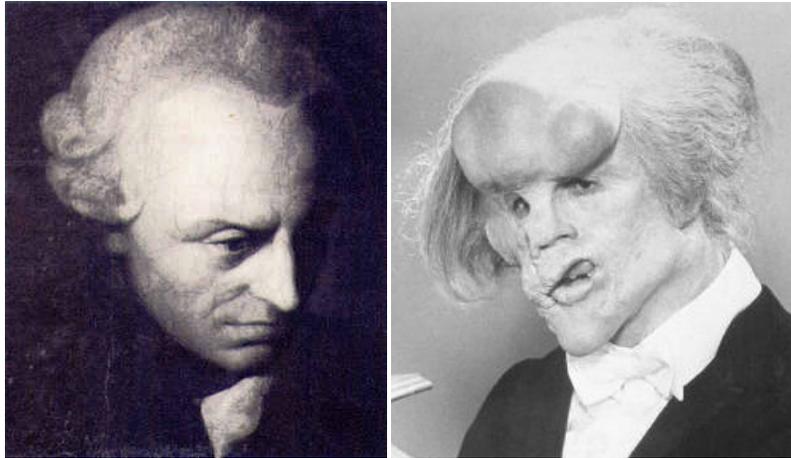


KANTIAN THEMES IN *THE ELEPHANT MAN* (forthcoming in *Film and Philosophy*)



Finding films that embody at least some elements of the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant is not too difficult. Others have written on the ways in which films as diverse as *High Noon* and *Hotel Rwanda* can be used in ethics classes to explain various aspects of Kant's ethics.¹ In what follows, I will try to make the case that David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* is one of the best films to use for both introducing and sympathetically understanding Kant's moral philosophy. The film does not merely focus on duty, or the tensions that can arise between consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethical decision making. It also helps us understand Kant's views on moral worth, friendship, and the value of rationality and personhood. In addition, it contains aspects which can help us critically examine the limits and overall plausibility of a Kantian ethical framework. Finally, it is a terrific film that most students have not yet had the opportunity to see, so introducing them to it offers the possibility of both aesthetic and moral enrichment.²

The Elephant Man is the story of a "poor wretch" named John Merrick, who is afflicted with a horribly disfiguring disease. His disfiguration is so severe that Merrick is relegated to appearing in a freak show as the "Elephant Man." Set in the Victorian era, the story follows Merrick's journey from abused side-show attraction to pampered international celebrity. This transformation occurs primarily through the efforts of Doctor

Frederick Treves, who rescues Merrick from an exploitative barker and provides him with a more humane home within his hospital.

While under the doctor's watchful care, it becomes clear that Merrick is actually intelligent and literate, and his life is ultimately transformed by the opportunities Treves offers him for engaging with society as a celebrity rather than an outcast. In the course of the narrative, Merrick overcomes many setbacks and eventually achieves a relatively happy and fulfilling life, but no cure for his condition is possible and his health continues to decline. The film ends with Merrick's decision to end his own life by sleeping horizontally for the first time, a choice that he knows will bring about his death, due to the nature of his condition.

The film is based on the real-life story of Joseph Merrick, who lived from 1862 to 1890. There's some controversy regarding what medical condition the actual man suffered from, with experts debating whether he had Proteus syndrome, Neurofibromatosis, or some combination thereof. The real Merrick was indeed taken in and looked after by a doctor named Frederick Treves, and some of the other key plot points in the film are based on actual events in Merrick's life, but as you might expect, other scenes (and their chronology) are fictionalized for dramatic effect.

Directed by David Lynch, it was only his second film (the first being the avant-garde milestone *Eraserhead*, which came out in 1977). Lynch managed to go from that surreal cinematic experiment to directing an all-star Hollywood melodrama because Mel Brooks liked *Eraserhead* and was willing to give Lynch the chance to make a bigger and more mainstream film. We should be thankful he did, as *The Elephant Man* is a remarkably beautiful and emotionally powerful film.

I've found this film very useful for teaching Kant to undergraduate students, and here I'll explain why I take the film to be a particularly valuable resource. There are some aspects which are quite *obviously* Kantian, perhaps too obvious to be worth mentioning (such as the tag line for the film: "I am *not* an animal, I am a human being!", which echoes Kant's important moral distinction between rational agents and the rest of the animal world). Yet the film is Kantian in spirit in several interconnected ways, some of them obvious and some more subtle.

My discussion is hence divided into three broad sections, with some overlap (which shouldn't be surprising given Kant's rather systematic tendencies). The essay will begin with Kant's ideas on valuing persons as ends in themselves, and indicate how they resonate in *The Elephant Man*. It then considers how Kant's prioritization of rationality over sentience and his emphasis on the importance of intention can both also be seen in the film. I will conclude by showing how the depiction of Merrick's death at the end of the film leaves us with a challenge for Kantian ethics, given Kant's bold and uncompromising prohibition of suicide.

Ends in themselves

Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead he must in all his actions, whether directed to himself or also to other rational beings, always be regarded *at the same time as an end*. (*Groundwork*, 4:428, p.35)³

Kant repeatedly contended that being morally good involves recognizing others as “ends in themselves.” It is always wrong to treat others *solely* as a means to our ends – to use them for one's purposes without regard to their own goals and interests is never morally permissible. Though Kant did not use these terms, his moral theory went a long way to explaining the wrongness of exploitation and objectification. *The Elephant Man* offers us a moving tale of exploitation. John Merrick (John Hurt) is clearly exploited by the obvious villains of the film (by Bytes the carnival barker, and by the night porter) but the movie also raises the question of whether he is equally exploited by those who appear to do good. In particular, it explores the possibility that his doctor (Freddie Treves, played by Anthony Hopkins) and that doctor's supervisor (Carr Gomm, played by John Gielgud) end up exploiting Merrick while attempting to aid and protect him.



The film highlights the possibility of a parallel exploitation in a number of ways. Consider the juxtaposition of Treves's presentation of Merrick to his medical colleagues and students with Bytes's sideshow performance. Both are similarly theatrical, involving curtains and spotlights, and both clearly involve the presentation of Merrick as an object to be studied *rather* than a man to be respected. (Note also Treves's casual remark about the reproductive organs of Merrick.) Bytes (who refers to Merrick as his "treasure") is aware of the similarity between himself and Treves, repeatedly reminding Treves that "we understand one another." The suggestion raised by the film is that, despite their very real differences in character and background, both men are guilty of viewing Merrick as a valuable object at times rather than a person.

As the film progresses, this theme recurs. Towards its end, we see Merrick attend the theater for the very first time, and no doubt we are supposed to share his joy at finally

being able to witness this spectacle. At the same time, though, the camera lingers over the moment in which Merrick is introduced to the audience and it is quite clear that *he* has become the spectacle: their applause gives a bittersweet feeling to the whole sequence. While this scenario is surely preferable to the horrible exploitation he experienced early on, there's the suggestion that, given his condition, a life in which he would *not* be regularly viewed as a curious object is perhaps impossible.



Several other sequences which touch on the theme of exploitation are worth mentioning. There is one scene in which Nurse Mothershead reprimands Treves, arguing that Merrick's new life has resulted in him "being stared at all over again." (This is after Treves has allowed a series of celebrities and other important social figures to visit with Merrick in the hospital.) Treves is moved to soul-searching, saying: "I've been thinking about Mr. Bytes... I'm beginning to believe that Mr. Bytes and I are very much alike... It seems that I've made Mr. Merrick into a curiosity all over again."

Now don't get me wrong, it is pretty clear that Treves is a good guy in this film, and I'm not trying to suggest we should think otherwise. Rather, I'm pointing out that *this* good guy, like most real people, is a pretty complex character, and the film delicately explores the ways in which such a good person might nonetheless end up exploiting another human being. In particular, the film offers up a thoughtful consideration of how a doctor might inadvertently end up exploiting a patient.⁴

Rationality

Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a *will*. (*Groundwork*, 4:414, p.24)

For Kant, it is our capacity for rational agency that makes us deserving of respect. It is only because one can reason that one can be free, and it is only through reason that one can both determine what is moral and choose to act accordingly. Creatures that lack this capacity do not, according to Kant, deserve our direct moral consideration. Now this aspect of Kant's ethics is highly controversial, and I don't intend to defend the sharp line he draws between rational beings and the rest of the world.⁵ I do believe that there is *something* plausible about his emphasis on the importance of rationality for morality, and that the film helps make clear exactly *why* such a connection is plausible.



Let's consider some particular scenes. The most famous lines of the film: "I am not an animal. I am not an elephant. I am a human being!" echo the Kantian theme that humans are distinct in their importance and uniquely deserving of a certain form of treatment. In the scene in which they appear, Merrick has been taunted, chased, and herded (like an animal) into a restroom in an underground train station. Consider also how, very early in the film, we see Treves operating on the victim of an industrial accident. Foreshadowing the role that reasoning will play in this film, he comments: "Abominable things these machines. One can't reason with them." (Admittedly this is a

pretty minor line in a minor scene, but it is interesting to consider Lynch's intentions here: he's a very careful filmmaker, after all, and most lines in a Lynch film feel deliberate in their placement.)

There's an additional sequence in which Treves is talking to a colleague about Merrick and says "the man is an imbecile probably from birth... the man is a complete idiot... I pray to God he's an idiot". The thought being that an idiot would be incapable of realizing the horror of his situation – it takes the ability to reason and reflection to recognize the tragedy of Merrick's life. Of course, even if Merrick had been an "idiot" his life in the carnival was undoubtedly an unpleasant one, but as Kant pointed out rational agents are capable of both pleasures and pains that are unavailable to creatures that cannot reason. There is something *especially* horrifying about a thinking, reasoning and thus self-aware creature being submitted to such exploitation and suffering.

Perhaps the most crucial scene in the film comes when Treves is interviewing Merrick for Carr Gomm (John Gielgud), and it appears to Gomm that Merrick is simply parroting pre-prepared responses. However, once they leave the room they hear Merrick continue on with a biblical passage that Treves did not teach him. This moment convinces both of them that Merrick is in fact a human being capable of significant reasoning – he's not an imbecile, and his capacities had been woefully underestimated. Kant would, of course, have emphasized the importance of this moment – in seeing that Merrick can think and reflect, we come to view him in a different light. We see him as a person rather than an unfortunate creature. He acquires a kind of dignity not available to creatures incapable of reason.

Intention and Moral Worth

A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination and indeed, if you will, of the sum of all inclination. (*Groundwork*, 4:394, p.8)

Kant, as a deontologist opposed to consequentialism, argued one's intention is crucial in determining the morality of an action, which has no moral worth unless it is done from the proper motive. This is true regardless of how beneficial the consequences

of the act might be. *The Elephant Man* raises this issue of proper intention at several junctures.



When Nurse Mothershead is told by Treves that she didn't show Merrick much "loving kindness" when he first arrived, she angrily replies that she showed him "care and practical concern." One way of interpreting her comments here is to see her as making a Kantian point: she may not have had a strong inclination to help Merrick (i.e., her natural inclinations and emotions were those of repugnance rather than warmth) but she recognized her *duty* to help and she did her duty simply because it was the right thing to do. Kant's writings on friendship and love are relevant here.

Kant was quite wary of emotionally-based bonds generally (of the sort which might spring from "loving kindness"), and deemed such "pathological" friendships risky, due to their tendency to generate bonds of loyalty that interfere with the strict impartiality demanded by morality. Instead, he promoted a rather reserved relation that is based more on rational respect for the other than emotional inclinations:

Friendship, through the sweetness which approximates a fusion into one person, is at the same time something so tender, that if it is left to rest upon feelings, and if this mutual communication and surrender are not underlaid with principles or with rules which prevent such mutual intimacy and limit such mutual love by rules of respect, then it is not for a moment secure against breaches. [...] But at all events the love in friendship cannot be emotion, because emotion is blind in its option and evaporates in the sequel." (*Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, sec. 471, pp.137-8)⁶

Thus, by Kant's lights, Treves' swipe at Nurse Motherhead for her initial reserve was rather off the mark.

Perhaps the most relevant scene regarding proper intention is the one in which Treves wonders whether he has exploited Merrick and explicitly asks: “What was it all for? Why did I do it? Am I a good man, or a bad man?” His wife reminds him of all the good he has done for Merrick, but of course that is beside the point. *Treves knows his actions have had good consequences*; this, however, isn’t enough to convince him (or us) that *he* has necessarily been morally good.

In suggesting that the film doesn’t simply give Treves a moral “pass”, I differ from others who have argued that we can safely conclude Treves is not immoral because he did not utilize Merrick *solely* as a means.⁷ I think both the film and Kant’s ethical views are more nuanced than such a categorical diagnosis implies. When the film ends, we surely have a good opinion of Treves, but we are left with the nagging thought that his motives may not have always been particularly pure. This issue of whether one can ever really know one’s true motives was a key concern of Kant’s:

In fact, it is absolutely impossible by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action otherwise in conformity with duty rested simply on moral grounds and on the representation of one’s duty. [...] for we like to flatter ourselves by falsely attributing to ourselves a nobler motive, whereas in fact we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives, since, when moral worth is at issue, what counts is not actions, which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see. (*Groundwork*, 4:407, pp.19-20)

The film encourages us to share Kant’s concern here and to consider whether we, too, are perhaps guilty of a self-flattery that obscures our darker motivations. This isn’t to say that either the film or Kant is promoting moral *skepticism*, rather I take both to be emphasizing instead the complexity of our psyches and the great difficulty (not impossibility) of moral purity.⁸

The End

Someone feels sick of life because of a series of troubles that has grown to the point of despair, but is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. [...] It is then seen at once that a nature whose law it would be to destroy life itself by means of the same feeling whose destination is to impel toward the furtherance of life would contract itself and would therefore not subsist as nature; thus that maxim could not possibly be a law of nature and, accordingly altogether opposes the supreme principle of all duty. (*Groundwork*, 4:422, p.32)

There is at least one important respect in which *The Elephant Man* is quite un-Kantian: most viewers take the presentation of Merrick's suicide at the end of the film to be a sympathetic one.⁹ It is presented as a noble choice given the decline and suffering Merrick knows he will soon otherwise endure. This is quite clearly a perspective on suicide that Kant rejected. Notoriously, he argued instead that one is never morally permitted to commit suicide, even if such an act would end great suffering. As he put it: "Misery gives no man the right to take his life."¹⁰ This is because he held that suicide necessarily involves using one's freedom for the intentional negation of the self, but that very self is the source of one's freedom and one's capacity for morality, and both exist so that we may respect our selves and live with the honour due to a rational being. Accordingly, any act which purposefully removes that possibility for self respect cannot be morally acceptable. (This is different from a situation in which one might sacrifice oneself in battle. Kant claimed that in such a case there is usually a degree of fate or lack of choice that makes such an act permissible.¹¹)

Kant's views on suicide are justifiably controversial, and philosophers disagree over exactly how to interpret his somewhat scattered and problematic remarks on the topic.¹² I share the view of most that he's simply wrong on this issue. Indeed, Kant's claim that one violates one's rational nature in performing suicide seems particularly wrongheaded when someone faces a future where that *very rational nature* is likely to decline along with one's physical health, and I presume this may well have been the case for Merrick.¹³ In addition, while perhaps hardline Kantians cannot place much weight on promoting happiness and avoiding pain in their theorizing about morality, the rest of us are inclined to recognize that ending one's life might be morally justifiable due to the unnecessary suffering suicide can prevent (suffering both to the individual in question, and to the loved ones who would suffer because he or she continues to suffer). In contrast to Kant, consider the Stoic philosopher Seneca's remarks on the moral permissibility of suicide:

For mere living is not a good, but living well. Accordingly, the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can. He will mark in what place, with whom, and how he is to conduct his existence, and what he is about to do. He always reflects concerning the quality, and not the quantity, of his life. As soon as there are many events in his life that give him trouble and disturb his peace of mind, he sets himself free. And this privilege is his, not only when the crisis is upon him, but as soon as Fortune seems to be playing him false; then he looks about carefully and sees whether he ought, or ought not, to end his life on that account. He holds that it makes no difference to him whether his taking-off be natural or self-inflicted, whether it

comes later or earlier. He does not regard it with fear, as if it were a great loss; for no man can lose very much when but a dribble remains. It is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill. And dying well means escape from the danger of living ill.¹⁴

In Seneca's writings we have the very sensible suggestion that to choose to leave the living while one is still flourishing, rather than to cling to life regardless of the decline that will inevitably ensue, can rightly be seen as an act of courage rather than cowardice.¹⁵ I take it as an additional virtue of *The Elephant Man* that it presents us with an eloquent and moving presentation of a suicide that seems not only morally permissible but perhaps even morally praiseworthy in its dignity.

As I hope is clear, the ending of the film provides copious food for thought, and is quite useful for motivating discussion regarding both the specific issue of the ethics of suicide but also the more general question of the extent to which we can appropriate the insights of a great systematic philosopher like Kant without accepting the "entire package", so to speak. Philosophers and students of philosophy will disagree about these questions, of course, but I know of no better stimulus for engaging reflection and debate on these and the other issues I've canvassed than Lynch's remarkable cinematic presentation of the tale of John Merrick.

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Notes

¹ A brief discussion of Kantian themes in *High Noon* can be found at the University of Newcastle Philosophy and Film database: <http://libguides.newcastle.edu.au/>. *Hotel Rwanda* is discussed in the context of Kantian ethics by Dan Shaw in *Morality at the Movies: Reading Ethics Through Film* (Continuum, 2012). The only other discussion I have found connecting Kantian ethics with *The Elephant Man* is a blog post by Alex Hoyt (<http://neuro-active.com/nomatter/?p=89>). The analysis offered is sensible and similar in some respects to my own, though it is also rather brief, and surprisingly Kant's emphasis on proper intention as it manifests in the film is not considered (nor are many of the scenes I go on to discuss). There is also a teaching resource involving Kant and *The Elephant Man* offered by BFI Education and TES Connect (<http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/The-Elephant-Man-KS5-RE-6369127/>). The outline of discussion points offered there (authored by Amar Ediriwira) is rather schematic and focuses primarily on the issue of valuing someone as an end. Neither document attempts the level of detailed analysis and discussion offered here.

²My goal here is to explore Kantian philosophical themes, so I will not devote much attention to discussion of stylistic aspects of the film, but this should not be taken as implying that the style of this film is not noteworthy. While perhaps more conventional and less “Lynchian” than many of his other films, it has its share of uniquely expressive shots, striking imagery, and atmospheric sound design. For more on what might be said to constitute “Lynchian”, see David Foster Wallace’s terrific essay on *Lost Highway*, “David Lynch Keeps His Head”, *Premiere*, Sep. 1996. Available online at: <http://www.lychnet.com/lh/lhpremiere.html>

A nice brief discussion of the sensual aesthetics of the film can be found in Justine Smith’s essay “*The Elephant Man* and the Sensual Experience of Form Great Monsters of the Screen” in *Sound in Sight*: <http://www.soundonsight.org/great-monsters-the-elephant-man-and-the-sensual-experience/>

Analyses which consider both the Victorian setting of the film and the ways in which *The Elephant Man* inhabits (while commenting on) the genre of melodrama can be found in Allister Mactaggart’s *The Film Paintings of David Lynch: Challenging Film Theory* (Intellect Books, 2010), and “Viewing the Elephant Man” by William E. Holladay and Stephen Watt (*PMLA* - Vol. 104 - Issue 5 - 1989 - pp. 868-881).

³ This and future references to Kant’s *Groundwork* in the text refer to the following edition: Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy), translated and edited by Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴ I’ll return to this issue of the complexity of our intentions in the third section of this paper.

⁵ For a persuasive argument that Kant (and Kantians) go too far in tying the dignity of humanity solely to *reason*, see Cora Diamond’s “The Importance of Being Human”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, Vol. 29, March 1991, 35-62.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Ethical Philosophy*, translated by James W. Ellington (Hackett Publishing Company, 1983).

⁷ Alex Hoyt makes this sort of point at <http://neuro-active.com/nomatter/?p=89>.

⁸ In general my goal here has been to present Kant’s position sympathetically (for pedagogical purposes), but it is worth noting that very effective objections have been raised to Kant’s argument that moral worth should hinge on duty rather than inclination (feeling). Michael Stocker’s “The Schizophrenia of Moral Theory” (*The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 73, No. 14, Aug. 12, 1976, 453-466) is one powerful statement of such a complaint. My own views are very much in line with Stocker’s.

⁹ Helpful comments from an anonymous referee mention included another aspect of the film which can plausibly be interpreted as anti-Kantian in spirit: at one point Merrick states that his life is full because he knows he is *loved*, not because simply he’s been dutifully looked after.

¹⁰ *Lectures on Ethics* (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant), edited by Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, translated by Peter Heath, (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27:373, p.147

¹¹ Cf. *Lectures on Ethics*, 27:372, pp.146-117.

¹² For a insightful reconstruction and qualified defense of Kant’s views on suicide, see Michael J. Cholbi’s “Kant and the Irrationality of Suicide”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Apr., 2000. 159-176.

¹³ For Kantian-inspired defenses of suicide that operate along these lines see David Velleman, “A Right of Self-termination”, *Ethics*, vol. 109, no. 3, 1999, 606-628; Michael Cholbi, “A Kantian Defense of Prudential Suicide”, *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, vol.7, 2010, 489-515.

¹⁴ Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, Letter 70: “On the Proper Time to Slip the Cable”. Available online at: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius/Letter_70

¹⁵ This is not to deny that suicide under other conditions may well be cowardly.