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AND PHILOSOPHY

The D'oh! of Homer



William Irwin, Mark T. Conard, and Aeon J. Skoble

The Simpsons and Philosophy

The D'oh! of Homer

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Hey-diddily-ho, Neighboreenos: Ned Flanders and Neighborly Love

DAVID VESSEY

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19) is the centerpiece of Christian ethics. Yet what it means and what it requires—like many good moral principles—is ambiguous. Among all Ned Flanders's acts that exemplify "love your neighbor," the one most philosophically interesting occurs in the episode "Home Sweet Home Diddly-Dum-Doodily." In this episode the Flanderses are acting as a foster family for Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. During a Bible study game, Ned discovers from Lisa that the Simpson children haven't been baptized and immediately rushes to perform the sacrament. The reason to have them baptized is obvious: Flanders believes that without baptism they cannot be saved. Oddly, his sense of obligation does not seem to extend beyond the household. He has never before tried to have Bart, Lisa, or Maggie baptized (perhaps because he hasn't known), nor does he continue afterwards. Nor does his sense of obligation ever seem to extend to the clearly non-Christian characters. So the philosophical question raised is: To what extent is "loving your neighbor" consistent with tolerating your neighbors' beliefs and practices when you think that holding those beliefs will cause them eternal suffering? How can you properly love others without acting to prevent them from meeting such a fate? This becomes even more complicated when we consider the full principle "love your neighbor as yourself." After all, a clear feature of self-love is that you act to prevent your own

eternal suffering when possible. So if you are required to love your neighbor as yourself, and a consequence of loving yourself is that you work to avoid suffering (including eternal suffering), then it would seem you are required to work to prevent the eternal suffering of others. And that requirement would include working to baptize them. But Ned does not try to do that except when it concerns children in his care. So our task here is to provide a possible justification for Ned's actions given his beliefs.

Philosophy and Fictional Characters

Now it should be acknowledged at the outset that this is an odd project. What does it mean to talk about the beliefs, or possible beliefs, of a fictional character? Ned Flanders is only that which Matt Groening and his staff make him to be. It doesn't really make a whole lot of sense to say "Ned should have said or done x, or should believe y," or even "these arguments justify Ned's actions" because, quite obviously, Ned has no beliefs and does not actually act. So how are we to understand the project in front of us?

One way would be to hypothesize Ned as an actual person. Our claims would then be of the form, "If Ned were real, and Ned acted this way, how might he philosophically justify his actions?" This doesn't work either. We are not seeking hypothetical "If Ned were real" conclusions, but a genuine understanding of the possible justification of certain actions. And this justification should hold regardless of whether the actions are performed by a real-life person, or simply depicted by the character Ned. Really, in the end it's the actions we want to focus on—not Ned the character or even Ned as potentially real—and thus we should think of the character as representing certain kinds of actions: actions that can be reflected upon independently of their enactment. To do so will make our investigations more philosophical, as opposed to belonging more to cultural or literary analysis.

We must also clarify that we are not out to explain the actions, but to provide a possible justification for the actions. What is the difference? The only thing that really explains Ned's "actions" is the fact that he was written that way. Though it makes some sense to say that Ned did something because he believed it was necessary, and so forth, as we have seen, strictly

speaking, Ned has no beliefs. Explaining actions is a complicated and sometimes futile undertaking. For example, what explains the shooting death of an innocent man? The question is horribly indeterminate because what counts as an explanation is horribly indeterminate. There are many possible legitimate answers: society, madness, mistaken identity, pulling the trigger of a loaded gun aimed at the victim, the bullet, the hole, the lack of oxygen to the victim's brain, or, of course, the ubiquitous explanation: God's will. So which really explains the action? It's not clear there is a single answer to that question. At any rate, notice that the answers tend towards psychological, sociological, and biological (and even theological!) explanations. Our issue here is what *justifies* an action. What kind of reasons could we provide that would make these actions and these beliefs consistent?

The Responsibility to Save Lives

So we're concerned with a set of actions represented by Ned Flanders in "Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily." What actions? Not Ned's attempt to baptize the Simpson children when they were under his care. That action does not raise a particularly difficult philosophical question. Providing a possible justification is fairly simple. You should always act in the best interest of those in your care. For what could it mean to care for others if not to enable them to pursue their best interests? And when others are in your care, as children are in parents' care—and as the Simpson children are in their foster parents', the Flanderses, care—this means not only helping them achieve their goals, but helping them to acquire the proper goals as the guardian or parent sees them. Even though Bart and Lisa didn't think being baptized was in their best interest, it is the responsibility of the guardians to act in the children's interest regardless of their beliefs.

The issue we need to confront is this: given the belief that without baptism eternal life is unattainable, and the belief that you should love your neighbor as yourself, why wouldn't Ned always be working to baptize the unbaptized as an act of love? To love someone would seem to require you to act to save his or her *earthly* life—or at least to try to save his or her life. Indeed many would think this requirement is not limited to

those you love; you should try to save someone's life even if you have no connection to that person. It would seem, then, that you are even more morally bound to try if you love that person. But if you are morally required to save someone's earthly life when you believe it is endangered, then it would follow that you are morally required to save his or her eternal life if you think it is endangered. That is, if you hold the beliefs represented by Ned Flanders, then you are morally required to work for the baptism of all persons at least as hard as you would to save someone's life. But, Ned clearly doesn't. And, in fact, most people who hold these beliefs don't. Are they simply inconsistent? To put our question in more general terms, could you be justified in not working to save someone's eternal life if you thought it was endangered? That is the action (or lack of action) that requires justification. Clearly it is a much more difficult question than whether the Flanderses were justified in trying to baptize the Simpson children. Let us spell the argument out in more detail, deriving it from the central principle of "Love your neighbor as yourself." Notice that the obligation always focuses on *trying* to save someone's life, not necessarily succeeding (as this may be impossible).

1. You should love your neighbor as yourself.
2. Loving someone requires trying to save his or her life.
3. If you are morally required to try to save someone's life, you are morally required to try to save someone's eternal life.
4. If you are morally required to try to save someone's eternal life, you are morally required to try to provide what is necessary for him or her to receive eternal life.
5. Baptism is necessary for eternal life.
6. Therefore, you are morally required to try to baptize everyone out of love, for the sake of saving their eternal life.

Premises 1 and 5 are taken as given, and surely they are beliefs represented by Ned Flanders. Premise 2 seems trivially true, but we will have to see if there are cases when you would, out of love, not try to save someone's life. Premise 3 also seems trivially true. Line 6 is the conclusion, and follows from the other premises. Premise 4 is something we haven't discussed yet, and needs our attention.

Are there cases in which you are required to act for an end, but not required to bring about the means to that end? It would seem unlikely, but let's consider two scenarios. First, you have a moral obligation to save somebody, but it would be physically impossible for you to save that person (perhaps because that person is on the other side of the world from you). Now since you are not morally obligated to do something physically impossible, you have a situation where you are obligated to an end, but not the necessary means. In this case, the error is in thinking that you can still perform an action even if you physically cannot perform the necessary means to that action. You can only perform an action if the conditions necessary for the action are in place. As you are not morally obligated to perform impossible acts, you are not morally obligated to perform the end. So in fact you are only obligated if you can realize the means.¹ In the second scenario, you have a moral obligation to save somebody, but in order to do it, you need to act immorally. Since you cannot be morally required to act immorally, again we have a case where the end is required, but not the means. The question here is what happens if the means are themselves immoral. If it's the case that it might be immoral to baptize someone under certain circumstances, then the proof would fall apart. But what might those circumstances be? Certainly there may be ways of getting someone baptized which are recognizably immoral. Two examples would be tricking someone into being baptized (somehow) or forcing someone to be baptized against his or her will. But all we need conclude from this scenario is that some ways of baptizing someone are more moral than others. This is not a surprising conclusion and not one which really jeopardizes the argument.² A greater concern is that, since baptism provides

¹ When we consider our example, the problem dissolves even more. According to most interpretations, only God can really provide eternal life. So the end is not in your power. What is in your power is trying to provide some of the necessary means to salvation, in this case baptism. So in this case it is really the means that you are required to try to provide, not the end itself.

² There is also the issue of baptizing infants before they can have a choice in the matter. We addressed this briefly above when we argued that guardians have a moral responsibility to act as they see would be in the best interest of the children in their care. Moreover, especially in the case of infants, baptism is not forcing the children to adopt any particular religious beliefs. They are free to renounce their parents' beliefs as they grow older.

for the possibility of eternal life, the ends justify the means. The immorality of the means is overshadowed by the possible good that can come from the action. Perhaps so, but we'll not solve this problem until we understand under what conditions you could morally refrain from trying to facilitate someone's salvation through having him or her baptized. What we will find is that the solution to the original problem also addresses the challenge that the end may justify the means. For the time being, let's accept premise 4 and turn directly to the possibility of justifiably not trying to save someone's eternal life, in the name of love.

Understanding the Command to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

First, I think we need to look closely at the basic moral principle at work here: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Let's take "neighbor" to mean, as it is commonly understood, all human beings, and not simply those living next door (though of course the narrow reading would still apply to the Flanderses and the Simpsons).³ This principle shares a feature with the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"): both commands derive the appropriate action from your own relation to yourself. As you love yourself, so should you love others; as you want done to you, so should you do to others. The concern following all such theories is that they open up what we will call "The masochist problem." In the case of the Golden Rule, what if what the person wants done to him- or herself is to have pain inflicted for the sake of sexual arousal? Is he or she morally required to inflict pain on others in order to sexually arouse himself or herself? This is a problem for some versions, but interestingly it is less a problem for the "Love your neighbor" principle. We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Since the obligation turns on a projection of our self-love to love of others, we are restricted from the start. Willing is much broader than loving, and not everything willed upon oneself is consistent with loving oneself. One could easily argue that masochism

³ Needless to say, "love" here is not meant as a feeling, as if the feeling of being in love could be obligated, but as a way of relating to others.

can't be consistent with proper self-love, but of course this raises the question of the distinction between proper and improper self-love. Consider one particular form of self-love: narcissistic self-love (excessive pride, which the Medievals thought the worst of all vices and the source of the rest). This form of self-love is not the self-love of the principle of "love your neighbor as yourself." We know this from simply looking at the form of the principle. The principle calls on us to treat others as we treat ourselves, but narcissistic self-love precludes precisely this other attentiveness. If we are narcissistically self-loving, we are incapable of loving others, much less loving them as ourselves. Clearly this is a morally improper form of self-love. Self-love of this sort can't be universalized to apply to others, therefore if the principle is going to avoid self-contradiction, it must call for a form of self-love other than narcissistic self-love.

What, then, are we to make of the notion of self-love? At the very least self-love requires this: that we aim to provide the means necessary for advancing the nobler aspects of our selves. Of course it will involve much more than this—for example, striving for self-realization has to be balanced with self-acceptance—but at the very least, to love oneself is to work to perfect oneself as a person. That never involves simply following one's immediate wants and desires. Rather it always involves evaluating those desires and integrating those desires into a complete and fulfilling life. Thus to love others as yourself is, at the very least, to work to promote the perfection of others as human beings—to promote others' development of their nobler aspects. And note well that these nobler aspects may not only be independent of self-interest, they may be antithetical to it. One of the noblest traits we recognize in people is their willingness to act on principle above and beyond their personal, selfish desires. Indeed, we praise those who not only act against their selfish desires, but who sacrifice themselves for the sake of acting morally. Loving others, then, involves encouraging them to act on principles which may not be connected to their desires. Notice this is appropriate given our discussion of the principle "Love your neighbor as yourself." That very principle requires us to act on principles like it. That is, the commands of the principle to love others as yourself preserve the idea of acting on principle rather than on narcissistic self-love.

At this point we can return to something we saw earlier. Recall that premise 2 in the argument was “Loving someone requires trying to save his or her life.” We can now see there are cases where, out of love, we should refrain from trying to save someone’s life. If we allow that love for others requires us to encourage others to act on principles more noble than merely following their wants and desires, then we realize there may be cases where a person is willing to risk death for one of these principles. If we are privileging some principles over interests, then we should privilege them over the ultimate interest: self-preservation. It would seem then that the principle “Love your neighbor as yourself” may, in fact, lead us into a situation where the appropriate action is not to act to save someone’s life. That is, in cases where people are acting on a principle which, when realized, advances nobler aspects of themselves and perfects them as persons, and the following of which jeopardizes their lives, then you should not intervene. A clear example would be if someone—recognizing it might mean his or her death—refuses on principle to follow orders to kill innocent civilians.

Now an obvious objection is that no one on *The Simpsons* is represented as holding such principles. Not even the most principled character, Lisa, could be said to belong to that category, so the argument is moot. But again, we are not concerned with Ned and the characters per se, but only with them as representatives of a certain set of actions, and we are inquiring as to how those actions could be justified. On first glance, it would seem that they are rarely, if ever, justified. Still, we have arrived at a sketch of a solution to the problem, but only a sketch. Those familiar with the history of philosophy will have recognized by now that our conclusions approach those arrived at independently and for different reasons by Immanuel Kant. Let’s look at his account of autonomy as a guide for fleshing out the view that is emerging.

Kantian Autonomy

At this point our view has two elements: acting on principle, and acting independently of interests. Kant held both of these factors to be crucial for an action to be moral.⁴ The first he considered trivial. Every action, he claims, whether we know it or

not, has some principle behind it: a maxim. The moral worth of an action, then, depends on the nature of the maxim guiding it. Some maxims reflect personal interests ("Act in such a way as to maximize your pleasure" is a common one), while others do not. We've seen that "Love your neighbor as yourself" is an example of a maxim which does not reflect personal interests. According to Kant, an action will be moral only if the motivation for the action is simply morality itself. We do it because it's the right thing to do. The same movements might be done for different reasons, but they are only fully moral if they are done for moral reasons. This is not to say the actions can't also fulfill our interests, just that our self-interests can't be the motivation of the action if the action is to be considered a moral action.

But when aren't actions done from self-interest? Kant acknowledges that it is difficult to tell. In fact he says it's impossible to tell when you are genuinely acting morally, but the key here is that it is possible to act morally. You can act on principles independent of your interests. In addition to merely acting on the principles, however, you must be aware of what you are doing for the action to be a properly moral action. At least you need to be aware that you are trying to act according to the principle you've chosen. To act morally, then, you yourself need to make the moral principle your principle. Certainly it is praiseworthy when someone acts benevolently out of instinct, but to fully act morally means to decide to make the moral guiding principle the principle to be followed. You give yourself the

* Kant, surprisingly, rarely discusses at length the command to love your neighbor as yourself. Here's what he does say in Part II of *The Metaphysics of Morals*. "The saying 'you ought to love your neighbor as yourself' does not mean that you ought immediately (first) to love him and (afterwards) by means of this love do him good. It means, rather, do good to your fellow human beings, and your beneficence will produce love of them in you (as an aptitude of the inclination to beneficence in general)" (Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 531). Later in the same work he writes, "The duty of love for one's neighbor can, accordingly, be also expressed as the duty to make others' ends my own (provided only that these are not immoral). . . . In accordance with the ethical law of perfection 'love your neighbor as yourself,' 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" (*Practical Philosophy*, pp. 569-570).

principle, you determine for yourself how you should act, and you act on that principle. Only then have you freed yourself from merely imitating others and according to Kant, only then are you genuinely free.⁵ Kant refers to this genuine freedom as *autonomy*, and it is different from what we will call metaphysical freedom. Metaphysical freedom is the ability to initiate new causal chains: the ability to, say, move your arm at will without it being moved by something external to you. Autonomy, however, is the ability to legislate your own actions by choosing the principle of your actions. It is taking responsibility for the maxim of your action.

Consider this feature of Kantian autonomy in the context of our guiding question. We have been developing a possible moral justification for 1. believing you should love your neighbor and 2. believing that without being baptized your neighbor will suffer eternally, and 3. still not acting to baptize your neighbor. And a picture of the conditions of such an action to be legitimate have started to emerge. If someone is acting on principle—a principle that perfects him or her—and that principle leads him or her to jeopardize his or her life (including his or her eternal life), you might be required to refrain from interfering on the basis of loving your neighbor. But surely if it's possible to be acting on principle without really adopting that principle consciously, then we are given pause. If someone has not consciously adopted the principle of his or her action and made it his or her own, then it would seem that there is an obligation to intervene "on his or her behalf" (so to speak). If self-love requires you to pursue principles of action that perfect yourself, then loving others means enabling them to do the same. But this must mean enabling them to choose these principles for themselves, and only in such conditions might "love your neighbor" obligate you to respect their decision. So the central feature of Kant's theory of autonomy, self-legislation

⁵ But note that simply making the principle your own doesn't make it a moral principle, it must be the right kind of principle. That is, the morality of the principle is independent of your willing the principle. We will see more of this as Kant's views unfolds. Of course we could not come close to presenting Kant's moral theory in all its complexity here. For a good presentation of Kant's ethics see Allan Wood's *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

of moral principles, seems to be required for our account as well.

Yet how do we come across these principles and make them our own? How do we distance ourselves from our inclinations enough to make this possible? Kant's answer is reason. Consider our three criteria for a moral action: 1. acting on a principle, 2. which is independent of our interests and 3. which we have given to ourselves. Reason is necessary for all three. Reason is what lets us step back from our immediate desires and inclinations, and it is reason which allows us to think through the principles and decide if the action we are going to make is being done for moral reasons (or selfish reasons). More importantly for our case, it is reason that ultimately allows us to judge that a person is risking his or her eternal life on the basis of what the person takes to be a more noble principle. For Kant, reason becomes the key to understanding how to formulate the ultimately proper moral principle. Reason abstracts us from our particular interests and, in doing so, universalizes our judgment. This universalization is the key to what Kant calls the categorical imperative—a principle which will tell us when our maxims are moral. Act only on the maxims which can be willed to be universal laws.⁶ We don't need to follow Kant to this extreme formalism, but we have already seen his concerns for universality at play in our interpretation of the meaning of self-love. At the very least we should agree with Kant that a condition of autonomy is rationally standing back from your desires in order to reflectively embrace a principle of action. Promoting your reasoned stance towards your desires is perfecting the nobler aspects of yourself. At least, the principle of "Love your neighbor" requires you to perfect your ability to use reason in this way.

So our conception of autonomy is complete. Loving your neighbor does not require you to try to save someone's eternal

⁶ Kant gives a couple of versions of the categorical imperative. Perhaps the most relevant version for our emphasis on autonomy (moral self-legislation) is the principle to act "on the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law" (*Practical Philosophy*, p. 81). Which is to say, treat all as capable of being autonomous agents. In effect, this and the principle of benevolence (help others perfect themselves) is the content we've given to the "love your neighbor" principle. We should recognize all as capable of autonomy and help them achieve that end.

life when he or she is acting autonomously. Autonomous agency, we've concluded with Kant's help, has four parts. You must be acting on principles that are independent from your interests and that you have consciously given to yourself. The principles must aim to perfect yourself and must be the result of rational reflection about how to act. In such a case Ned's actions would be justified. Under these conditions, premise 2 from our earlier argument—"Loving someone requires trying to save his or her life"—turns out to be sometimes false and the argument no longer holds.⁷

Conclusion: Autonomy vs. Choice

Still, doesn't this simply boil down to the commonsense reaction that you should not interfere in the choices of others? Where does the argument differ? Although it is true that if a person has consciously chosen his or her ends, the person meets one of the criteria, there is still the concern for choosing principles which function independently of desires. If a person is acting out of his or her interests rather than on principles independent of his or her interests, then there is never a case where the preservation of life is sacrificed to higher interests. Well, unless of course that interest is the interest in eternal life, but this is precisely the point. If people act out of interest rather than out of principle, then helping them attain eternal life is consistent with their aims, whether they realize it or not. So it is not the case that choices are tolerated simply because a person made them. Only some choices people make—rational, principled choices that are independent of interests—free someone like Ned Flanders

⁷ Although we've moved away from the question of the Simpson children, there is a concern about how this reasoning would apply to all children, not just those in your care. Kant thought everyone was capable of acting autonomously, however not everyone realized this capacity. Children rarely act autonomously; so the argument may still hold that one should try to baptize all children in your care or otherwise. There isn't room to develop a fuller response to this concern, but I think one of two tracks (or both) would be successful. One might argue that you should respect the judgments autonomous people make for those in their care; or one might argue that the conclusion is that loving your neighbor requires you to work for your neighbor's salvation or to work for your neighbor's realization of his or her autonomy.

from trying to facilitate his or her salvation through baptism in the name of "loving your neighbor as yourself." Perhaps, then, it is especially appropriate that at the end of the episode Flanders has only succeeded in baptizing one person, the character most driven by immediate pleasures, his neighbor, Homer Simpson.