

Project Work

Written Report

Black Mirror -- Behind the Screen

Project ID: 2A-03

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Black Mirror is a British anthology series created by Charlie Brooker. The first 2 seasons of the series were aired by British Television Network Channel 4, before being bought over by American streaming giant Netflix. Since its creation, the show has been critically acclaimed, receiving many awards and is widely regarded as one of the best shows of the 2010s.

However, beyond that, what makes the show stand out is its prescient warning weaved into each episode. Despite its many sub-genres of themes, varying from science-fiction, horror, thriller, crime, and even satire, it all falls back on one common theme -- technology. It explores a twisted, high-tech multiverse where humanity's greatest innovations and darkest instincts collide. While seemingly foreign to many, it has become increasingly apparent in recent times the uncanny parallels between the supposed "future" in the show and our world.

Indeed, Black Mirror is no longer a piece of speculative fiction, but instead a cautionary tale of the road that lies ahead of humanity. From Artificial Intelligence(AI), Digital Consciousness, Data Privacy and Mass Surveillance, the ethical implications with such technologies is catching up to Man, and could soon fall into the dystopia we once dismissed.

Hence, this essay aims to shed light on the multiple ethical issues as portrayed in Black Mirror. Through the lens of two notable ethical philosophies: Kantian Ethics and Utilitarianism, this essay seeks to show how these ideologies, beliefs, and their conflicts reveal the deep, dark abyss behind the screens of the devices we hold so dear.

1.2 Rationale

Media and culture are two aspects in society that go hand-in-hand. In this increasingly digitised and connected world, we are constantly exposed to various forms of media, with one such being television shows. Nowadays, such shows do not exactly have to be broadcast via physical televisions but could be through the internet via streaming giants like Netflix. Television shows and series, while seemingly just a form of entertainment, could in fact be a reflection of the prevalent cultural norms, beliefs and values of society. At the same time, it also spreads its own ideas that can slowly influence us. The power of television shows thus cannot be underestimated.

In recent years, one genre has been gaining immense popularity -- dystopian. In particular, dystopian science fiction. Hence, it becomes a relevant subject of study so as to attempt to understand the messages such series are trying to convey and how it is conveyed.

Black Mirror is one key example of the genre, yet it stands out from the rest. And the reason is simple.

Black Mirror appeals to many not because it has out-of-this-world stories, but because it is based on reality. In every episode, there is an eerie similarity between its so-called “dystopia” and our real world. Black Mirror’s realistic and familiar settings are able to easily connect with us and unsettle us, making us question the very world we live in and the technologies that we hold so dear. Around us, numerous new and modern digital technologies are sprouting forth, but along with them come numerous ethical implications. Hence, arises the need to better understand the technology we use and its associated ethical issues.

With its disturbing storylines and eerie resemblances to our real world, Black Mirror is thus an extremely viable piece of literature that can allow us to better understand technology and ethics. Therefore, through aligning its discussion and analysis with the philosophies of Kant and Utilitarianism,

this essay hopes to better understand the ethical issues related to technologies seen in our lives.

1.3 Research questions

1. Viewing from a Kantian standpoint, how are people shown to lose their own humanity due to modern technologies?
2. How does the conflict between the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) and the Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776) bring about the “horror” of modern technologies?
3. What are some parallels that can already be seen between Black mirror and the current world?

1.4 Thesis Statement

The portrayal of technology in Black Mirror showcases and warns us of the potential ethical implications, such as the loss of fundamental humanity, and other dilemmas related to the use of new modern technologies. This is further explored in the conflicts between moral principles, namely the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) and Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776), bringing to light the ethical “horrors” whilst consistently drawing uncanny parallels to our current global realities.

1.5 Scope

Black Mirror consists of 5 seasons and has a total of 22 episodes. After watching all the episodes, we have decided on the following 4 episodes for analysis in depth as they are most relevant and related for our field of research:

Season 1 Episode 1-- The National Anthem:
Season 2 Episode 2 -- White Bear
Season 3 Episode 1 -- Nosedive
Season 3 Episode 3 -- Shut Up and Dance

1.6 Significance of Research

Many studies and analysis have already been conducted on Black Mirror and its portrayal of technology, but not many have been done in relation to why exactly one experiences the feelings of uneasiness when watching the series. This essay does not intend to unpack what the ethical issues are, but, more appropriately, why these ethical issues arise. By better understanding why we face such ethical dilemmas, we would be able to better understand our human morality, therefore preparing ourselves for the increasingly technologically advanced world and perhaps make more ethically correct decisions in the future.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, technology is advancing rapidly. Thus, new studies like this essay would have current value when seen in relation to the constantly changing times.

1.7 Limitations

As previously mentioned, there is a wide range of dystopian science-fiction series similar to Black Mirror. Technology is still showcased in a rather pessimistic way, but from different angles and severity. In addition, there are other series which also portray technology in a good light. Hence, while Black Mirror is quite realistic in comparison to other shows of the same or similar genre, it cannot be taken as the full accurate truth reflecting technology.

Furthermore, our field of research is on the ethics of technology, but Black Mirror covers a wide range of topics, from politics to romance. Thus, while all episodes surround the theme of technology, not all are related to the ethics of technology. Therefore, only some episodes are relevant to our analysis. Thus, the portrayal of technology might not be exactly the same between episodes. In addition, there was a switch in ownership of the series from Season 3 onwards from Channel 4 to Netflix, thus the show's general style might be altered to suit different audiences and demands. Hence, this further shows how technology's portrayal might be inconsistent throughout the series.

1.8 Methodology

This essay's analysis of Black Mirror will be through the lens of 2 of the notable ethical philosophies: Kantian Ethics and Utilitarianism. The actions and dialogue of characters in each episode will be of particular importance as they would reveal the thoughts and feelings of the characters, and, from there, we attempt to deduce the portrayal of technology and its ethical issues.

The 5 aspects of film will also be applied when unpacking the scenes of Black Mirror. These elements would heighten the mood and propagate the themes of the episode, and thus analysis of it would allow for better understanding of the ethical issues of technology.

These 5 aspects are:

1. Narrative -- The Story, Characters and Settings
2. Cinematography -- The way of filming, camera movements, angles, lighting, colour tone etc.
3. Mise-en-scene -- Everything that appears on set, for example props, locations, costumes, actors, light, shadow etc.
4. Editing -- The connection and transitions between scenes and shots
5. Sound -- Dialogue, Sound Effects and Music

In relation to current world issues, parallels will also be drawn between the series and real life, further revealing the uncanny similarities between Black Mirror and reality, hence unveiling the "horrors" of technology.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Kantian Ethics

Overview

Kantian Ethics is the deontological ethical theory developed by influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Born from the age of Enlightenment Rationalism, Kant believed that we can define morality using pure reason. He did not prescribe specific action on what one should do, instead he recommended the use of reason to decide whether an action is right or wrong.

Good Will, Duty and Imperatives

The basis of Kant's ethical philosophy, to quote his book, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of the Moral*, is:

“It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will.”

Kant argues, no action can be considered truly morally right without limitations, unless the action is done with a “Good Will”(Kant, 1785). This means adhering to the moral law, or doing an action out of moral duty or moral obligation. Any other form of virtue, Kant says, can be exploited for immoral means (out of filial piety, one may steal for his parents).

Kant advocates a morality of rationality, where the agent is autonomous and makes the decision for himself, and not a morality of compliance, where specific laws are imposed. Thus, after logical deliberation, the agent would have to choose actions out of his own volition that comply with the moral law, even if against his own personal desires.

At the basis of this rationality, is Kant's Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) (Kant, 1785). In essence, an imperative is an ultimate commandment of reason. Hypothetical imperatives identify actions we ought to take, but only if we have some particular goal, or are a means to an end. For example, if one wants to do well in a test, one should study. On the other hand, Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785)s are an end in itself. It denotes an unconditional requirement that must be fulfilled at all times, regardless of personal desires.

Hence, applying the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) (Kant, 1785), duties arise, to which Kant points out there are 2 types: Perfect and Imperfect duties. Similar to the imperatives, perfect duties always hold true and must always be done, while imperfect ones allow flexibility and can be done if one aims to achieve something.

Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785)

The Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) (Kant, 1785) is morally-binding due to the fact that they are based on reason, not contingent facts of an agent. Hence, it applies to all rational agents unconditionally regardless of desires, as going against the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) would mean going against rationality. In other words, Kant's Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) does not apply to us on the requirement that we have previously adopted some goal for ourselves. Instead, it applies to us because we possess logical resolutions and going against them would be absurd.

From the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785), Kant derived 4 further formulations. To put them In simple terms:

Universality -- One should only follow moral principles that can be widely accepted as a universal law.

Humanity -- Every human being has an inherent value, and should never be treated as mere instruments to achieve certain goals. Instead, their basic dignity and value should be recognized and thus be respected.

Autonomy -- One should only act by maxims that can become a universal law, but without infringing the autonomy and free-will of others.

Kingdom of Ends -- In a world where all beings are rational and treated as ends in itself, with the basis of the first 3 formulations, one should act only by maxims that can harmonise this hypothetical kingdom.

Critique

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was heavily critical of Kant's theory, arguing that the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) is too self-centered, reducing to the principle that "I should not do to others what I do not want done to myself". According to Schopenhauer, genuine moral conduct must be sympathetic, but Kant did not consider sympathy for others as a legitimate motive behind human conduct. He recommends that we shun our feelings of sympathy, which Schopenhauer argues will cause egoism to become the main drive when one considers the implications of one's action in the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785).

Kant's theory sometimes also goes against human nature. Humans are rarely rational beings, with many acting on emotion rather than reason, thus it is practically impossible for Kant's theory to always hold out, especially in times of despair. If a murderer was hunting down a victim, do we lie to him to save the man's life? To Kant, we still should not, as we can never be sure of the outcomes of our actions. Lying to the murderer might cause the murderer to leave in the direction where the victim tried to escape from, leading to the victim's death. Still, one cannot help but feel a sense of wrong. Such a conflict shows the flawed nature of Kantian Ethics.

In addition, irrational beings can exploit the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) to their own means. For example, Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust, declared during his trial that "with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life...according to a Kantian definition of duty." As Hannah Arendt wrote in her book on the trial, she considered this so "incomprehensible on the face of it" that it confirmed her sense that he was not really thinking at all, just mouthing accepted formulae, thereby establishing his banality. This reaffirms the issues with Kant's theory, it is too idealistic to assume that people would abide by the perfect duty, due to the common irrationality of human beings.

Utilitarianism

Overview

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory of morality, which recommends and supports actions that foster joy and/or satisfaction and goes against actions that cause displeasure or negative impacts to a group of people. In terms of making social, economic, or political decisions, a utilitarian philosopher would target and go for the betterment of society and the community as a whole; the more people that benefit, the better.

Principle of Utility

Utilitarianism is widely attributed to English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The backbone of the philosophy he popularized is best described in this quote:

“It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.”

- A Fragment on Government, 1776

Classic utilitarians like Bentham and John Stuart Mill identified a good with pleasure from basic human nature, which is to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Hence, they came to the conclusion that one ought to maximise the good, and minimise the bad, formulating the Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776), popularly known as:

“The greatest good for the greatest number”

Types of Utilitarianism

There are 2 main types of Utilitarianism: Act and Rule. For the purpose of this project, Act Utilitarianism will be used as the contrasting philosophy to Kantian Ethics to best showcase the ethical conflicts seen in Black Mirror due to the problematic and rather contradictory nature of Rule Utilitarianism.

Act Utilitarianism

Act Utilitarianism, which is also known as Classic Utilitarianism, is the first modern form of Utilitarianism, and is mainly attributed to Jeremy Bentham.

The basis of his theory, and Act Utilitarianism in general, is best explained in this quote by Bentham:

"Nature has placed mankind under two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do."

- *Principles of Morals and Legislation*

Bentham believed humans were hedonistic by nature, and given the chance, would choose actions that bring the most pleasure and least pain. Therefore, the only way to determine whether an action is morally right is if it maximizes the happiness of the maximum number of people. Moral values are omitted in all cases as all that matters is the outcome.

Rule Utilitarianism

Rule utilitarianism is an attempted solution to the problems with Act Utilitarianism. Major proponents of such an approach include Richard Brandt and Brad Hooker. Unlike its counterpart, an action must not be

graded based on its outcome, but instead whether following a general moral rule would lead to the best outcome.

There are 2 main types of Rule Utilitarianism, Strong and Weak.

Strong Rule Utilitarianism believes that all moral rules that maximise utility should be followed. Hence, Strong Rule Utilitarianism becomes an ethical theory similar to absolutist moral theories, such as deontological ethical theories.

Weak Rule Utilitarianism also believes that moral rules should be followed, but only in normal situations. In certain exceptions, moral rules can be broken to achieve the best possible outcome. However, many thus argue that Weak Rule Utilitarianism thus falls back into Act Utilitarianism, as this is similar to Act Utilitarianism, moral rules are omitted to achieve the maximum happiness of the maximum number of people.

Cost Benefit Analysis

Then, how does one choose the right action so as to maximise happiness? For this, utilitarianism calls for impartiality, or the agent neutral theory. This means that everyone's happiness counts the same. One's good counts for no more than someone else's good.

A more modern version of calculating the maximum happiness for the maximum number of people is cost-benefit analysis. Deducting the total suffering caused from the action from the total happiness it achieves, one can deduce the best course of action that maximizes utility.

One famous attempt to come up with a system to measure the value or monetary value of actions and consequences was by a study by American psychologist Edward Lee Thorndike in the 1930s. This was based on the utilitarian belief that all can be reduced to a single uniform measure of value. He gave participants a list of unpleasant experiences, such as eating

a live earthworm, and asked them to give a monetary amount on how much they would be willing to be paid to go through such experiences.

Thorndike concluded from his study any want or satisfaction which exists, exists in some amount and is therefore measurable. From the life of a dog, or a cat, or a chicken consists of appetites, cravings, desires and their gratifications, so does the life of human beings.

Critique

Evidently, a major issue with Utilitarian philosophy is the belief that a uniform value can be found for everything. This problem is best visualised with the Ford Pinto case. Ford has to test several prototypes of the pinto to meet the standards specified by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. They thus did a cost benefit analysis of the cost per part to increase the safety of Pinto against the cost of human lives and cost to repair the vehicles. The costs heavily outweighed the benefits, thus Ford did not make a better tank design, and went ahead with the same design which was deemed unsafe for the next 6 years. Needless to say when this memo of the Ford Motor Company's cost-benefit analysis came out in the trial it appalled the jurors who awarded a huge settlement. Indeed, how can one truly put a monetary value onto a human life?

From this, it is also argued that the utilitarian philosophy results in people becoming "cold and unsympathetic". As long as the consequences of one benefit more people in general, it is considered as the superior choice in the eyes of utilitarianism. This might cause people to slowly mold their character into one that only chooses an option that benefits the majority of people. One example would be the criminal case of R v Dudley and Stephens. In this case, there were 4 people stranded on a boat. In order to survive, they had to eat one of them. Conventionally, this decision is morally incorrect. However, from a utilitarian perspective, it is morally right. One might thus be desensitised to others' suffering when making decisions, as all that matters is the final outcome.

Consequently, justice can also be ignored. For example, if a king murdered people, by the theory of utilitarianism, you would frame someone who is innocent like a commoner, and not of royalty. This would reduce the amount of chaos and conflict among the people and the king in the country, making it the right moral choice. However, the innocent are being wrongly punished, while the guilty escape free from punishment. Then, how can this be considered justice?

Lastly, utilitarianism has unrealistic expectations of humanity. Utilitarianism expects humans to always help a greater number of people. It could mean that one constantly gives up one's own happiness, which is very taxing due to the egoistic nature of humans. This brings to light the demanding nature of that utilitarianism.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Analysis

3.1 Loss of Humanity

The loss of humanity in Black Mirror best manifests in the desensitization of the people. Contrary to our research question, technology is shown not to directly lead to the loss of humanity, but a tool indirectly facilitating the process.

A recurring motif within White Bear are the bystanders with their mobile phones, possibly referencing the “bystander effect” we see in real life. As Victoria, the protagonist, is chased by the ruthless “killers”, the bystanders are glued to their phone and constantly filming her instead of helping her despite having superior numbers. Many take enjoyment in the act, with some even continuing to film the “dead” body at the gas station. To take it to another level, many continued to enjoy filming Victoria as she was being drilled to a cross. Despite Victoria’s cries and pleas, the most senseful form of reaction she gets is that of laughter. With the use of a high- pitched metallic soundtrack, similar to that of horror movies, tension and fear is created, evoking considerable unease in viewers.



Fig. 1: Victoria running from the Killers while being filmed by “bystanders”



Fig. 2: Victoria being tortured

This, without a doubt, seems morally wrong, especially from a Kantian point of view. How can one imagine a world where rational beings allow others to suffer while they watch in enjoyment? It goes against the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) as it is completely illogical for it to become a universal law, making it morally wrong. Moreover, mobile phones, technological devices meant to help humanity, have instead turned humanity upon itself. By filming Victoria as she tries to escape the killers, the bystanders are treating her as a mere instrument, a form of entertainment. Victoria has become a means to an end, which is the bystanders enjoyment, instead of an end itself. Her basic dignity and human value has been completely neglected, her suffering turned into a show for others.

Though it is said that it was the mobile phones that turned the people into bystanders, it is revealed that it was in fact not the case, and the entirety of the so-called killers and bystanders story was fake. Instead, it was an act to punish Victoria for her previous crimes and thereby to serve justice. The visitors of White Bear Justice Park chose to utilise their mobile phones to film Victoria's suffering, and not that they were under the influence of a radio signal. This proves that technology was not the proponent in the desensitisation and eventual loss of humanity, but a tool used that showcases the desensitisation and immoral treatment of Victoria by the bystanders. Technology was not the problem, but humanity's loss of empathy for others. The ethical conflicts regarding justice will be further elaborated on in Chapter 3.2.

Similarly, in *Shut Up and Dance*, Kenny, the protagonist, and others are blackmailed and forced through gruelling mental torture, running errands from place to place, or their secret would be leaked out. Kenny was forced to rob a bank, to the point that he wet himself. He even had to fight another fellow victim to the death. Such tasks go against Kant's first formulation (Kant, 1785) of universality, as such acts like stealing and killing are not possible to become a universal law and thus morally wrong.



Fig. 3.1 and 3.2 depicting Kenny robbing the bank

In the closing scenes of the episode, the song, "Exit Music (For a Film)" by Radiohead echoes the lyrics "Now we are one in everlasting peace, possibly referring to the victims finally able to heave a sigh of relief after giving up the demands of the kidnapper, thus protecting their secrets

However, this is in heavy contrast to the visual imagery we see, as regardless of their actions, the victims' secrets are still leaked by their

tormentors. The suffering of the victims as they receive the consequences of their actions, paired with the smiling “troll face” picture they receive, implies that the blackmailers had possibly been enjoying watching their victims suffer. Just like Victoria in White Bear, the victims had become the play toys of the blackmailers, going against the Humanity formulation (Kant, 1785).



Fig. 4: Kenny in the final scene of the episode

The fact that the blackmailers are able to hack through the computer systems might mean that they have experience in coding or programming. Such skills can heavily benefit society, for example designing apps or websites to help people improve their daily lives. Instead, technology that could have been used to help others was used to harm others. From the trojan horse that infected Kenny’s laptop, to the GPS systems used to track down victims, all these show how dangerous the technologies we use are if they are applied through the wrong hands. Thus, this enforces the point that technology was a malicious tool due to the desensitisation of the blackmailers, and not the cause of the desensitisation of the blackmailers, bringing to light the loss of humanity was not due to technology, but humans themselves.

Particularly, during the fight, the scenes rapidly transition between the desperate dialogue and interactions between Kenny and the other man and the perspective of the drone. Such editing showcases the helplessness of the victims, as to how they are constantly being watched by their tormentors at every moment using technology. Coupled with the irony of the

ending song, the sadism, desensitisation and loss of humanity of the blackmailers is accentuated.

Interestingly, a similar form of sadism is seen again in The National Anthem. For the sake of the Princess, the public, under the media's influence, has become desensitized to Prime Minister Callow's suffering, pressuring him into giving in to the demands of the kidnapper.

Having sexual intercourse with a pig is morally wrong, as once again, it goes against the Universality formulation (Kant, 1785). Yet, the public seems desensitized to this fact. The media, social media in particular, was effectively utilised to spread sensationalist headlines, heavily influencing the public and desensitising the people to Callow's suffering. As seen in a discussion among journalists and workers of British Media Company UKN, they decided to go against the DSMA-Notice issued by the government, due to constant pressure by the public and competition from rivals. Technology, in this case being mass media, could have been used to provide support for Callow and his administration in dealing with the crisis, yet technology was used wrongly at such vital times. Whether or not it was to popularise their company to earn more revenue, or truly document news, many journalists failed to realise or ignored the consequences of their actions, reporting the incident in an exaggerated way, instead of giving balanced viewpoints and encouraging the public to not spread rumours.



Fig. 5: Callow before he is about to engage in sexual intercourse with a pig

Though initially sympathetic, public opinion quickly changed once the media company UKN received a severed finger, supposedly Princess Sussanah's, from the kidnapper. The media once again capitalised on this, creating attention-grabbing captions to garner views, failing to recognise the implications on Callow. Callow had become an instrument for the media, a source to generate views and revenue, completely disrespecting his human value and dignity. Their immoral actions, by Kantian standards, have caused the public to become very narrow-minded, neglecting Callow's suffering.

Some of the public liked the princess and hence decided to treat Callow as an instrument to ensure their happiness. Sadly, most purely wanted to watch the Prime Minister's humiliation for entertainment. When the live broadcast was streamed, the streets of London turned empty, with everyone in their homes to watch the broadcast. The streets were so empty that no one realised the princess was released 30 minutes before the broadcast began. Despite the message before the broadcast to deter the public from viewing, many continued so, some even cheering and recording the entire act down. They have completely neglected Callow's basic human value and dignity, and instead took his humiliation as their entertainment. Despite many feeling bad for Callow, they still continued watching the broadcast, most likely out of morbid curiosity. All this points towards desensitization of the people due to the media's influence. The abuse of power by journalists and media companies for personal benefit, played with humanity's curious nature, compelling the public to watch the broadcast even though it was a demeaning act. One with a sense of humanity would not watch the broadcast out of respect for Callow, but over 1.4 billion worldwide viewed it live.

In addition, the juxtaposition between the viewers' engrossment and Callow's suffering during the broadcast, paired with the climatic music, heightens the feeling of disgust of the act, simultaneously emphasising the desensitisation of the general public. Combined with the image of Princess Sussanah lying on a bridge without being noticed by anyone for a considerable amount of time, it stresses the point of how the public was so

captivated by Callow's live act, that so little noticed the hostage had been released. A form of dramatic irony, this further reinforces the desensitization of the people to Callow's suffering and their loss of humanity.

In Nosedive, those at the top are given more benefits than those at the bottom, and thus effectively can control how society as a whole functions. The elite use this to discriminate against those of lower-credit scores instead of helping society progress further, eventually leading to societal wide desensitisation to others' suffering.

Susan's husband had contracted pancreatic cancer and was in grave condition. Yet, he was rejected experimental treatment as his score was 4.3, lower than another person's 4.4. Those of higher scores are seen as better beings, which might not necessarily, and hence supposedly deserve more than the rest. Such principles are morally wrong, as it is impossible to imagine an universal law whereby people are rejected crucial medical help just because they are slightly lower in the social ladder. The people have become too class discriminatory, and are hence desensitised to the fact that a human's life is at stake.



Fig. 6: Susan, a low rating individual offering Lacie a car ride

Lacie also goes from Naomi's so-called "best friend" to being worthless. Naomi had never truly wanted Lacie to be her bridesmaid. That was only if Lacie had a considerably high rating. Once Lacie's rating diminished, Naomi's tone took a sharp turn, from polite to harsh, forcing Lacie to not come to her wedding, completely forgetting all the effort Lacie had put in to

come. This shows a simple fact of the world of Nosedive: People are mere instruments. One is only useful if one can bring benefits, such as increasing ratings. But once one's rating falls, just like Lacie, one is shunned and tossed aside by society. This completely violates the Humanity formulation (Kant, 1785), and also proves the desensitisation of people to others' suffering and circumstances.



Fig. 7 depicting Naomi rejecting Lacie and revoking her invitation for Lacie to be a bridesmaid

Unlike other episodes, Nosedive has a pastel colour scheme. Contrary to other episodes' dark, greyish colour schemes, the strong pastel colours of Nosedive creates a rosy, warm atmosphere, depicting a supposed "utopia". However, as previously mentioned, this is clearly not the case. Such irony highlights the monopoly of the meritocratic system by the elite, leading to discriminatory nature of Nosedive. The people thus slowly are desensitized to others' suffering, hence bringing to light the loss of humanity.

3.2 Ethical Conflicts

Throughout the course of the episodes, characters are met with ethical conflicts where they are confronted with a collision between the beliefs of the general public and their own personal circumstances and ideals. Technology once again, was not the direct cause of the conflicts, but the controversial use of technology that raised two major questions:

- a) What is Justice?
- b) Should one commit morally wrong acts for the greater good?

Justice

When first watching *White Bear*, most would feel sympathy and root for Victoria as she was completely clueless to her situation and why there were so many people out to “kill” her. However, after we find out that she filmed the death of an innocent little girl, Jemima Sykes, do we still feel sympathetic for her? Is justice served? In *White Bear*, the supposed “justice” was constant psychological torture for Victoria.

It can be deduced that the general public are Act Utilitarians. They are determined to punish Victoria to maximise utility, even if it may be going against traditional moral rules. The utility in this case could be firstly, punishing Victoria for her actions, and possibly also on the account that her boyfriend had committed suicide, thereby avoiding justice. At the same time, this possibly gets revenge for Jemima’s family. The torture that Victoria was put through is strikingly similar to what Jemima had experienced. It can be seen as the re-enactment of scene where Victoria filmed the murder and became a bystander. Except this time, Victoria is now taking on the perspective of Jemima Sykes, the poor innocent girl that got murdered, and the public has become the bystanders. Turning Victoria into a form of entertainment, could also additionally generate revenue while allowing the public to quench their thirst of vengeance. Simultaneously, it deters others from committing similar crimes, hence ensuring security and protecting the innocent. Therefore, due to the many benefits, the use of technology to punish Victoria is morally right.

But, there is a certain feeling of “wrong”. Every night, Victoria’s memory is erased, thus she forgets everything she had done. Then, is the Victoria we see in *White Bear*, the same Victoria that filmed the cruel murder of Jemima? Can she truly be considered guilty?

If one was to assume that it is not the same Victoria, then without a doubt, the actions of the people are most definitely wrong, as they would be torturing an innocent person, an illogical thing to do in a Kingdom of Ends.

If it is the same Victoria, then the owners and visitors of White Bear Justice Park are not respecting Victoria's basic dignity and human value. The owners and visitors are treating her as a form of tool, and not an end in itself. As said, for the owners, she might help bring revenue. For the visitors, Victoria is a form of entertainment. Though she may have committed heinous crimes, she still possesses fundamental rights innate to a human and thus is still deserving of respect. She is human after all, and is thereby imperfect by nature.



Fig. 8 Showing the owners and visitors to White Bear Justice Park

This is clearly seen in the final scenes of the episode, where Victoria was shown the truth. In the theatre, music is unheard of, so viewers can only hear the cries of Victoria and the boos of the crowd. Despite just learning of the truth of Victoria, it is easy to still feel sympathy for her. The lack of music brings us closer to the suffering and agony of Victoria. Despite this, she is being constantly booed at with vulgarities being hurled at her.

Later on, as Victoria is transported back to the house, the camera rapidly switches between her perspective in the plastic carriage and the crowd shouting and throwing insults. The recurrent camera switch between Victoria's helpless sobs and the crowds' shouts, portrays Victoria in a position of weakness, as being wrongly humiliated, evoking sympathy within viewers. In such scenes, her more human side is revealed, that she is not just a merciless murderer.



Fig. 9 Showing Victoria being brought through a crowd and being shamed and mocked

Yet, all this happens just right after the viewers learn of Victoria's gruesome deeds. This contrast begets the question: What is justice? If it is in the name of "justice", are all actions permissible? There is no certain correct answer to this question due to the conflict between the Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776) and the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785).

Technologies like the device used to delete Victoria's memory or the mobile phones used by the bystanders, supposedly allowed justice to be served. Instead, it has further put viewers at a loss, pondering what truly is the right way to treat criminals. For many who have a strong faith in conventional ideals of justice and fairness, the rise of such dilemmas can be rather frightening, hence the "horrors" surface.

Likewise, in *Shut Up and Dance*, viewers might initially feel sympathy for Kenny, until it was revealed he was actually masturbating to child pornography. Technology, in this case computer viruses, was utilised to put Kenny and others through psychological torment, forcing them to carry out tasks to protect their secret, only to still release it in the end. Is this justice?

Kenny's secret was already hinted at the start of the episode during his conversation with the little girl, showing us Kenny could possibly sexually harass children given the chance. By invading his privacy and punishing him severely, children are protected from being hunted down by pedophiles

like Kenny at the expense of Kenny's suffering, showing the utilitarian nature of the hackers.

But, is the punishment just? The "anti-virus software" was called "Shrive", which means to confess your sins to a priest. Possibly, the hackers saw themselves as the priest punishing others for their sins. However, by blackmailing, the hackers are not respecting the autonomy of others, infringing on their basic freedom. Kenny was forced to rob, Kenny was forced to steal. Such acts are clearly morally wrong by Kantian standards. It is impossible to imagine a world where stealing and killing are widely accepted as a universal law. Then, how does forcing others to commit crimes serve justice?

Perhaps, it is the psychological torture of the act. Throughout the entire episode, Kenny is shown to be extremely conflicted, frequently breaking down into tears from the anxiety. While robbing the bank, he was quivering non-stop and even wet his pants. When forced to fight the other man to the death, Kenny attempted to kill himself as he could not take it any longer. Throughout these scenes, music is omitted, so that we can only hear Kenny's cries. This makes it clear that Kenny was doing all of this against his will, as he was so reluctant to carry out the demands of the hackers. His suffering and mental conflict thus becomes more apparent, making viewers sympathize with him, even after learning of the act he had committed that got himself into this entire problem. This makes Kenny feel more human despite his sins.



SOURCE: A STILL FROM BLACK MIRROR

Fig. 10: Kenny panicking as he is extremely reluctant to rob the bank

Even after all of this, Kenny and the other victims' secrets were still revealed. With the “troll face” sent to each of his victims, it shows that the hacker has become the puppetmaster, with the victims being the marionettes who had to do his bidding, their suffering becoming his entertainment. If such is truly the case, then just like Victoria, Kenny and others have become another instrument, his human value and dignity completely forgotten. Thus, the hackers' actions are undoubtedly wrong.

However, Kenny and others have committed serious sins, and therefore should they not be punished? By regular standards of punishment, perhaps they would not be able to truly repent. But, how can one be so sure that the judgment passed is just? How are we, as imperfect beings, fit to judge others? Although it does maximise utility, there are clear infringements of the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785). In that case, what is the right way to treat people who have committed such socially unacceptable acts?

Similar to *White Bear*, *Shut Up and Dance* presents the cold hard truth of justice: there is not one truly right way that serves justice, as due to different perspectives, conflicts are sure to occur. Just like in *White Bear*, technology supposedly has allowed justice to be better served, yet it presents more ethical dilemmas. Such ethical predicaments thus instill a sense of uncertainty and mistrust in traditional forms of justice, therefore bringing the “horrors” of modern technology to light.

The Greater Good

The National Anthem and *Nosedive* presents the ethical conflicts from a different perspective, as to whether one should sacrifice oneself for the greater good.

In *The National Anthem*, Prime Minister Callow had two options. Either, he could save his dignity and humanity, and try to save the princess without giving into the kidnapper's demands, but potentially endangering the

princess. Or, negate his own dignity and humanity and give into the kidnapper's demands, but potentially save the princess.

Naturally, Callow was very against giving into the kidnapper's demands due to the immorality of the act. Having sexual intercourse with a pig could never logically become a universal law, making it wrong. If Callow were to do so, he would lose his basic dignity, as the indecent act would be broadcasted live on television for the public to watch. Other than the possible mental scars, it could also damage his relationships with his relatives and family, especially his wife, Jane.

However, after further threats were sent by the kidnapper, further pressure was mounted on Callow, with now public opinion drastically changed due to the influence of the media. If he were to forgo his basic dignity and relationships, he could possibly save the princess. In addition, he could increase the general happiness of the public, consequently his popularity and his chances of remaining Prime Minister. He could even protect his family and his life, as by committing the act he could avoid public backlash. From an Act Utilitarian standpoint, the second option is no doubt the right choice.

Eventually, Callow committed the act, and supposedly "saved" the princess. Whether or not it was truly to increase the general public's happiness, save the princess, or increase popularity, they are all possible reasons for his final choice. However, the episode showcases it as more of a reaction to public pressure. Leading up to the scene containing the indecent act, there is a constant camera switch between the public and Callow. The public seems extremely lighthearted and joyous, while Callow seemed extremely tense and looked to be reconsidering whether he had made the correct ethical decision. This places a further emphasis on the grim and tense atmosphere due to the predicament Callow had placed himself in. Callow undoubtedly would not have committed such an act, as possibly his own conscience, seen in previous scenes where he acted so violently when asked to give in to the demands, would have stopped him from doing so. The public pressure had finally gotten to him, leaving him without any other

choice, with the only free-will he had left was to question the morality of his decision.

Most likely, Callow regretted his decision. Right before the act, Callow could only utter the words, "I love my wife. May God forgive me," between sobs. This shows how sorry he was for doing what he was about to do, and was desperately begging for forgiveness. After the act, he immediately rushed to the toilet to vomit and break down into tears, expressing his disgust with himself. Out of shame, he could not pick up his wife's calls. With the scene of Jane avoiding Callow ending in the climatic music used during the broadcast, the gravity of Callow's actions are truly brought to light.

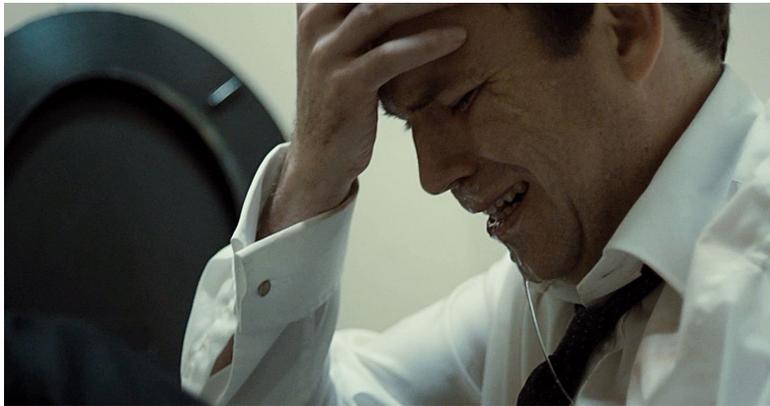


Fig. 1: Callow sobbing and vomiting

Once again, the question of whether Callow's actions were truly right is raised. If the indecent act with the pig was the right thing to do by maximising utility, then why does Callow and Jane feel such pain? It is thus evident that moral principles like the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) constantly plague Callow, always in conflict with the Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776) without a true right answer. This conflict instills uncertainty among viewers, thereby creating the "horror".

In Nosedive, the clear conflict between Kant's second and third formulations (Kant, 1785) and Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776), fleshes out its own form of "horror".

The system of Nosedive, from a Utilitarian perspective, is a perfect world. The rating system has motivated most to become polite, elegant members

of society. This thereby increases the collective happiness of society, as it possibly reduces the crime rates and incidents of socially unacceptable behaviours. Though this has created many relationships to become shallow, and rather fake, the outcome matters more according to the Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776).

Yet, it clearly infringes upon the autonomy of the people. The fear of ratings forces people to put on a fake persona to please society. As Lacie is arrested, the colours begin darkening to a much more familiar setting, possibly signalling the contrast between those within the system, and those who have fallen out of it. Lacie and another inmate begin hurling insults at one another, heavily contradicting the overall themes of elegance and politeness in the society of Nosedive. But, instead of expressions of pain, we see joy in their eyes. Ironically, it is in these moments of inelegance, between strangers that barely know each other, that everything feels much more real, less fake and less dream-like, and more human and genuine. Ironically, it is in a prison cell where criminals are being punished and controlled, is one no longer held back by the constraints of such a society, and can one truly live our lives genuinely as we want.



Fig. 12: Lacie is shown to be practicing how to laugh, highlighting the ingenuity

This series of irony further reinforces the point of how the society of Nosedive is nothing more than a prison, clearly violating Kant's third formulation (Kant, 1785). But, if it maximises utility, then is it not morally right? The system of Nosedive sacrifices the autonomy of the people,

possibly for the collective security and happiness of society. Such seems morally wrong, but is also reasonable in its own way. Either the people live freely, but risk collective happiness. Or restrict the lives of all, to possibly increase collective stability and consequently happiness. Therefore, there is no completely right answer to this dilemma, hence the “horrors” emerge.

3.3 Uncanny Parallels

Cancel Culture

In “White Bear” and “Nosedive”, viewers are brought to feel sympathy for the protagonist and the unfortunate series of events they find themselves in. However, as their sins are revealed, the question arises: Was the punishment just? How do we treat criminals or people who have committed misdeeds?

Similar to the current world we live in, there are many people facing similar scenarios for the sins they have committed. From general examples such as criminals and ex-convicts being shunned and shamed by some in the general public, there are also specific examples, one of which include Ellen DeGeneres, a famous comedian and talk show host. She was “cancelled” by the public as there were accusations of fostering and causing a toxic work environment. Former employees revealed and accused Ellen DeGeneres, by stating she was a completely different person off camera. According to them, she is demanding and ditches her “be kind” principles. Former employees also said DeGeneres would fire people who take medical leave, make racist comments and contribute to microaggressions.

From a Kantian view, DeGeneres’ actions are certainly morally wrong, going against the first and second formulations (Kant, 1785). However, could there be another approach rather than cancelling her? The media are in a way Act Utilitarians by ultimately bringing more joy than pain to society by cancelling out those being insensitive or mean. However, they are oblivious to the fact that the person getting cancelled is unable to retaliate

due to the power that the media holds. A person, as Kant says, has his own human value that needs to be respected. Is it right to ignore all the person's past good deeds just because of one wrong? We all know that as humans, we are imperfect by nature, so is it just to ruin someone's future and career due to his past mistakes, which are normal? Many might argue that is justified as the person was in the wrong anyways, but have we ever spared a thought for the person? We humans share a common imperfect nature, yet we have become desensitized to others' suffering.

China's Social Credit System

The world of Nosedive, while seemingly foreign, is already coming to life in China. The Score System in Nosedive is extremely similar to that of the social credit system in China, with one of the only differences being the people in Nosedive are rated by the public, while those in China are rated by the government. The Social Credit system in China is a method that the government uses to monitor and assess the trustworthiness of individuals and companies. Those that attain a higher rating are given access to many privileges. These include priority healthcare and or deposit-free renting of public housing, while a negative rating could see individuals banned from flights and trains. Similarly in Nosedive, those who have a rating close to 5 (around 4.5 and above) are given access to luxury housing, nicer rental cars and easier access to plane tickets.



Fig. 13: Citizens containing their names and ratings

China's Social Credit System poses similar ethical dilemmas as the society of Nosedive. A meritocratic grading system could encourage people to be more polite and conscious of their actions. People might be more motivated to do good for society, promoting important moral values thereby creating a more elegant society. However, If the government were to abuse their power, just as the elites of Nosedive propagate elitism, the consequences could be severe. As the grades are decided by the government, the government could deem certain actions that might affect the Chinese Communist Party's rule of China as wrong. Those who dare oppose would be graded lowly, and thus have their privileges stripped. The system could thus possibly be used to brainwash the masses, restricting freedom of expression and thought, consequently cultivating a generation unquestioningly loyal to the government. Furthermore, corruption could lead to an invasion of privacy and possibly leaks of private information.

Just as seen in Nosedive, on the surface, such systems might aid the progress of society due to the public's cooperation. This therefore maximises utility, as a better society can be achieved in the future. But, it also clearly infringes on the freedom of citizens, violating the Autonomy formulation (Kant, 1785). Once again, it is important to note such would only happen if the system and its technologies are abused by the people in power, possibly leading to the dystopia of Nosedive.

Media Power

The National Anthem reflects the power of the media and their insatiable lust for stunning headlines due to the people's obsession with the media and desire for shocking stories.

Throughout the episode, it is apparent a majority of the public were not truly sympathising with Prime Minister Callow or wanting to save the princess, instead there seemed to be a desire for the humiliation of Callow. From the cheers of the crowd at the bar, to the insensitive comments on social media, it is clear that the public has become desensitised to Callow's suffering, and are now treating his mortifying act as a form of entertainment. To cater to the needs of their audience, the media thus goes to great lengths to report stories that would captivate and shock, even going against moral principles. The media, which is widely accepted as a way to connect and educate the world, has indeed served its purpose, but for the wrong reasons.



Fig. 14: Cheers of the public

Similarly, in the world today, many situations of such can be seen. Following the recent River Valley High School Incident, many reporters swarmed the scene to take photos. One might say it is for the sake of journalism, but if photos are taken of students completely uninvolved with the murder, is it truly to educate, or for shock value? Many of the students

had just gone through a traumatic experience, yet their privacy cannot even be respected.

When online, the desensitisation and insensitivity of the public became even more apparent. The boy's body was not publicised in any articles online, yet it was sent to many Whatsapp chat groups and privately forwarded from one to another. The fact that a boy's gruesome death can become the enjoyment of others, proves an important point: many have become so blind to others' suffering that they can even treat it as a form of entertainment. Other than that, just like The National Anthem, many turned this tragedy into a joke, making insensitive comments without any respect to the victim's family.

The media, without a doubt, can change the way we think. It brings many benefits, such as a source of information or raising social awareness, and many others that can be seen in the past. However, more and more, the power of the media is seen to be frequently abused by media giants to garner views by satisfying the public's desires for entertainment, thereby generating income. Consequently, this desensitises people to real life incidents.



Fig 15.1 and 15.2 depicting insensitive posts and comments

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Through the lens of Kant and Utilitarianism, this essay examined and analyzed the four most relevant Black Mirror episodes to better understand the ethical issues with modern technologies. One such issue is the loss of humanity seen from a Kantian perspective, which is most prominently manifested in the desensitisation of the people to others' suffering. Many ethical dilemmas also arose due to the conflict between the Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1785) and the Principle of Utility (Bentham, 1776), posing questions on justice and the greater good. The resulting uncertainty in conventional moral beliefs instills fear and unease among viewers, putting them at a loss on what is truly morally right, thereby painting ethical "horrors". In addition, the world of Black Mirror shares many eerie similarities to our reality. Ranging from cancel culture, China's Social Credit System, to the power of the media, numerous uncanny parallels are consistently drawn.

Throughout Black Mirror, modern technology has always been at the centre of each episode, with it being portrayed in a negative light, as something that leads to a myriad of ethical issues. Viewers thus come to the simple conclusion that technology is a major proponent of society's many problems. If that is the case, then should Man let go of technology?

To this, the series does not provide a clear answer. Instead, it shows us the true reasons for Man's ethical dilemmas: Man. In fact, technology is merely a tool, not the direct cause of the many ethical implications seen in Black Mirror and real life. It is the abuse of technologies, due to the selfish nature of Man, wanting one's benefits over others, leading to a variety of ethical issues.

Therefore, Black Mirror serves as a "moral reminder" to look within ourselves, and perhaps have a closer look at the devices we hold so dear. As when the devices power down, all we see in the dark reflection of the screen is ourselves.

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