

The National Anthem and Weighing Moral Obligations

Is It Ever OK to F*ck a Pig?

Brian J. Collins with Brandon Boesch

So it's a statement. That's what this was all about: making a point.

(Alex Cairns, Home Secretary)

The National Anthem, which was our first gaze into *Black Mirror*, was disturbing to say the least. Prime Minister Michael Callow awakens to discover that someone has kidnapped the beloved Princess Susannah and will kill her unless Callow has “full unstimulated sex with a pig” live on national television. An attempt to capture the kidnapper as well as a plan to digitally simulate the sex act fail, and Callow ends up going through with it. To top it off, the kidnapper releases Susannah thirty minutes *before* the deadline. However, since everyone was at attention “watching screens” (as if they were all “singing the same song [the national anthem]”) to see whether Callow would f*ck a pig, no one noticed until the ordeal was over.¹ It turns out, the whole thing was orchestrated by Turner Prize-winning artist Carlton Bloom (who killed himself as the broadcast began) to make a statement about society's depravity.² We're left wondering: Is he the sick one for demanding such an act? Or are we, the viewers, the sick ones for staring at our screens and trying to watch it?

More disturbing than the episode's depiction of bestiality is the fact that it depicts how we suspect society would respond if such a thing happened. Like Bloom, creator Charlie Brooker is making a statement about the depravity of society. But he's also raising a number of difficult philosophical questions: What is the nature of moral obligations and how do we decide between them when they conflict? Would it be OK to do something that would otherwise be immoral, like having sex with a pig, to save someone's life? Could you bring yourself to do it? Could you forgive a loved one who did? Should you watch if it were broadcast? And why would Bloom, or

Brooker for that matter, want to subject people to such shocking and horrific imagery in the first place?

Weighing Moral Obligations

Moral obligations sometimes conflict with one another. Many situations, including the extreme one Callow faces, call for us to weigh different goods/values/interests against one another to determine what the right thing to do would be. Of course, we might ask about what we *want* to do or what we *would* do. But if we are interested in knowing what the *right thing* is, then we are asking what philosophers call a “normative” question: What *should* we do? This requires us to consider the morally relevant aspects of the situation and weigh them against one another.

In the extreme case presented in *The National Anthem*, the primary moral considerations in play are 1) the personal interests of Callow and his family, 2) the personal interests of the princess and her family, 3) the public interests of the society and the *royal* family, and 4) the morality of bestiality. The question of weighing these types of moral considerations highlights a debate in ethical theory between consequentialists, deontologists, and virtue theorists.

Consequentialism is the ethical view that the moral rightness of an action is to be judged solely on the consequences of that action. One simplistic consequentialist theory is hedonism. Advocated by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE), hedonism claims that pleasure is the only thing of intrinsic value and that we should always choose the action that maximizes pleasure. Contrary to common belief, however, hedonism is not the pursuit of unadulterated physical pleasures. In fact, Epicurus led an *extremely tame* life of simple pleasures taken in moderation. Epicurus advocated protecting oneself from pain and procuring for oneself stable and meaningful relationships. From the Epicurean perspective, protecting his relationship with his wife should be a key component in Callow’s ethical calculations.

More complex consequentialist theories have been defended by canonical philosophers like Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), as well as contemporary philosophers like Peter Singer and Julia Driver. Roughly put, according to the consequentialist, an action is judged on its consequences, and the *right* action is the one that has the best consequences and brings about the most good (pleasure *plus* other things of value). A consequentialist would suggest that Callow should take into account all relevant factors and do whatever produces the most overall good. For example, Callow might go through with it because the pain caused to him and his wife is not as severe as the damage that would be caused to society and the princess by her death.

In opposition to consequentialism is deontology, the view that rightness and wrongness *do not* depend on consequences but instead depend on duty. A person doesn't need to know the consequences of lying, cheating, or killing to know they're wrong. The most famous deontologist, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), argued that because one cannot “will” that everyone perform such actions (they cannot be universalized), actions like lying, cheating, and killing are morally wrong. Kant also argued against treating others only as a means to an end.

With this in mind, one might assume the deontologist would say Callow should *not* go through with it because f*cking a pig is intrinsically wrong.³ However, preventing someone's death when it's possible to do so seems to *also* be a duty we all have. One of the classic objections to Kant's theory is that it gives us no way to determine what we should do when duties conflict. Consequently, subsequent deontologists like W.D. Ross (1877–1971), John Rawls (1921–2002), and Onora O'Neill were much more moderate in their prescriptions. They suggest that when duties come into conflict we should consider the moral weight of each. In this way, it might be morally permissible (or even required) to do something that ordinarily would be wrong. So, if saving the princess has greater “moral weight” than refraining from bestiality, the deontologist could prescribe doing the former (even though bestiality would still be intrinsically wrong).

The third main contender, virtue theory, rejects both the consequence-focused and duty-based approach. The virtue theorist contends that the primary focus of ethics should not be actions. Rather, the focus should be on virtues and the moral character of the person performing the actions. Like its competitors, virtue theory comes in different variations, prescribed by the likes of Aristotle (c. 384 BCE–c. 322BCE), G.E.M. Anscombe (1919–2001), and Philippa Foot (1920–2010). But essentially, the primary ethical concern of virtue ethics is acting on and developing moral virtues (like courage, generosity, and trustworthiness). Right actions are not the focus of ethical inquiry but *follow* from having the right type of character. The virtuous person sees what to do (what the right action is) in situations with ethical implications.

One of the common objections to virtue theory is that it does not answer the pressing moral question: What's the right thing to do in *this or that situation*? It simply suggests that you should develop a virtuous character within yourself so that, if faced with *this or that situation*, you will know what to do. In the situation facing Callow, the virtue theorist would say he should do what a morally virtuous person would do, but the theory wouldn't be specific about what that was. This, many would argue, isn't helpful. Often, however, the virtue theorist is satisfied to accept this complaint and redirect the discussion back to the virtues that people should be developing or to *the type* of action that a morally virtuous person would take in such a situation.

With all this in mind, to understand these ethical theories better and maybe determine whether Callow did the right thing, let's look at how they are employed by different individuals and groups in *The National Anthem*.

“The world’s bloody broken”

At the start of the episode, all the characters seem to be self-interested hedonists. Callow doesn't want to f*ck a pig on live television – “Page one, that's not happening.” He assumes it would ruin both his and his wife's life. Likewise, the royal family is self-interested. “I trust you'll do everything in your power to get her back,” the queen tells Callow, implying that he should f*ck the pig if that's what it takes to get Susannah back. Even the media is self-interested. Although the TV station UKN initially seems to take a Kantian approach by observing the type five D notice (because “a woman's life is at stake here”) to not cover the story, as soon as it's broadcast on American news networks, they dedicate every resource to it – presumably to preserve their ratings and revenue.⁴

The public seems to initially take a Kantian approach. A full 72% think that Callow *should not* be expected to engage in such an inherently immoral act and that there would be “no blood on [Callow's] hands” if something were to happen to the princess because he refused. However, public opinion shifts when the kidnapper uploads a video of him seemingly cutting off the princesses' finger. The video brings to mind the pain she would suffer being killed, and Callow's pending embarrassment pales in comparison. “It'll be humiliating, but nothing compared to her suffering.” After the video, 86% of the public think Callow should capitulate. Apparently, the public performs a utilitarian calculation.

Interestingly, though, the public seems to be employing a bit of virtue theory too. The kidnapper uploaded the video in response to discovering that Callow's administration was trying to fake the video. By seeming to risk the princess' life in favor of his own self-interest, Callow seems to be showing a lack of moral character. “He's got to do what they want,” Lauren, the nurse, says. “We can easily get another Prime Minister,” says another, “We can't live without a princess.” By putting his own self-interest ahead of Susannah's, Callow lacks the virtue a prime minister should have. At least that was what the public seems to think.

This doesn't stop him from being self-interested, however. When the attempt to capture the kidnapper fails, Callow only decides to go through with it after Home Secretary Cairns tells him that, if he doesn't, the physical safety of his family cannot be guaranteed. “The mood will border on insurrection, and you will be destroyed.” In one way, it pays off. His family remains alive, and he actually becomes more popular after the incident. In another way, very important to the hedonist, it does not pay off. Callow's wife can't seem to forgive him for what he did and how he handled it. His marriage is destroyed.

Such unforeseen consequences bring to mind why it's difficult to justify any action on consequentialist grounds. It's impossible to know what the consequences of our actions will be. Recall, for example, that Susannah was released a half-hour *before* the sex act even took place. Callow's act was therefore not necessary for the release of the princess, the primary event that was supposed to justify it. Given that in any situation we can never really know what would have happened had we had done the opposite of what we did, one must wonder whether consequentialist theories can ever really help us.

When Callow's administration decides to keep the fact that Susannah was released early from both the public and Callow himself, it seems to be making a utilitarian calculation. Both Callow and the public could only be harmed by learning that they were complicit in such a horrendous act when it was not necessary. The deontologist and virtue theorist, however, would likely contend that there is something inherently right or virtuous about revealing the truth, and say that it should be done. *The National Anthem* pushes ethical questions and forces the characters and viewers to weigh competing moral obligations until the very end.

There is no straightforward answer to which of these ethical theories is correct – the philosophical debate is still going strong after thousands of years. But this doesn't mean that thinking critically about ethical theory is unimportant. Using these types of hypothetical scenarios as thought experiments helps us to think through our intuitions about the debate. We can use these difficult cases to see if our intuitions and judgments in specific cases match our intuitions and judgments about the more abstract and general ethical theories. Where these judgments do not match we work to create balance – continually trying to find a theory that is intellectually satisfying and also explains as many particular intuitions and judgments as possible.

Anticipation of the Spectacle Turns to Horror and Disgust

A key moment in the episode is the montage that displays the reaction to the event. Prior to the deadline the public was boisterous and eager. Everyone in the entire city (country? world?) seems to be gathering around televisions as if they were anticipating a major sporting event. They cheer as Callow comes on screen. After the act begins, however, attitudes change. The viewers' expressions reflect their feelings of worry, horror, pity, and disgust.

Interestingly, that moment of the episode got the same reaction at its London press screening.

Everybody came in, and because it was Charlie Brooker [and he's known for comedy], everybody thought it would be funny...everyone just laughed [at the ransom demand. But] then gradually they got more and more worried and felt more and more sick. [The] pivotal moment was with the onscreen people in the pub, watching the live broadcast....The tone in the screening

room was absolutely thrilling. Everyone was completely silent...When the journalist in the press room did exactly what the people in the pub were doing onscreen, that's when we knew we'd got the tone of the series.⁵

This reaction seems to reveal three things of ethical importance. First, our deontological intuitions are *quite strong*, despite our tendency to weigh and calculate the benefits of performing or not performing actions. There seems to be something so intrinsically wrong about having sex with a pig that many think Callow shouldn't have done it. Second, people have difficulty understanding even their own desires and interests – what they *really* want. Everyone seems to think that they want to see the prime minister f*ck a pig, but when it comes to it, almost everyone is sickened and disturbed by the act.

The third thing the reaction reveals aligns with *Black Mirror's* general message about the dangers of technology. We have everything at our fingertips. We can see or do almost anything we want, whenever we want. Having this ability, and having it with such ease, doesn't allow much time or even motivation to consider whether we *should* want to see or do these things. It is easier and more immediately satisfying to stare blindly at our black mirrors. As director Otto Bathurst put it:

It suddenly becomes very clear that actually humanity, society, and media and all of us are responsible for this...You feel culpable for what's happened to Callow. You kind of go, "Oh shit, this is awful – look what I've done." We all buy the papers and get on the Twitter feeds. If that story broke now, the speed at which it would go viral is horrendous. Everybody says we're powerless, but we've actually never been more powerful. [But] we also have real responsibility, and we're not taking it.⁶

On the flip side, however, many people wouldn't have such a reaction because they, like Callow's wife, wouldn't watch in the first place. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear people say that they tried watching *Black Mirror* but couldn't get through the first episode. Even viewers who are not sickened by the mere premise of the episode can find themselves experiencing a variety of emotions (when the full reality of what it might be like to actually have sex with a pig while everyone in the country watches) that makes them shut it off.

With this in mind, we might raise the same objection to Brooker as we would to Bloom. You might have a good point, but couldn't you have made the same point without making Callow f*ck a pig? What's the point of subjecting everyone to such gruesome visuals?

Invoking Moral Disgust

The experience of feeling negative emotions is a common result of watching film and television. Some such reactions are incidental; the topic or subject matter just naturally gives rise to negative emotions in an audience

member. Films about war for example (like *Saving Private Ryan*) naturally bring about emotions of fear and anxiety because these emotions are central to the experience of war. Other films conjure up negative emotions for their own sake – like the fear and anxiety invoked in horror movies with “jump scenes” (like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) that seem designed to give the audience an adrenaline rush.

The disgust conjured by *The National Anthem*, however, cannot be excused in either of these ways. It’s not incidental because the issues explored could have been explored without invoking disgust through the gratuitous visualizations of Callow having sex with a pig. Nor is it summoned for its own sake, because there are other, easier ways to elicit disgust. Instead, it seems that the disgust of *The National Anthem* plays a *moral* role. But how can a negative emotion play a moral role?

Several contemporary feminist philosophers, such as Macalester Bell and Lynne McFall, have argued that negative emotions such as anger, bitterness, and contempt can be morally valuable as *good* moral responses to unjust actions.⁷ Other philosophers, such as Fabrice Teroni and Otto Bruun, have argued that negative emotions, like shame and guilt, can be good because they can motivate us to make reparations for harms.⁸ The disgust invoked by *The National Anthem* can be justified in a similar way: as a *moral emotion*.

Phillip Tallon argues that some horror movies invoke fear to induce us to “recognize evils that must...be wrong” and “to take seriously the darkness within our own nature...”⁹ When we feel afraid while watching these films, we are better able to recognize the wrongness in the object of our fear. Charlie Brooker’s use of disgust in *The National Anthem* seems to do something similar. We, the viewers, are subjected to several images that elicit disgust – Callow preparing for and engaging in sex with the pig (while the sedated pig eats slop out of a dish), the kidnapper seeming ready to masturbate to the broadcast but then committing suicide instead (bloody hand hanging by his side), and then, after it’s over, Callow vomiting into a toilet, mucus and saliva running down his face. The disgust aroused by these scenes helps us make moral judgments about the act of bestiality, but it also seems to be invoked to help the audience wrestle with what brought it about: the modern obsession with spectacle.

To see how disgust plays this moral role, we must first understand the nature of disgust. Martha Nussbaum offers a complex theory of disgust, arguing that disgust first arises in response to objects that remind us of our own mortality and vulnerability (like blood and saliva). Disgust’s role is to police the boundaries of the body – keeping the “disgusting stuff” outside. Consider the difference between swallowing your saliva when it’s already in your mouth compared to spitting into a cup and then drinking it. The former is fine, but the moment your saliva becomes an “outside thing,” it’s gross.

Things unrelated to our mortality and vulnerability can also be disgusting because disgust can be transferred from primary objects of disgust to other

things through “contamination.”¹⁰ Through contact with a primary object, a secondary object can *become* disgusting. Imagine finding a urine-soaked shirt at a festival. Is there any amount of washing that would convince you to wear it?

Now recall the previously mentioned montage of the public watching the spectacle. It is bookended, and interspersed, with disgusting imagery: pig f*cking, a hanging suicide, and graphic vomiting. In this way, the public’s obsession with the political spectacle becomes, through a sort of contact, disgusting. Similarly, our feelings of disgust towards these people, staring open-mouthed at the disgusting visuals, lead us to experience a *moral* reaction/judgment that their actions are wrong. In this way we become disgusted by them and are thus in a better position to recognize the moral depravity found in the modern obsession with spectacle.

Now it’s time to address the only question we raised at the beginning that we have not answered. Should you watch such a thing if it were broadcast? Brooker seems to be suggesting that our willingness and desire to see such a disgusting spectacle is a substantial part of society’s problem.

Our First Gaze into the Black Mirror

It doesn’t seem incidental that *The National Anthem* is the first in the series. It really does set the tone. Nearly every episode of *Black Mirror* deals with conflicting moral obligations and/or gives rise to one of a range of negative emotions – disgust, sadness, fear – each of which is meant to help us to recognize the moral wrongness of some action. With that in mind, when you are reading this book and (re)watching episodes, think carefully. Look for competing obligations and try to decide what one should do. Attend to your emotions and use them as a compass to help you develop moral judgments about the important social and moral issues that *Black Mirror* explores. In this way, you will be helping *Black Mirror* do what science fiction does best.

Notes

1. This, and the Radiohead song “The National Anthem,” seem to have been Brooker’s inspiration for the episode’s title. Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones with Jason Arnopp, *Inside Black Mirror* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2018), 26.
2. At the beginning of the episode’s second part, a news report says Bloom’s “controversial *Agitation Exhibition* at the Tate Modern closed three weeks ahead of schedule amidst criticism. ...” It’s possible that the point of what Bloom did was to expose the hypocrisy of the moral objections that caused his exhibit to close early.

3. One might assume that since Kant thought it was acceptable to treat animals as a means to an end (say, as a beast of burden or as food) his theory would *not* suggest that bestiality is wrong. In a footnote in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, however, Kant says that bestiality “degrade[s] a man even below the beasts, so that he actually behaves contrary to the natural laws of the brute creation.” See, Immanuel Kant, Endnote c. of “Article III: On Stupefying Oneself by the Excessive use of Food and Drink” in Mary J. Gregor ed., *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 373.
4. An entire chapter could be spent talking about the ethical obligations of the media in situations like this.
5. Brooker et. al., 23 and 26.
6. *Ibid.*, 23 and 28.
7. See Macalester Bell. “A woman’s scorn: Toward a feminist defense of contempt as a moral emotion,” *Hypatia*, 20 (2000), 80–93 or Lynne McFall, “What’s wrong with bitterness?” in Claudia Card ed., *Feminist Ethics* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 146–60.
8. See Fabrice Teroni and Otto Bruun, “Shame, guilt and morality,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 8 (2011), 223–45.
9. Phillip Tallon, “Through a Mirror, Darkly: Art-Horror as a Medium for Moral Reflection,” in Thomas Richard Fahy ed., *The Philosophy of Horror*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 33–41.
10. Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 93–94.