

Ethics in *The Darjeeling Limited*

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In Wes Anderson's film *The Darjeeling Limited*, three American brothers set out on a trip across India with a plan to rediscover and reinvigorate their relationships with one another and with their individual spiritualities. However, their trip unravels quickly, and their meticulously crafted quest becomes an ad hoc adventure filled with moments of inebriation, anger, unwonted sexuality, unfortunate death, and, ultimately, spiritual fulfillment. The brothers encounter notable ethical dilemmas while in India, which, in the end, prove key to appreciation of the film. In a subtle and refined manner, Anderson uses *The Darjeeling Limited* as a general showcase for the value of ethics in everyday life. Specifically, Immanuel Kant's ethics can be understood in relation to the "spiritual" or, perhaps better understood, "ethical" rebirth of the brothers. Various parallels to Kantian philosophy appear in *The Darjeeling Limited*, and serve as Anderson's commentary on how humanity should confront relationships with others, from inner family to complete strangers.

A basic understanding of Immanuel Kant's belief system is necessary to recognize its presence in the film. In *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant founds a moral system based on the categorical imperative. He states "There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a *good will*... it is good in itself" (7). Kant expresses the issue of duty to oneself and others using perfect (universal) and imperfect (conditional) obligations. His philosophy on duty follows as such: a person's perfect duty to oneself is to maintain life, to others is to be truthful; a person's imperfect duty to oneself is to cultivate abilities and use them

wisely, and to others is to help others achieve the same (10). Finally, Kant comments on how one should act in the presence of others: “Hence there is only one categorical imperative and it is this: Act according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become universal law” (30). Thus, a self-legislating individual should act as his actions will become universally acceptable for all human beings.

Principles of Kant’s philosophy can be seen in *The Darjeerling Limited*, particularly in the tragic scene at the river. The brothers approach a group of three young men attempting to cross a river on a raft.

One brother, Francis bluntly remarks, “Look at these assholes.” In a split second twist of fate, the raft jerks violently and casts the children off into the dangerous, rocky water.

Another of the brothers, Peter yells, “Go!” and they immediately run to the river and dive in. Each brother attempts to save one child, and only Peter is unsuccessful; his child falls out of his grasp and dies on the rocks. Anderson presents the ethical dilemma in this scene clearly: the brothers have the option of refusing to help the boys at the assurance of their own safety, or risking their own lives for the well being of others. The brothers demonstrate actions in line with Kant’s ethics: they risk their own lives to help the boys. This, perhaps, could even be typified as an act of human instinct; the viewer witnesses Peter’s directive to “Go!” without considerable time for thought. Nevertheless, the brothers universalize a maxim, that, as self-legislating individuals, we have a duty to help others in peril, regardless of race, social status, or any other historically determining factor. Similarly, they demonstrate a good will and imperfect duty to others, which Kant would find admirable (Kant 10).

Seen cradling the child in his arms, Peter addresses his panicked brothers and states, “He’s dead. He’s dead; the rocks killed him... I didn’t save mine.” Later, he asks of the

interpreter “Can you explain that I almost had him? I lost him when we went off the rocks; he was too slippery. I had him the whole rest of the time... I want them to know that.” Indeed, the ethics displayed by the brothers are not bound by their relationships to parties involved, but out of pure good will and concern for humanity. It is visible that Peter has remorse and feelings of inadequacy for his failure to “save his.” His guilt shows the ethical and moral struggle that he has been presented with, and how it has affected his conscience.

Anderson also contributes to this theme artistically in the context of the movie. During the rescue scene, the camera angles are such that the children’s individual faces are only very rarely seen; Anderson chose to shoot the scene in a way that the actual children are only visible from behind and only briefly frontally. When their faces are visible, however, it is in such a way that the viewer cannot tell if they are being saved by Peter, Jack, or Francis. Thus, one cannot deduce, until far after the scene, which child exactly was the unfortunate one. The relative anonymity of the children speaks to their individual moral worthiness and equality. The children do not need to be distinguished from one another- it does not matter who is saved and who is not, as every child’s human dignity is equal, and they all deserve safety from the crisis.

Kant argues the point of moral worthiness and human dignity throughout his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. He states, “The practical imperative will therefore be the following: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (36). The children are, in themselves, moral ends. For this reason, the children do not really gain individual identity during this scene; their identities are unimportant and, arguably, irrelevant. During the scene, the panic, human identity is subordinated to the importance of the fulfillment of basic human instinct, the concern to save another’s life.

Afterwards, cradling the deceased child in his arms, Peter asks of his brothers, “What is his name?” Peter, in his guilt and failure, wishes to extend identity to the child, and pay respect to the fallen. Identity is now itself needed for the purposes of treating the child with human dignity.

By stark contrast, Anderson focuses greatly on the faces and expressions of the brothers at this time in the movie. Through heavy camera zoom and chaotic music, he shows their fright, panic, and sorrow during the situation. Anderson chooses to display the children as equal ethical beings, but places more emphasis on the actual ethical actors and their feelings in the scene. Kant describes this situation as the “pain of the humiliation of our inclinations” (Kant 24). The brothers must act against their inclinations for self-protection, and risk their lives—it is their duty to the children, and the ethical action. This pain and suffering is displayed clearly in their expressions and actions to the camera. Coincidentally, the chaotic music also stops when the child appears dead; the brothers’ obligation to act out against their natural inclinations ends at this junction, and a slightly peaceful silence is predominant. The scene, taken as a sum, demonstrates the chaotic resignation of self that a human undergoes in sacrifice, and provides Kant’s philosophy with a face and act.

The Darjeeling Limited raises various questions about ethics, most overtly in relation to duty to others. In directing the film, Wes Anderson exposes these dilemmas and makes their impact apparent to the viewer. His commentary on ethics in the scene at the river is meaningful and poignant, but subtle. These situations spawn probing questions in the mind of any attentive viewer, and shed light on the somewhat elusive questions of morality.

Works Cited

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