

**PART ONE**

**WHAT WOULD OPRAH DO?:  
ETHICS AND THE GOOD  
LIFE AT 30 ROCK**

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## BEING KENNETH: SOME MORAL LESSONS

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Kenneth makes my heart skip. It isn't his dashing good looks or his wonderful sense of style. It isn't just the endearing fact that his middle name is Ellen. Honestly, it's the simplicity of his moral vision. He just sees the world in a way that I can't even imagine. It's an enchanted world, where right and wrong are as plain as the pee and laughter combination we call lizzing. I have the same question Jack Donaghy has.

Jack: Kenneth, I wonder what it's like seeing the world through your eyes?

Kenneth: I don't know, Mr. Donaghy. Well, I think I see the world pretty much the same as everyone else.

Jack: Really? [*music starts, Jack continues, singing*] 'Cause I think you're very special, Kenneth [*Jack is now seen through Kenneth's eyes, as a puppet.*], to be able to get so much joy from simple things, simple things. . . .

Jack [*talking again, and human*]: But most of us grow up and lose our sense of wonder. ["Apollo, Apollo"]

Kenneth sees things uniquely. He is literal-minded. When Jack says, "Now look at me," after talking about some of the things he went through as a child, Kenneth simply says, "I already did" ("Apollo, Apollo"). Kenneth is thrilled with a key-chain he got on his last birthday, joyous because "every time you move his head, his head moves! Look!"

The disenchanted world is complicated. The decisions we have to make can make us unsure of ourselves. We face challenges of all kinds. We're befuddled by moral dilemmas in which we have to make difficult choices. Do we let Jenna fall as she plays Peter Pan in order to get back at her for sleeping with Dennis? Do we let Frank go to law school given his family history? Do we call the ambulance right away when we hit Mom with the car? Kenneth doesn't seem to be bothered by such dilemmas. He sees the world with absolute clarity. There's only right and wrong.

### **Kenneth's Moral Universe**

Jack sees the world in terms of dollar signs. Tracy sees the world egocentrically—everyone is just another Tracy Jordan, having no interests other than Tracy's.

Kenneth lives in a different world. His moral universe involves following a moral code no matter how difficult it is. It's a world where lying is wrong, where one must never steal, and where doing good for others is paramount. Kenneth's good deeds are all over *30 Rock*. Whether he's accompanying Liz Lemon to recover her phone from an unscrupulous cabby, or swearing his undying love for television, Kenneth seems to emit moral virtue like it's going out of style (and maybe it is). When Tracy disappears to save himself from the wrath of the Black Crusaders, Kenneth knows his whereabouts, but refuses to break his vow to Tracy ("Hiatus"). Liz and Jack yell at him,

threaten him, call him a “mouth-breathing Appalachian,” but it’s to no avail. His promise stands strong. When Tracy is running late to *TGS*, Kenneth sacrifices his body to get Tracy there on time. Kenneth voluntarily falls down some concrete stairs so that Tracy can use the ambulance to get him to the show on time (ambulances are only for real emergencies, after all) (“Hiatus”). When Kenneth wins Pete’s wedding ring in a game of poker, he simply gives it back. He can’t see his way clear to keeping it (“Blind Date”).

These acts of kindness and principle seem to make Kenneth what we might call a “rule absolutist.” For the rule absolutist, the moral law dictates what’s appropriate, and it’s appropriate *everywhere and always*. There are no exceptions to moral rules. Period. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is the philosopher usually associated with this view, though perhaps a little unfairly. For Kant, morality demands absolute consistency in action. It involves never making an exception of oneself, and always holding oneself to the highest moral standard. The rule is everything for the rule absolutist.

By contrast, one might think of moral rules as useful guidelines for navigating the difficult waters of everyday life. These rules, however, need to occasionally be set aside when the circumstances demand it. Of course, it’s easy to be wrong about what the circumstances demand, so one shouldn’t set aside rules lightly. All the same, there will be some cases where a rule like “never lie” will lead us astray. (When the Nazis ask if we’re hiding any Jews, saying “Yes, they’re upstairs” would arguably *not* be an example of moral action! And the same goes for telling the Black Crusaders where Tracy is.) With this view, morality is a *context-specific* affair. We can call this *contextual absolutism*. The most famous advocate of this kind of view is Aristotle (384–322 BCE).

As the name indicates, this conception of morality doesn’t equate to any kind of *moral antirealism*—the view that *there are no* moral truths. The idea, rather, is that there *is* always

a right thing to do, it's just that rules can't tell us in advance what that thing will be. We have to pay special attention to the circumstances of our action, and act accordingly. The moral sage is the person who always *sees* all of the relevant features of a given situation, and responds to them appropriately. In this respect, the moral sage has no need for rules. Rules might help us to reach a stage where we act morally most of the time, but they're only a ladder that we must climb up. Once we've attained moral wisdom, the ladder itself can be discarded.<sup>2</sup>

Kenneth certainly believes that there's a singular right thing to do. But is he a rule absolutist? Does he take his moral rules so seriously that he simply can't set them aside? In a surprising number of cases, Kenneth does set specific rules aside—and he sometimes does so for all the wrong reasons. But in a complicated world like New York City, what's the son of a pig farmer from Stone Mountain to do?

### Tested Virtue

Kenneth doesn't seem to fetishize rules. He doesn't seem to hold to them in all circumstances no matter what, valuing them in themselves. For example, when Tracy and his wife, Angie, are on the verge of breaking up for good, Kenneth sets aside his aversion to deception. He tries to intervene. By pretending to be interested in Angie as a sexual partner in an attempt to make Tracy jealous, Kenneth Ellen Parcell claims he's real good at the sexy stuff, and that he'd like to visit Angie "at night." We know he doesn't mean it, and we know why he's doing it. He wants to trick Tracy, to *deceive* him.

Kenneth attempts the same kind of deception when Tracy doesn't take his risk of diabetes seriously. He constructs an elaborate ruse involving a story he first heard from his Mee-Maw: the Hill Witch torments those who don't eat their vegetables! In an effort to get Tracy to eat right, Kenneth pretends to be the Hill Witch, trying to scare Tracy into a healthy lifestyle

(ultimately, it's Jenna who manages to successfully impersonate the Hill Witch).

So maybe Kenneth isn't a rule absolutist: he's willing to engage in deception for a greater good. But the strategy can backfire. Consider, for instance, when Tracy tells Kenneth to "please" his wife as a way of making up for Tracy's (pretend) infidelities. When Tracy rushes to stop the consummation, he finds Kenneth looking pale, eating a sandwich, sitting next to Grizz.

Tracy [*running into his house*]: I'm going to kill you, Kenneth the Page!

Kenneth: I'm sorry, Mr. Jordan. I just couldn't do it.

Angie: This boy comes to the door, tries to kiss me, then he throws up, and starts crying.

Kenneth: My body wouldn't let me violate the sacred bonds of marriage, sir.

Kenneth's ability to bend the moral rules has its limits. While Kenneth might be able to be set aside some moral rules briefly (like not deceiving others), he can't set them aside easily—and certainly not for long. When Kenneth tries to get Tracy to believe he's hitting on Angie, for example, he stutters through his pickup lines, using every cliché he can think of. When the ruse is complete, he has trouble taking a drink from his bottled water, shaken by his venture into rule-breaking.

Kenneth's willingness to set aside a moral rule may well indicate that he's a contextual absolutist—that is, he may think that morality sometimes requires setting aside our usual roles. But there's some evidence to the contrary here as well. While Liz is right to call Kenneth a "sweet kid," he doesn't always seem so sweet—particularly when he's doing something for someone else (like Jack).

Jack: The only reason I sent you to Banks was to get information. Why were you telling him anything?

Kenneth: I'm sorry, sir. I had to keep talking just to stop him from putting his fingers in my mouth.

Jack: Kenneth, you are the worst gay bait ever.

Kenneth [*upset*]: You used me?

Jack: For television. Kenneth, I humiliated you for television.

Kenneth [*excited*]: Like on *What's Happening?*, when that man used Re-run to bootleg that Doobie Brothers concert!

Jack: Exactly. And I need to humiliate you again. I've got a very important meeting coming up and Banks cannot be there.

Kenneth: And you want me to kill him . . .

Jack: No. I want you to distract him. You've got to make sure he doesn't leave that hotel room tomorrow morning.

Kenneth: I'll do it. Just like Sydney Bristow on *Alias*, I'll use my sexuality as a weapon. To the wig shop! [*runs away, smiling*]. ["Fireworks"]

And this is certainly not the only time Kenneth is asked to use his sexual energy as a trap for Devon Banks. It's also not the only time he decides to actively deceive others. Television is hardly the greater good, even though Kenneth most certainly thinks it is. Do these examples show that Kenneth isn't the moral beacon we thought he was? Perhaps. Or perhaps not.

There's another way of understanding Kenneth's moral lapses—and one that fits perfectly with Kenneth's personality. Kenneth's immoral actions all stem from the same unholy trinity: gullibility, trust, and unflappable loyalty. He sets aside



rules for the greater good, but he also sets aside rules when he thinks he's serving a higher cause (like television, or his friendship with Liz). He's no moral sage, to be sure. He lacks the wisdom for that. As Frank puts it in describing why Kenneth's so good at poker, "He's awesome. You can't read his thoughts because he doesn't have any" ("Blind Date").

The simplicity of Kenneth's moral vision is thus also Kenneth's downfall. He's too easily duped into giving up parts of his moral vision by his trust in and loyalty to others. This is a central danger of seeing the world through Kenneth's eyes: it is a beautiful world full of happiness and song, but also a world where we can be led to act against our own principles.

### **Olympic Tetherball: A Final Lesson on Moral Frailty**

After learning that many of his most beloved Olympic events were faked to improve ratings, Kenneth has a sit-down with Jack.

Kenneth: "Believe in the stars". . . it's like that doesn't even mean anything anymore.

Jack: Kenneth, I'm sure I can trust your discretion about what happened in my office today. What you overheard was some rather grown-up talk.

Kenneth: Was any of it real, Mr. Donaghy? Beer pong? Jazzercise? Women's soccer?

Jack: You're not in Stone Mountain anymore, Kenneth. This is the real world, and not everything is in black and white.

Kenneth: There's always a right thing to do, Mr. Donaghy. Just sometimes, it's not the easy thing to do. [*gets up*] Tyler Brody was not the only hero I lost today. [*Kenneth*]

*begins to walk away, but stops and turns back.*] The other hero was you, in case that—

Jack [*interrupts*]: I got it, Kenneth. [“Believe in the Stars”]

Kenneth’s reaction to Jack promotes a pang of conscience in Jack. For all of Kenneth’s hillbilly moral sentiment—for all that he fails to see in the world—his vision of the good acts as a reminder of how the world *could* be. Jack later worries that somebody “would have to be a complete monster to lose his respect.” This leads him to try to convince Kenneth that a person can be good even when that person chooses to violate some moral rules without appealing to any greater good.

Jack: Kenneth, I’m a good person.

Kenneth: If you say so, sir.

Jack: But sometimes life is complicated. There isn’t always a right answer. Say you’re on a lifeboat.

Kenneth: You’re on a lifeboat.

Jack: The boat holds eight people, but you have nine on board. Either you will capsize, and everyone will drown, or one person can be sacrificed to save the others. Now, how do you decide who should die?

Kenneth: Oh, I don’t believe in hypothetical situations, Mr. Donaghy. That’s like lying to your brain.

Jack: Kenneth, you’ve lived a sheltered life. Virtue never tested is no virtue at all.

Kenneth: Oh, I have been tested, sir. There are only two things I love in this world: everybody, and television. But up in my neighborhood we can’t even afford cable. So my neighbor the Colonel and I just watch whatever the old rabbit-ears will pick up. A lot of folks have chosen to go ahead and steal cable from the poor, defenseless

cable company. But not me. As bad as I want all of those channels, I don't do it because stealing is wrong!

Jack: Kenneth, I'm familiar with the Ten Commandments.

Kenneth: Ten?

When Jack tries to test Kenneth's virtue in an elevator (telling him they're stuck there, and that someone must die), Kenneth opts to make *himself* the victim. Not to be outstripped, Jack tries to test Kenneth's moral mettle in another way. He sets up illegal cable in Kenneth's apartment, along with a new flat-screen TV. Kenneth is visibly ashamed the next day, having watched the stolen delight that is cable television.

Jack: Did you have a good night, Kenneth?

Kenneth: Oh yes, sir. Hardly any screaming from the Colonel. Actually I was thinking . . . we all try to be perfect, but the world may be, well . . . uh, what I'm trying to say is that . . . there's a whole channel on the cable that just tells you what's on the other channels . . .

Jack: I know, Kenneth, it's okay.

We all make mistakes sometimes. Morality is harder than many of us think. When we err, we should face our failure with resolve, not with shame. And this might be the central lesson that we can learn from Kenneth Ellen Parcell.

Besides, as Kenneth reminds us, "Everybody knows that the only thing we should be ashamed of is our bodies" ("Succession").

## NOTES

1. The "P" is still silent.
2. This metaphor is most famously used by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1989–1951), though he was by no means the first. The same metaphor can be found in ancient China as well, in Chuang-Tzu (fourth century BCE), for example.