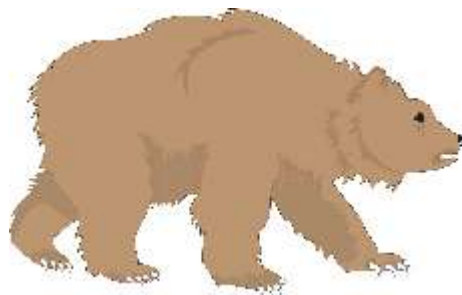


Ursus Philosophicus

Essays dedicated to Björn Haglund on his sixtieth birthday



The Good Woman of Madison County

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Abstract

This paper analyses the character Francesca Johnson in the movie *The Bridges of Madison County* from the perspective of virtue ethics and asks whether she is virtuous or weak-willed. It also discusses if her situation can be described as an ethical dilemma.

This paper takes an example from fiction and discusses what can be said about it from the perspective of neo-aristotelian virtue ethics. The example is Francesca Johnson from the movie version of *The Bridges of Madison County*.¹

I do not claim that virtue ethics is the only way to look at this example. In fact, the very person I have stolen the idea of using this movie as an example in ethical discussion from, Nina Rosenstand,² puts it under the heading “Kant’s Deontology”. A good work of art lends itself to many different interpretations.

1 The Story

The part of the movie *The Bridges of Madison County* that is relevant here takes place 1965 in Madison County, Iowa. Francesca Johnson was born in Italy where she met her husband Richard shortly after the war. She worked as a teacher for a while before becoming a farmer’s wife full-time. She has two teenage children, a son and a daughter.

The rest of the family has gone to the Illinois State Fair for a couple of days, and Francesca is alone. Robert Kincaid, a photographer sent by *National Geographic* to write an article about the covered wooden bridges in Madison County, comes to the farm to ask for the way to one of these bridges. Francesca accompanies him there. At the bridge Robert gives her a bouquet of wild flowers. She invites him to dinner. During the evening they discover that they like each others company, among other things they

share an interest in poetry. Francesca reveals that her life has not become what she dreamed of when she was young.

When Robert has left Francesca goes to the bridge he is going to take pictures of next morning and puts up an invitation to him to come to dinner. Robert sees the invitation and accepts it. That evening they dance close on the kitchen floor and then make love in front of the fire – for a start ... Francesca writes in her diary: “And in that moment everything I knew to be true about myself until then was gone. I was acting like another woman, yet I was more myself than ever before”.

Next day they take a trip sufficiently far away to ensure that Francesca is not recognised. At breakfast the next morning Francesca is upset. She asks what is to become of her and what she really is to Robert. He replies that he does not want to need her because he cannot have her, but what he feels for her is something completely new to him, something unique. “[...] that all I’ve ever done in my life has been making my way here to you”.

They are interrupted by a neighbour and Robert hides. When the neighbour finally leaves Robert asks Francesca to leave her home and come with him. Francesca starts packing her bags. But at the candle dinner that evening Robert realises that she is not going to leave with him.

Francesca: No matter how many times I turn it over and over in my mind, it doesn’t seem like the right thing.

Robert: For who?

Francesca: For anyone. They’ll never be able to live through the talk. And Richard [Francesca’s husband]. Richard will never be able to get his arms around this. It will break him in half. He doesn’t deserve that. He’s never hurt anyone [...]

[....]

Francesca: And my kids.

[..

Francesca: ...] Carolyn is only 16. If I leave, what does that say to her?

Robert: What about us?

Francesca: You have to know deep down, the minute we leave here, everything will change.

[...]

Francesca: No matter how much distance we put between ourselves and this house I carry it with me. I ..., I feel it every minute we're together, and I will start to blame loving you for how much it hurts. And even these four beautiful days will seem like something sordid and a mistake.

[...]

Francesca: We are the choices we have made, Robert [...] When a woman makes a choice to marry and have children, in one way, her life begins, but in another way, it stops. You build a life of details, [...] But you never think ..., you never think love like this is going to happen to you.

[..

Francesca: ..] but ..., if we leave, we lose it. I mean, I can't make an entire life disappear to start a new one. All I can do is to try to hold on to both of us somewhere inside of me.

As he leaves Robert says: "I'll only say this once. I've never said it before, but this kind of certainty comes just once in a lifetime."

The next day Francesca's family is back. "You all came home, and with you, my life of details. A day or two passed, and with each thought of him, a task would present itself like a life-saver, pulling me further and further away from those four days. I was grateful. I felt safe."

Francesca sees Robert one last time, when she is in town shopping. She comes very close to running out of her husband's car and to Robert, but he drives off in the rain.

"What Robert and I had could not continue if we were together. What Richard and I shared would vanish if we were apart. But how I wanted to share this." Francesca seeks the acquaintance of a Miss Renfield, a woman who is more or less ostracised by the community because she has been found out having an affair with a married man. It is a long time before Francesca tells her about her own affair with Robert. "But for some reason being with her somehow made me feel it was safe to think about it, to continue loving him. [...] If not for him, I don't think I would have lasted on the farm all those years."

2 Virtue amongst Bridges

The question we primarily look at here is whether Francesca, as she appears in this story, is a good person, which, in virtue ethics, is asking whether she possesses the relevant human excellence (virtue, *arete*). First, however, a caveat about the story.

2.1 The One, True, Love

There is a myth haunting Hollywood, the Myth of the One and Only Great Love, i.e. the idea of each person's one and only, really true, love in the encounter with that person's uniquely right mate; to find this true love is an important part of a meaningful life.

If we were to discuss Robert we would have to face the normative side of this myth, the principle that this Great Love is worth any sacrifice. Robert comes dangerously close to making such a claim.

My calling it a myth shows that I do not care much for this idea, but to discuss the moral character of Francesca we can put it aside. It is sufficient to say that Francesca gets a close contact with Robert, a contact that quickly develops into a kind of love and erotic attraction that is stronger than any she has felt before, and that her brief encounter with Robert will be important to how she looks at the rest of her life.

2.2 Between Virtue and Vice

Back to the main question: Is Francesca a truly good person, i.e. does she possess the human excellences? No, she is not. If you have the excellences of character your emotions and your judgement are in harmony. In Francesca they are in strong conflict.

This, of course, is not saying that Francesca is a morally bad person. It is just that she does not reach the ideal of excellence. Aristotle introduced this sequence of types of moral character (from the very good to the very bad):

Excellence (*arete*, virtue) – *Enkrateia* – *Akrasia* – Vice (*kakia*) – Brutishness

Formally this sequence is introduced only for the faculties dealing with physical pleasure and pain, but it is easy to generalize it to the other faculties that the virtues of character are concerned with.

The positions between virtue and vice are particularly relevant here. To be typically **enkratic** (*enkrates*; self-controlled, continent, strong-willed) is to know what is right to do, and to be able to perform it, though often only after an inner struggle, because one's inclinations are in conflict with the judgement. The typically **akratic** (*akrates*; un-(self)-controlled, incontinent, weak-willed) also knows what is right and what is wrong, but often do not manage to do the right thing because they are overcome by their contrary inclinations.

The traits of character that are of most relevance to the case Francesca are **responsibility** and **temperance**. Here the excellence temperance is a slightly enlarged version of *sophrosyne*. It includes a disposition (*hexis*) to spontaneously letting ones erotic and romantic inclinations pay heed to, and be formed by, ones practical wisdom (*phronesis*). The responsibilities that chiefly are in play in the story are those Francesca has to her husband and her children. It is clear that Francesca accepts that they have strong claims on her. For the moment we will not question the validity of these claims.

Temperance and responsibility of course interact with each other. This is particularly relevant to Francesca's situation. The excellence of character that is relevant here can be called **temperate responsibility**.

How does Francesca fare with regard to temperate responsibility? I have claimed that her character does not reach excellence. But excellence is rare; Aristotle claims that most people fall somewhere between being enkratic and being akratic, with a tendency towards the latter – I must confess that personally I am no exception to this. Francesca also falls somewhere within the span between being typically enkratic and typically akratic with regard to the faculties that temperate responsibility are concerned with. By Aristotle's standards she is better than most people however; she is closer to being strictly enkratic than akratic.

What puts Francesca in the span enkratic – akratic is that her (sound) judgement has to struggle with her feelings; in the excellent and the truly bad there no such struggle. She is not typically enkratic, because the enkratic mostly do the right thing (although it takes an inner struggle) while Francesca acts wrongly to begin with; she cheats on her husband and plans to desert her family. What puts her closer to the enkratic than to the akratic is that she in the end, when she really consults her judgement, manages to do the right thing.

Another side of the state of her character is that she realizes the guilt she would feel if she deserts her family. Since acting genuinely wrong does not really come into play with the excellent, taking such guilt into account is typical of the span enkratic-akratic. The inner double life that Francesca lives after her affair with Robert could be another indication of her flawed character. Her wish to tell others about her experience when it becomes possible would then be somewhat redeeming.

When I follow Aristotle in claiming that Francesca's being closer to the enkratic than the akratic makes her better than most people, does that mean that I take it that most people in a corresponding situation would desert their families? Not necessarily, many of the more akratic might also stay with their families, but they would do it for the wrong reasons, e.g. because they are scared by the new and unfamiliar.

2.3 Do not Lead Yourself into Temptation

It could be argued that I have disposed of Francesca's virtue too easily. Aristotle has a level beyond human excellence, viz. superhuman excellence or godlikeness. To demand that Francesca should handle her strong passion without an inner struggle is that not to demand superhuman virtue? There are situations that are so horrible that even the truly courageous are scared. Should we not admit that there are feelings so strong that even those possessing the human excellence temperance must struggle hard with them?

That is as may be; it still would not save Francesca's excellence. It is not that Francesca has to struggle with her passion for Robert that is the strongest indication of the flaw in her character. It is that she allows that passion to arise in the first place.

Love is sometimes described as striking like lightning. Even if this sometimes happens it is clearly not the case with Francesca – her falling in love is a process (though not a slow one). It could also be argued that you can only be struck by that amorous charge if you have opened yourself to it, or at least not put up a defence against it. Therefore even instant infatuation is no excuse for one's virtue. If Francesca had possessed the excellence temperate responsibility she would, smoothly and spontaneously, and without any real inner struggle, have avoided the situation where she risks falling in love with Robert.

To be typically excellent is not to resist temptations – that is to be merely enkratic – it is not be tempted at all. An important part of this is the capacity to avoid situations

that contain strong temptations. That this is a constituent of excellence is clear from the way we develop our good character, viz. by practising doing the right thing in real life, until this becomes perfectly natural to us. This process would suffer if we frequently fail to do the right thing. Thus, strengthening our ability to discern and avoid situations that are so tempting that it is quite likely that we would fail in them, is an essential part of our moral self-education. There is no reason why this ability should not also be an important part of mature excellence.

So what would Francesca have done, had she possessed the human excellence temperate responsibility, in the situation where she, home alone, encounters an interesting and attractive stranger? Well, she would obviously treat him kindly and hospitably, but, at the same time, completely spontaneously, keep a clear distance to him. Kindness obviously includes that she helps him find the way to the bridge, and, as there are no road signs, it is hard to do this by just telling him the way. There is no need for her to go with him in his car however; she has the family's second car available. What she should have done was showing him the way by driving along in her own car and, when they got to the bridge, wave a friendly goodbye and go back home.

You might think that I am merely dodging the problem by using a coincidence in the story, the availability of a second car. Well, I did not invent that car; it is actually there in the movie. It is true, however, that a temperate and responsible Francesca should be able to keep an amicable distance to Robert even if she had to go with him in his car to show him the way. The dialogue and the psychological description needed to portray that are unfortunately far beyond the scope of my literary capacity.

This idea of what temperate responsibility amounts to in this situation has implications for what traits of character are involved in a good marriage. To uphold a distance to practically all, erotically interesting, acquaintances is obviously not an excellence in single life. It is a disposition that has to be put to work when the kind of relation (real *philia*) that a good marriage constitutes is well in progress. If you accept that this is an application of the virtues that is specific to marriage-like relations, you could argue that it can be made to work because there normally is a rather long period of deep infatuation at the beginning of such relations. It gives us a window of opportunity to develop this kind of erotic exclusiveness.

2.4 Blaming Society

Another objection to my giving Francesca a second rate moral character is that this depends on accepting the strong claims of her family on Francesca's loyalty (erotic and otherwise) as legitimate. But are these claims really ethically legitimate? Is it not the case that the notion of marriage that gives rise to them is completely unreasonable, a leftover from ancient sexism and collectivism?

It can be argued that Francesca really is an excellent person, but that she is trapped in a bad institution of marriage, in a society with a view of family and fidelity, that makes it impossible for her to actualise the good life she has capacity for as an excellent human.

Remembering the play by Brecht³ alluded to in the title of this paper you might state this objection by saying that Francesca is a good human being, but trapped in a, at least in some aspects, bad society. This forces her to live with compromises and conflicts that would not be a part of the truly good life she is capable of. A good society would give her space to live her deep passion without this deep anguish. This could be done by accepting erotic relations beside the marriage as in order, or by allowing divorces (where both parents keep in good contact with their children) as something perfectly natural.

This objection raises two questions that are too large for this paper. Let me put them aside first. The first of these two questions is how reasonable and ethically legitimate the institution of marriage really is, especially as practised in Iowa 1965 (we probably should take Francesca's Italian background into account too).

The other question I sidestep is how virtue ethics is to deal with the general problem of being an excellent person in a bad society. Aristotle does not give much support here; in his ethical texts he seems to take a society that is, if not ideal, at least reasonably good, for granted. So how would a virtuous person deal with living in genuinely bad circumstances? By withdrawing, or fighting, or compromising, or living a double life, or ...? The answer probably lies in the direction of the generally particularistic tendency of virtue ethics. There is not one answer. In different situations and societies different approaches will be right (least bad).

With that speculation we leave the two large questions and close in on the particular case: Francesca. If we now stipulate that the institution of marriage involved

is not ethically sustainable, and that a good society would let Francesca nourish and live out her passion for Robert, what are we than to say about Francesca's character.

The crucial point is that her family and the local community and, in some relevant sense, even Francesca herself, accept the prevailing view of marriage and fidelity, and that is not unreasonable of them to accept this view even if it actually is false. Further, it is reasonable of Francesca to believe that she will hurt her husband and children if she leaves with Robert – it is probably true actually – and that they do not deserve that treatment. This includes that she would unnecessarily hurt her husband if she were to tell him of the affair afterwards.

Granting this, it is hard to see that temperate responsibility would allow anything but Francesca's staying with her family. The question is whether she does this in the correct way. The short, secret affair with Robert and her inner double life afterwards, is that an excellent person's least bad way of handling a conflict arising out of a bad society?

This is a very hard question. It could be that a short, secret, intense, affair of the kind Francesca has with Robert is, under the prevailing circumstances, the least bad way to combine her concern with her family with an opportunity to live her erotic-emotional potential. Similarly, her inner double life afterwards might be the least bad way to deal with a bad situation, although I cannot help wondering whether a more active reaction might not have been possible, e.g. resuming her career as a teacher.

Another kind of objection is that a truly excellent person would not have gotten herself entangled in a kind of marriage that did not give her sufficient opportunity to live her erotic-emotional potential. To discuss this we would have to know more about Francesca's situation in Italy when she met Richard, and the movie gives us practically nothing to go on there.

3 Francesca's Dilemma

Finally we take a look at another aspect of Francesca's story, but still from the point of view of virtue ethics. Is Francesca's situation an example of an ethical dilemma?

There are two paradigmatic kinds of dilemmas: good-vs-good and bad-vs-bad dilemmas respectively. In a typical good-vs-good dilemma there is in the situation more than one, mutually exclusive, alternative that are equally right and best. As an example

of this take an editor of a newspaper who discovers that one of her journalists has plagiarized an article. If this was a first-time offence of an, otherwise good, journalist, it could well be right to show mercy and let him keep his job. However, it might be equally right to stick to high standards of journalism and have him fired.

Where is the dilemma in this? You do what is good and right anyway? Well, the dilemma is in what you do not do. The situation is such that you also have to abstain from doing something that is good and right. It is important to notice that in this kind of dilemma the mutually exclusive alternatives none is more right than the other, but they are right on different grounds, based on different norms and values (it is not like the utilitarian case where there are more than one method to produce the same amount of value). Therefore, whatever you do in this situation you must let down some values and norms that have an equally strong claim on you.

Good-vs-good dilemmas are not that exciting; to be in such a situation is not that horrible. More important here: Francesca's situation is not of this type.

In a bad-vs-bad type of dilemma all alternatives are wrong and bad. This does not imply that there is no way of knowing what to do in such a dilemma. On the contrary, it might be quite obvious what one has to do. Agamemnon has to sacrifice Iphigenia – otherwise they will all perish – but that does not make the murder of that innocent child right. In what sense can something be the obvious thing to do on ethical grounds, but still be wrong?

Aristotle's criterion of what constitutes the right kind of action in a specific situation is that it is what the excellent person would do in that situation. The first thing to note is that this is not a criterion stating right-making characteristics. To borrow terminology from the discussion about utilitarianism: it is not a criterion of rightness; it is more like a method of decision: 'Ask yourself what an excellent person would do in this situation'.

We also need some additions to the criterion. It should read something like this: "The right kind of action in a specific situation is the kind of action that an excellent person would typically perform in that situation, or would typically prescribe in that situation." The last clause is added because an excellent person can also give judgements on situations they would never put themselves in. (There might well be some kind of limit here. The Drop-dead reaction, i.e. "That you have managed to put yourself in such a

situation shows that you are so completely corrupted that I have nothing to say to your except: ‘Go to hell (preferably literarily)!’” might well be acceptable.)

Another addition is “typically”. It is typical of the brave to stay and fight and of the generous to give. Occasionally, however, the brave will flee and the generous will not give although they have resources and there are needy. And, they are doing what they should do in those situations, but, since these are kinds of actions that are untypical of excellence, we should not call them right without a further explanation (something like: “This is what one should do in this particular situation, but remember that this line of action is not paradigmatic for excellence, and that this should not be used as an example.”)

That the alternatives are not typical of the actions of excellence is not sufficient to make the situation into a bad-vs-bad dilemma. The situation has to be worse, viz that all alternatives are of kinds that typically are bad, i.e. of a type that excellent persons rarely, and only hesitatingly, would perform or recommend, and, even more important, all alternatives are actually bad in this particular situation. All alternatives are wrong in the sense that they are all bad (though one alternative might be clearly less bad). Like in an good-vs-good dilemma, you have to let down ethical values you strongly believe in.

The dilemmas most frequently discussed in ethics are **tragic dilemmas**; Agamemnon and Iphigenia has been mentioned, another example is Bernard Williams’ Jim & Pedro example⁴, and, why not another Meryl Streep movie, *Sophie’s Choice*.

Tragic dilemmas are an especially severe kind of bad-vs-bad dilemmas. All alternatives are really bad; you have to do something awful. Taking a clue from Rosalind Hursthouse⁵, let us say that in a tragic dilemma you have to perform some action that is so bad that it will scar your life. That you have to perform such an action will clearly diminish the degree to which your life can be called a happy one (happiness is here obviously Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, human flourishing, living well and being successful for a long period).

Is Francesca’s situation an example of a bad-vs-bad dilemma? Yes, her two options, walking away from her true love, or walking away from her family, are both bad. Is it a tragic dilemma? No, probably not. It is doubtful if she is worse off after her affair with

Robert. Her life was not that good before the event, and, although the romance makes a strong impression on the rest of her life, she manages to draw some good from it.

You might want another distinction, between dilemmas that are the result of the character flaws of the one in the dilemma, and dilemmas that even the excellent might find themselves in. With the latter kind you might make a further distinction between dilemmas that arise out of the basic conditions of human existence and/or pure chance, and dilemmas that are caused by the flawed character of others or a bad society. Those who want to defend the virtue of Francesca will say that her dilemma is of the last kind.⁶

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¹ Screenplay by Richard LaGravenese, director and coproducer Clint Eastwood, after a novel by Robert James Waller.

² In *The Moral of the Story. An Introduction to Ethics* (Sec Ed, Mayfield Publ. Company, Mountain View 1997).

³ Bertolt Brecht: *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (1943).

⁴ In Smart & Williams *Utilitarianism For and Against* (Cambridge UP 1973) pp 98f.

⁵ *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford UP 1999), esp chapters 2 and 3.

⁶ To comment on earlier versions of this text has been part of the examination of some courses I have held, and this has resulted in many helpful comments. By now I have no idea what I owe to whom, so I give a collective 'Thank you!' to my students.