

Little Stories for Big Thinkers

Ethics and Philosophy for Curious Kids



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Chapter Four



The Jewel

Many years ago, a bright young student named Leah had the good fortune to be tutored by the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant.



Kant liked to talk to Leah about how we decide what is right and what is wrong.



One day while Kant and Leah were walking,
Leah found a jewel on the ground.



“It’s beautiful!” exclaimed Leah.

“Someone must have dropped it,” said Kant.

“I’ll bet they would really like it back.”



Leah spent the rest of the day looking for the owner of the jewel.



At last she found a boy named Dennis who recognized the jewel.

“It belongs to my cousin,” the boy said. “I’ll give it to her.”



Later, a woman asked them if they had seen a red jewel.

“Yes,” said Leah. “I gave it to your cousin Dennis.”

“But I don’t have a cousin named Dennis!” the woman exclaimed.



“It seems that the boy was lying,” Kant remarked.

“I feel terrible!” cried Leah.



“You have no reason to feel bad,” Kant told her. “You meant well and tried your hardest. This shows that you have good character. Good character is more precious than any jewel.”

“But I shouldn’t have given the woman’s jewel to that boy!” said Leah.



“You may have made a mistake,” explained Kant, “but you didn’t do anything morally wrong. You meant to do the right thing, and that’s what’s important.”

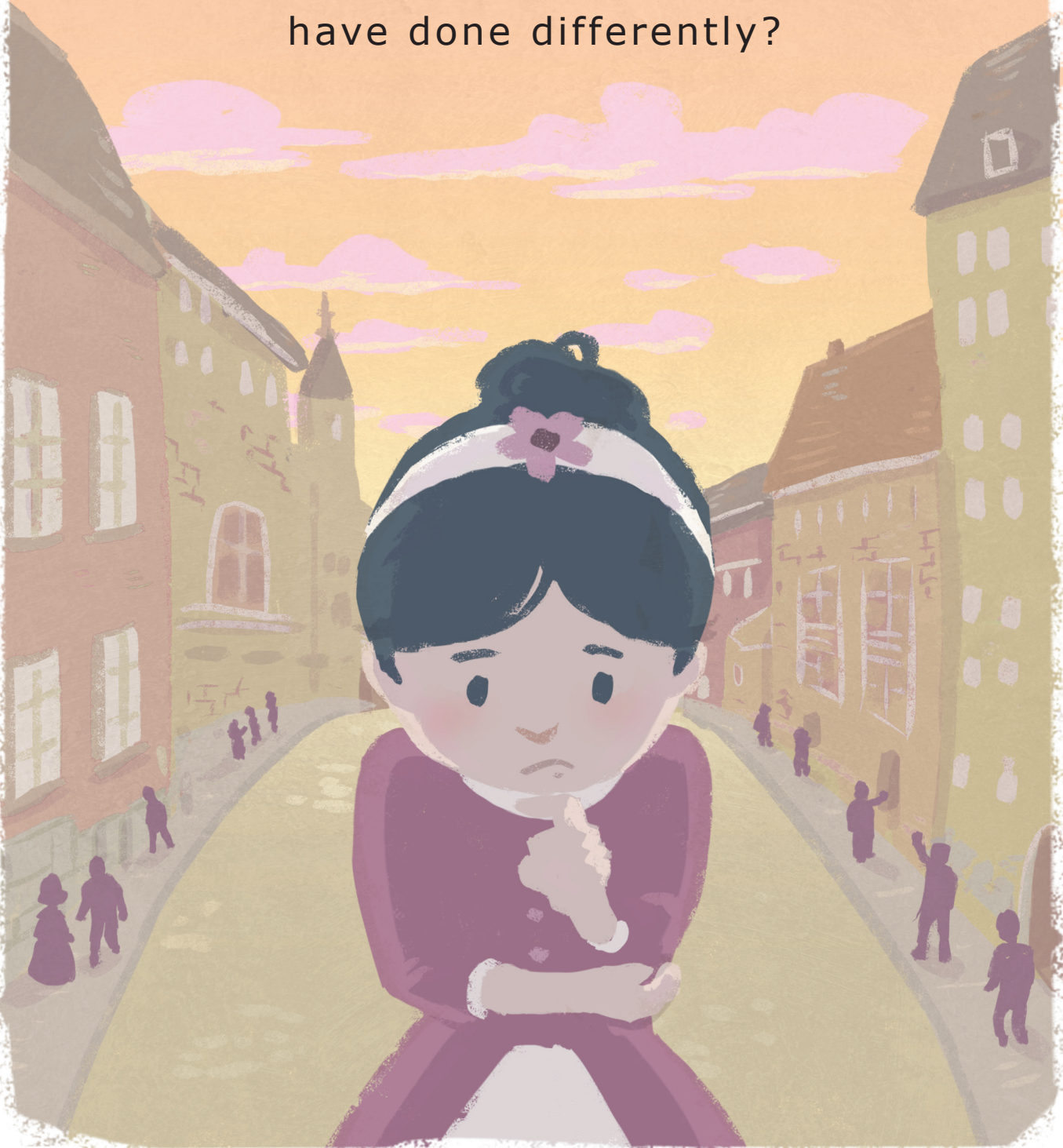


“How can I know what the right thing is?” asked Leah.

“That’s a great question,” replied Kant. “In my view, you should only do what you would want everyone else to do. If you wouldn’t want everyone else to do something, you shouldn’t do it.”



I may have meant well, but should I have tried harder to make sure I was doing the right thing? What could I have done differently?



Immanuel Kant

(1724–1804)

*“Two things awe me most:
the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.”*
– Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was a famous German philosopher. When he was young, he loved to go on long walks with his mother, who was widely known for her kind and generous heart. Kant tutored children in order to pay for his university studies, and the children became his lifelong friends. As an adult, he worked as a university professor. At the end of his career, he wrote a book about how we can make good choices. His neighbors always knew that it was three o'clock in the afternoon when they saw Kant taking his daily walk around town.

Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 1785

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even outside of it, that can be called good, without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other talents of the mind are not good without good will. Likewise, courage, resolution, perseverance, and other qualities of temperament that are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects may also become extremely bad if the will making use of them is not good.

It is the same with the gifts of fortune. Without good will, power, riches, honor, health, and even happiness inspire pride

and often arrogance. The sight of someone with bad will enjoying unbroken prosperity can never give pleasure to an impartial rational spectator. Thus, a good will seems to be crucial for being worthy of happiness.

A good will is not good because of what it does. It is not good because of its success in accomplishing some goal. It is good simply by virtue of its good willing. That is, a good will is good in itself. Considered by itself, good will should be valued much higher than the accomplishment of any goal. In fact, good will should be valued much higher than the sum total of all of our goals.

Suppose it happens that, due to bad luck, a good will fails to accomplish its goal. Despite its greatest effort, it accomplishes nothing, and only its good willing remains. Still, like a jewel, this good will would shine by its own light as a thing that has its whole value in itself. Its usefulness or uselessness can neither add nor take away anything from this value.

The use of good will is like the setting of a jewel. A jewel's setting (the metal base that holds it) enables us to handle the jewel more conveniently in everyday life or to attract the attention of those who are not yet connoisseurs. But those who are true connoisseurs do not need any setting to appreciate the value of a jewel. Nor can the setting of a jewel ever determine the jewel's value.

But what sort of willing enables us to call the will good in itself, without concern for its use? It is willing that conforms itself to the universal law. The universal law is this: You should