

DEONTOLOGY IN AUGUST WILSON'S PLAY *FENCES*

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As an African American dramatist, August Wilson (1945-2005) strived to unveil the typical lifestyle that he witnessed in his community through theater. Anyone who is familiar with Wilson's plays may have heard of The Pittsburgh Cycle, or The Century Cycle, as it is also called. For those who are still unclear of its origin, The Pittsburgh Cycle consists of ten dramas by August Wilson that reflect different aspects of African American living in the 20th century¹. *Fences* is a play within the cycle which takes place in the 1950s. The troubled protagonist, Troy Maxson, deals with racial boundaries at work while attempting to overcome personal struggles in his own home. Unfortunately, the whole Maxson family seems dysfunctional. Troy's youngest son, Cory, feels unloved by his father while Lyons, Troy's older son from a previous relationship, is mocked whenever he needs to borrow money. Cory's ambition to be a football player and Lyons' dream of becoming a jazz musician do not fulfill Troy's expectations. Even Troy's wife, Rose, is neglected and cheated on. Different relationships in this play allow its title *Fences* to become highly symbolic. For Rose, a fence allows everyone to remain closely connected. To Mr. Bono, Troy's friend, fences keep people in, but they also shut people out. Lastly, Troy believes that building the fence around his yard is just another chore that must be accomplished. Could commitments to sturdy relationships also be a mere chore for the protagonist? Possibly. We may not know whether Troy's relationship with Cory is completely ruined by the time that Troy dies with his faults in 1965. Though his morals are complex, Rose still notices the good

¹ "August Wilson," The Theater of August Wilson, Pulitzer winning playwright now showing *Jersey Boys*, accessed September 03, 2017, <http://www.august-wilson-theatre.com/>.

qualities of her late husband by acknowledging that her son Cory is hard working, just as Troy had been.

Fences captures the essence of a realistic family living in the hill district of the Pittsburgh area during a troublesome time. Underlying themes of love, racial injustice, and hardship of chasing the American dream allowed Wilson's play to maintain its relevance throughout the years. *Fences* has another intriguing element though— one which requires a more thorough analysis of Troy's character. Through Troy's behavioral habits, August Wilson incorporates an ethical outlook that is often discussed in the philosophical discipline. In a standard ethics course, students may be exposed to a hypothetical scenario such as this: a man named Smith visits a sick patient in the hospital and, to the patient, Smith is a "real friend" for making such efforts to come to visit ². Each time this sick patient attempts to commend Smith for his concern, Smith rejects the praise and makes it obvious that his visits have nothing to do with any form of friendship formed with the patient. Instead, Smith only continues to visit because he believes it is his duty to do so. Smith's intentions exemplify what it takes to behave accordingly with deontological ethics. While reading *Fences*, it is easily observed that Troy behaves the same way while interacting with his family.

Imagine a father asking this of his son: "Liked you?... What law is there say I got to like you?" ³. Such a question seems almost too cruel and inconsiderate to conceive, especially in the context of a father-son relationship. Anyone who was spoken to this way would feel unloved— betrayed, even. What is more appalling is that this question implies

² Michael Stocker "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories" *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1976, 462.

³ August Wilson's *Fences* Act I Scene III in Kirsznner, Laurie G., and Stephen R. Mandell. *Portable Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*. (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning) 2010.

that the son should have already known that his father would see no reason to like him. Troy Maxson is the culprit, his son, Cory, an apparent victim. Their brief conversation, though cold-hearted as it seems, aligns perfectly with the basis of an ethical theory known as deontological ethics. In fact, Wilson's play exhibits numerous examples of deontological views! For instance, racial inequality in other aspects of Troy's life brings out frustration within him. Does that mean that Troy lets his emotions get the best of him, in this case? No, in fact, fair treatment of all people simply comes down to practical thinking. Troy's strict viewpoints regarding his obligations and his human rights disregard his emotions, thus making him a perfect candidate to follow in Immanuel Kant's non-consequentialist practice.

Deontology may seem like a foreign idea, but most people *are* familiar with its overall principle. Immanuel Kant's moral code focuses on an individual's duties, such as Troy's duties as a father, a husband, a worker, and a citizen. A moral action for Kant depends on one's ability to fulfill such duties in a non-consequentialist way. What does this mean? Simply put, a non-consequentialist ethic is one which emphasizes the intentions of an action over the results, or *consequences*⁴. It is also important to note that in traditional Kantian deontology, God is not the provider of an individual's obligations. To Kant, humans have duties because of two qualities: rationality and free will. A rational brain makes us aware of our actions while free will gives us the ability to choose what we do. Reasonable thinking is the only requirement to fulfill a moral action or obligation, for this ethical approach says it is wrong to allow emotions to gage whether an action is right or wrong⁵. I

⁴ Irina Filip et al. "Morality and Ethical Theories in the Context of Human Behavior." *Ethics & Medicine: An International Journal of Bioethics*. 2016, 84.

⁵ John Mizzoni, *Ethics—The Basics* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell), 2010, 107.

previously mentioned being appalled by Troy's question, ("...What law is there say that I got to like you?") for it suggests that he felt little emotional connection with Cory. Keeping this foundation of a person's responsibilities in mind, though, readers can recognize how Troy's attitude makes more sense.

Let us revisit Troy's obligations as a father. He mentions a few duties— including supplying meals, clothes, and a structured home— which make him a provider. It sounds like Troy must have *some* sort of emotional influence or desire to make sure his son is cared for, does it not? Believe it or not, this is not necessarily the case and Troy continues by explaining why. He says to Cory, "You live in my house...sleep you behind on my bedclothes...fill you belly with my food...'cause you my son... Not 'cause I like you! 'Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you!"

Deontological ethics enforce following imperatives, or commands, simply because doing so is morally right, no ifs, ands or buts about it⁶. As we can see, Troy does this in his role as a father. He does not succumb to the rhetorical consequences that could occur if he neglected Cory. Instead, he recognizes that his son is a person with rights, and uses his free will to respect him accordingly. In fact, Troy hints at a specific deontological principle that deals entirely with rights, which we will now consider.

Before their conversation ends, Troy gives Cory a bit of advice saying, "Don't you try to go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you" (*Fences* Act I Scene III Lines 118-119)⁷. If somebody does *right* by you, this would imply that he or she treats you justly and does not try to manipulate you. This

⁶ Mizzoni 2010, 109.

⁷ August Wilson's *Fences* Act I Scene III in Kirszner and Mandell, 2010.

idea correlates with one of Kant's categorical imperatives known as the principle of respect for autonomy. This principle urges us to treat others as ends in themselves, never as a means⁸. Troy may not seem so cold-hearted now, for he assures us, the audience, that Cory is dignified enough to be respected by others.

Other instances in *Fences* hint at the concept of fairness, another aspect of Kantian deontology. Inequality results from racial discrimination that Troy deals with at his job as a garbage man. From the beginning of the play, we can see that Troy feels underappreciated by his boss, Mr. Rand. In fact, he is so bothered by his lack of opportunities to be a driver, that he openly questions Mr. Rand's motives. Troy inquires why only white men get to drive the trash trucks. "What's the matter," he asks, "don't I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck" (*Fences* Act I Scene I Lines 26-29)⁹. Troy believes that anybody who can drive a truck ought to be allowed to do so. With this in mind, though, it is beneficial to point out that Troy's methods of getting promoted to a trash truck driver are not ethical, from a deontological perspective. After Troy gets promoted, Mr. Bono points out that Troy is not legally permitted to drive (*Fences* Act I Scene I)¹⁰. Audiences realize how deceptive Troy's methods can be, for he does not mention anything about not having a license to his boss. Immanuel Kant suggests that we ought never use others as an instrument to achieve an end goal for ourselves¹¹. Therefore, a traditional deontologist may question the morality of Troy's action, in this case. Since Troy did not relay the truth about his circumstance to Mr. Rand, he breaks both legal laws as well as moral ones.

⁸Mizzoni 2010, 111

⁹ Ibid Act I Scene I

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Immanuel Kant *Lectures on Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co.) [1780] 1979, 239.

It is understandable why Troy is concerned over inequality in the work place, the same can be said about his views on sports. Baseball is a prominent symbol in this play and, evidently, an important aspect of Troy's life. He is prohibited from playing in the major leagues, though. Rose attempts to console her husband, wanting him to understand that he was too old to play for the major leagues. She asks him, "How's was you gonna play ball when you were over forty?" (*Fences* Act I Scene III Lines 260-261)¹². Troy knows the truth, though. His age is the insignificant factor that his race completely overshadows. Though he once had the ability to be an amazing baseball player, Troy now feels robbed of that opportunity because he was, as he puts it, "not the right color" (*Fences* Act I Scene III Line 258)¹³.

When we view equality in Kant's ethical framework, there is a strong emphasis on the idea that all persons with rationality and free will have duties and rights. From this, equal chances ought to be offered to everyone as well. An example of how this works can be derived from Kant's opinion of capital punishment. He supports that practice with simple reasoning. In Kant's eyes, if someone commits a serious crime, he or she deserves to be punished, no matter what the circumstance is. That explanation seems practical enough. This is why Troy's frustration towards racial inequality is arguably driven by rational thought. In a similar way, Troy thinks that everyone who is capable of doing something beneficial ought to be allowed to, despite their age, race, or other contributing social factors. Troy *does* combat racial boundaries in his career when his boss promotes him to a

¹² August Wilson's *Fences* Act I Scene III in Kirsznner and Mandell, 2010.

¹³ Ibid

driving position. Playing baseball will always be an unfulfilled dream, though, for reasons that both Troy Maxson and Immanuel Kant would object to.

Troy's affair with a woman named Alberta shines a different light on his character and illuminates him in a way that is certainly *not* in accordance with Kant's duty-laden ethics. Troy sees Alberta multiple times and even has a baby with her. This is far from the worst of the situation, though. What makes Troy's infidelity even more gut-wrenching is that he asks Rose to raise the baby after Alberta dies in childbirth. Though Rose is furious when she finds out about the scandal, as she has the right to be, she is saint-like in her responsiveness to the child. Rose agrees to raise the newborn, and remains married to Troy despite the way he treated her. In this instance, Troy's actions seem to have more influence of feelings and less of rationality, which is the exact opposite of what Immanuel Kant suggests of us. James Earl Jones who played the role of Troy on Broadway said that the reason for Troy's affair was that "...he just wants..." ¹⁴. To *want* can imply many things like wanting intimacy; wanting freedom; wanting respect; wanting a better life, and so on. It is fair to say that Troy wanted all of these things, and felt dissatisfied with what he had. Troy's marriage to Rose puts morals into perspective. After all, as harsh as deontological ethics may seem, Troy's affair—which goes against categorical imperatives—turns out to be much worse.

All ethical theories provide certain rules that dictate behavior ¹⁵. Unlike utilitarian or social contract ethics, deontological ethics urges that we ought to consider the intentions of our actions, not the consequences. Doing this sounds simple. However, Kant's claim that

¹⁴Allison Keyes "Troy Maxson: Heart, Heartbreak as Big as the World." 2008.

¹⁵ Filip et al. 2016, 84

humans can fulfill moral duties without emotional influences makes this ethical theory seem uncaring. The example of a man named Smith shows such drawbacks to Kant's views for it emphasizes the lack of emotional responsibility within this specific ethical outlook. Troy Maxson's habits in his household align well with certain aspects of deontological ethics. Troy sees little significance in "liking" his son, Cory and believes that his obligation as a parent is solely to take care of his sons. Responsibility is significant to Troy and he makes that very clear in his wishes for his sons. Additionally, much like Kant, Troy believes that every person ought to have equal opportunities. In public, however, Troy's behavior falters when he tries to deceive his boss. According to deontological ethics, deception is a way of using others as a means to achieve a certain end goal, which is prohibited¹⁶. Despite Troy Maxson's inner struggles, he is still one of August Wilson's most renowned characters, with good reason. Troy is not perfect and it can be argued that he should have done better as a father and husband, but ethical influences can spark discussions that range from the values of duties to the significance of equality for all people, and these are essential conversations to be had.

¹⁶ Kant 1780, 239.

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