to say. But in seeing her growth, we as viewers are confronted with our own relation to others, and we must ask: Is it possible to be a principled individual in a selfish world?

Becoming a True Friend of Humanity

In the first episode of the Netflix series, Queen Calanthe, the "Lioness of Cintra," provides a gem of wisdom on this question. "In the face of the inevitable," she declares, "good leaders should always choose mercy. In the future, you will be wise to do the same" ("The End's Beginning"). There's a bit of irony here, as Machiavelli suggests not only being a fox, but also sometimes being a lion.[19] Perhaps Calanthe balances out the contradictions between Geralt and Yen, but in doing so, she loses her life, her city, and her people. Kant himself reminds us of the humility required to be a