

A Friend of Humanity

On Mercenaries, Mutants, and Morals

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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*

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

friend of humanity, and Calanthe seems to meet the challenge by sacrificing her crown. As Kant says,

A friend of human beings as such (i.e., of the whole race) is one who takes an effective interest in the well-being of all human beings (rejoices with them) and will never disturb it without heartfelt regret. ... Taking to heart the duty of being benevolent as a friend of human beings (a necessary humbling of oneself) serves to guard against the pride that usually comes over those fortunate enough to have the means for beneficence.²⁰

Like Calanthe, the bard of *The Witcher*, Jaskier, mediates between the principled concerns of Kant's deontology and the material desires of Machiavelli. Jaskier, rather than Yennefer or Geralt, best reflects what it means to be a real, ethical human who seeks to become a friend of humanity in Kant's sense. Fragile, Jaskier is not a fighter. He creates songs rather than fighting battles. Still, Jaskier gathers courage to fight and to forgive, and he helps us remember that we must *choose* to act. By contrast, Geralt sometimes behaves as if he were unfree: his one-sided pursuit of duty paints him as a shackled monster, and it reminds us that he is a mutant. One criticism of Kant's ethics is that when we act purely from our rational-moral nature, we are all the same. But where is our humanity without our individuality? Where is good without creation and choice? By the same token, Yen's political machinations encourage her to think ahead of herself, anxiously. She can't live in the moment, as Jaskier teaches. If we are always projecting into the future, always worried about the not-yet, how can we ever live as good humans? Jaskier too grapples with selfish political dilemmas, but he succeeds in putting the happiness of others as his end (we call these "imperfect duties of virtue" for Kant). Jaskier's actions help both Geralt and Yen see that being ethical is not simply a matter of obeying formal duties or overcoming self-interest. It is also a matter of actively cultivating friendship and love. What else could it mean to be a friend of humanity?

Both Geralt and Yennefer are incomplete characters—by blindly pursuing duty or desire, they miss something. Geralt is the White Wolf and Yen is the Black Kestrel. What is Jaskier? His name in Polish translates as "Buttercup" (or, roughly, as "Dandelion"). As others have observed, the buttercup flower, hearkening back to Shakespeare, is symbolic of *lovers and innocence*.²¹ The dandelion, in addition, is commonly viewed as a symbol of *hope*. Our bard fleshes out the missing human elements with the human heart and ear. Without love, we remain immature Machiavellian egoists, unable to truly understand what it means to be human or do right. Without hope, doing right is hard to understand, and we once again remain unable to make sense of who we should become. Kant himself recognized this.²² At the end of the day, if we equip ourselves with philosophical eyes (or, like good bards, philosophical ears), *The Witcher* teaches us a lot about

our own world, our choices, and ourselves. To absorb these lessons, even by exploring the trials of mercenaries, mutants, and mages, let's first learn to listen to those imperatives, O' Valley of Plenty ♪, and become friends of humanity.

Notes

1. "A Grain of Truth," season 2, episode 1.
2. *Modern Stoicism*: <https://modernstoicism.com>; *The Daily Stoic*: <https://dailystoic.com>. For a good overview of Stoicism and its popularity, see Matthew Sharpe, "Stoicism 5.0: The Unlikely 21st Century Reboot of an Ancient Philosophy," *The Conversation*, July 13, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/stoicism-5-0-the-unlikely-21st-century-reboot-of-an-ancient-philosophy-80986>. Ask yourself if Geralt really seems to be a stoic or not.
3. Jamie Ryder, in "Stoicism And Geralt Of Rivia's Philosophy Of Life" (*Medium.com*, February 22, 2022, https://medium.com/@Jamie_ryder/stoicism-and-geralt-of-rivias-philosophy-of-life-e4c96a35e1ef), reflects on whether Geralt should be seen as a stoic.
4. Classic texts to read include Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983) and Epictetus, *The Handbook (The Encheiridion)*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).
5. Dragons are an interesting exception for Geralt, as seen in "Rare Species," season 1, episode 6.
6. Martha C. Nussbaum connects the philosophical views of Immanuel Kant and the Roman Stoics well in "Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 5 (1997), 1–25.
7. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
8. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 34, 40, and 42.
9. In a later philosophical treatise on religion, Kant argues that we all rationalize (or make excuses for) ignoring what we know to be right to meet the demands of our self-interested desires. See Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. George di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
10. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 40; emphasis original.
11. Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 530; emphasis original.
12. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 570.
13. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 586.
14. This is a dilemma Kant himself was pressed to address, now known as "Kant's Axe." Kant's response can be found in the essay, "On the Supposed Right to Lie from Benevolent Motives," trans. Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 612.
15. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 578; emphasis original.
16. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 60.

17. For an example of how *The Prince* is adapted for today, see Chris Taylor, “The Machiavellian Way: How ‘The Prince’ Can Help Women at Work,” *Reuters.com*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/machiavellian-way-how-the-prince-can-help-women-work-2022-05-03>.
18. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 57.
19. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60; emphasis original.
20. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 587.
21. Gretchen Scoble and Ann Field, *The Meaning of Flowers: Myth, Language & Lore* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 19.
22. In his later works, Kant would build in the importance for practical hope with his postulate of immortality. Fans of *The Witcher* books may continue on this philosophical thread, making sense of Geralt and Yennefer’s journey to an afterlife realm later on. Unfortunately, we must save those reflections for another time. This chapter has not been concerned with the beyond, but with the here and now.