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Abstract: It is possible to do something deeply wrong even while committing an ostensibly ethical act. This essay examines the relationship between responsibility and ethical culpability, applied to my process of coping with a friend's suicide.

A brief note: This paper's method is guided by the idea that questions, not solutions, are often the only honest responses that can be given to ethical quandaries. In that sense, the questions I raise may be considered parts of an aggregate attempt to find a more informed approach to personal ethics.

I can't remember what color J's hair was the last time I saw her – it changed so many times over the past few months – but for some reason my memory has dyed it fading red. I knew J as part of a loosely linked group that played and listened to music together around downtown Baltimore, so it made sense for me to run into her at a friend's concert over this winter break. After we hugged and shouted pleasantries over the music, she told my friend Ian and me that she needed a ride home that night. Our excuses began fumbling out at once – “Oh, uh, we're actually leaving pretty soon, so I'm not totally sure that would work.” “Yeah, and didn't your mom say she wanted the car back in like an hour? I don't know if we could make it.” “She did, she did – I'd call her but my phone's dead.” “Mine too. I'm real sorry, J. We're real sorry.”

I don't think it was wrong of me to refuse J a ride. We had made no plans to see or spend time with her. She was asking us to drive the opposite direction from our destination, we were expected to get the car back at a specific time, and there were other people at the concert to take her. The extent of my immediate quandary was whether to do a favor for a relatively distant friend at my and Ian's expense. We left the concert without J and went home. Some weeks later, on March 5th, I got a text from Ian: “J killed herself today.” They found her in her dorm room – there was no note, no last words, no punctuation on that tangled sentence of a life.

I felt the hit immediately – the shock and ache of a life voided. Confusion followed shortly after – Why J? Why now? How could she give up like that? I haven't resolved the pain or

even the basic questions, but as the hours have turned to days I've found my overwhelming response to her suicide has become one of regret and a vague, abiding guilt. I find myself wondering "what if" constantly: What if we had driven her home that night? What if we'd promised to see each other again over spring break? Skeptical as I am of counterfactuals, and spare as the chances are, I can't help but wonder whether if we had driven J home she might still be breathing. Could my friendship or attention have given her the strength to keep going?

Though I don't think I was immoral in refusing J a ride, I cannot rationalize my way out of feeling guilty; in other words, my lack of ethical culpability does little to alleviate my sense of responsibility. That "I can never know" what could have happened fails to satisfy me emotionally or intellectually.

I am struggling to understand this, and the little headway I've made is realizing that many ethical dilemmas don't have clean solutions or conclusions – often the most honest response is to raise more questions. Asking my "what-ifs" and "whys" has pushed me towards broader questions about the nature of ethics and our approaches to decision making. First and foremost, how much bearing does moral liability have on actual responsibility?

I'll take a moment to clarify these terms. I use "responsibility" to refer to our role in the correspondence between our actions and their results. "Ethics" or "morality" deals specifically with the conscious element of this correspondence – in a word, our intentionality. We certainly have ethical responsibility for our actions, but responsibility itself is broader and includes our role in those effects of our actions that we may be unaware of. While it wasn't immoral to refuse J a ride, my action (or inaction) impacted her life, and so there's a possibility that I played a part in her suicide.

My parents and close friends say that I am in no way “responsible” for J ending her life. It’s unlikely that there is anything I could have done to help her, and even if there was I couldn’t have known, so they say I have nothing to do with her death. The disagreement here is essentially definitional – I’m using “responsible” in this case much more broadly than most. I would argue that the common usage and understanding of “responsibility” is a product of a flawed approach to its correspondence with ethics.

It seems that many have a tendency to assume circularity in the relationship between ethics and responsibility. Intentionality or moral culpability, the reasoning goes, implies responsibility, and more problematically, “moral” innocence implies freedom from responsibility.

This understanding of responsibility runs into some problems when applied to real life situations. Religion, for example, has been used to justify incredible atrocities - human sacrifice in the Aztec theocracy and Buddhist Burma, the Crusades, the Armenian Genocide, just to name a few. Many of the perpetrators in these cases may very well have believed what they were doing was “right” – their intentions were to do right by the beliefs they held sacred. It’s possible to provide immediate ethical rationales even for horrific acts.

These examples aren’t directly analogous to my situation with J, but they point to the idiosyncrasy at the heart of my dilemma: You can do something deeply wrong even while committing an ostensibly ethical act. Acknowledging this opens the door for a host of further questions: Does ethics, in fact, encompass all that can be discussed as “right” and “wrong?” Does responsibility end with intentionality? Can any decision we make *not* ultimately be an ethical dilemma?

These questions are compelling, but basically unanswerable. Maybe the most important step I've made so far has been asking a more concrete question: Is there any way I would have acted differently? Some rejoinder may be found in considering the broader ethical context in which I formulated and made my decision. Though my decision was ethical within my set of standards for behavior, perhaps under another, more principled one, I would have chosen to drive J home, to make her laugh, to hear how she was doing. This concept could be compared to Kant's formulation of a "categorical imperative"¹ – it suggests that we must consider the ethics of our ethics, so to speak. Whether consciously or not, we make ethical decisions based on assumed sets of standards. Considering our ethical standards - why we hold them and how rigidly – is an essential precursor to the actual decision-making process.

This may also allow for a more meaningful re-articulation of my question about responsibility and ethical culpability. Surely we have a responsibility which extends beyond doing what we think is right or wrong in a given situation – we also must consider our reasons for thinking something is right or wrong. I don't know if there's another set of ethical standards under which I would've treated J differently, but it's my duty to continue to ask myself that, and work towards the best code I can discern.

I remain in the early stages of the coping process, but I have found some comfort in acknowledging my response to J's suicide for what it is: in large part an unconscious reflex to a shocking event. Much of my reaction has nothing to do with reason or ethics, so much as pain and confusion. Moreover, I've tried to keep in mind that reason – or more accurately, the

¹ Kant, Immanuel, and H. J. Paton. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964. Print.

rationalization process – is more likely to be influenced by emotion than it is to sway our emotions.

Even after I'm able to edit my own end-marks onto J's life, after the pain has subsided and I'm able to relegate it and her to memory, some questions will continue to linger, as I imagine they always will. Can we ever know how we will affect others? Is there any way to really know that we've done right or wrong? How can you give up a life, and why, why, why? I can only hope the questions that can't be answered do not eclipse those that might.