

(Re)Defining Fairy Tales: A Deontology Ethical Approach to Oscar Wilde's Selected Fairy Tales

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Abstract

Authors often use fairy tales to impart their moral values and principles. This is commonly done by portraying their main characters, including their personalities, actions, and consequences. In some cases, authors use death as a moral lesson due to its connotation as a form of punishment for a character's misdeed. However, Oscar Wilde's fairy tales contradict the conventional aspect of death in classic fairy tales. His main characters experienced death or physical disfigurement despite their actions which readers would perceive as reasonable or morally permissible. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the theme of morality in Wilde's selected fairy tales through a Deontology Ethical approach. This study addressed the relationship between the personalities and actions of Wilde's selected characters and the consequences of their actions.

Furthermore, using Kantian Ethics, the study evaluated the moral permissibility of the characters' maxims underlying their actions. The findings showed that the personalities of Wilde's characters could be categorized into those who adhere to or oppose Kant's definition of personality based on their actions. The study also highlighted the varying deaths that Wilde's characters faced in the end. Additionally, the analysis suggests that the reasons behind the actions of Wilde's characters could be categorized into "for duty" and "for other means." At the end of this study, readers would be introduced to a different moral theory in understanding a character without justifying it based on the simple "right versus wrong" principle.

Keywords: Kantian ethics, deontology ethical approach, the goodwill, oscar Wilde, fairy tales

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INTRODUCTION

While fairy tales are neither virtuous nor primary examples of the way of moral life, they tend to help young readers to conceptualize the world around them. Authors often incorporate morality into their tales by portraying their characters which reflect their morals and beliefs. This is often done through the dichotomy of good and evil that provides readers with an experience in moral education (Brand, 2001). Such instances could be found in fairy tales from The Brothers Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales* (1812), later titled *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. In these tales, evil loses out to good, and thus, readers – especially children – are drawn to the good deeds of the protagonist.

In some cases, authors establish moral lessons in their work with the addition of grisly consequences for the actions of certain characters (Abler, 2005). Antagonists such as the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* (1812), the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* (1812), and the evil queen in *Snow White* (1812) are "rewarded" with death as a form of fair punishment due to their immoral or evil actions. Readers interpret the story based on their morality, which often acts as an unconscious behavior system when people make certain decisions or justify an action based on their standards of right or wrong.

However, Churchland (2013) argued that morality is subjective and stems from the complexity of an individual's interactions and emotions. Depending on where it originates, the conscience is where the concepts of right and wrong are programmed in everyone. This explains why some believe that morality is limited within the same society despite the significant variations. Nevertheless, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) had a different approach to morality. In his work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (1999) argued that one's action results from the internal effects of that reason towards oneself in advance of the act (p. 185). In other words, the reason for an action is subjected to the phenomena consisting of a series of causes and effects that occur at specific moments. These phenomena are comprehensible and do not follow any empirical laws or time. Therefore, based on Kant's interpretation of morality, the morality of an action is unknown to the person and can only be judged based on the result of an action that is expected to stem from the agent's will. Whereby their underlying intentions are sole of goodwill and free from any obligations or expectations.

Oscar Wilde's fairy tales have contradicted the central themes of the stories they evoke. Wilde's fairy tales ironically reject the typical happily-ever-after concept of classic fairy tales. In his fairy tales, Wilde would show readers why the main characters in his fairy tales would commit certain acts, whether to help others or gain something for their self-interest. Thus, a shift occurs when the characters make confident decisions that challenge the readers' morals and beliefs. In the end, the characters in Wilde's selected fairy tales experience death, denial, or physical disfigurement.

Nevertheless, the reason behind the deaths of characters is due to their moral obligations, where they had some form of expectations or desires and did something not out of their own will, or the Good Will, which states that morality is based on rationalism or reason. In his work *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1997), Kant states that anything in this world or beyond can be considered good without limitation only when there is goodwill (p. 7). An action is regarded as moral only if done out of one's moral duty, not sympathy, pleasure, or the desire for personal happiness. In the case of Wilde's fairy tales, there is a need to determine whether the actions of the main characters resulted from their goodwill – which may have benefited themselves, others, or society – and how this justifies the consequences the characters had to face towards the end of the stories.

Hence, the study aims to discuss the theme of morality in Wilde's fairy tales using Kantian Ethics. Through this research, readers are provided with an alternative approach to analyzing characters. Based on the connection between personality and action, readers could deduce the consequences of death or physical disfigurement that Wilde's characters experienced because of their actions. With the application of Kantian Ethics, readers would determine whether the characters' actions were committed out of the good will. As the theory suggests, the conduct and merits of action are not determined by the consequences of the actions, and rather it is a good will. As such, readers of Wilde's fairy tales would be provided with an understanding of moral theories that guide readers in making moral judgments when faced with situations of moral dilemma. This new knowledge could educate readers on applying suitable moral theories when making a judgment in a particular situation,

rather than justifying based on the simple concept of right or wrong. Besides, through the analysis of the characters' actions and their reasons using Kantian Ethics, readers could apply the principle of Good Will in their lives, whereby they commit an act solely out of their own will and intentions.

Research Objectives

This study aims to address the following research objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between the personalities and the main characters' actions from Oscar Wilde's fairy tales.
2. To discuss the consequences of the actions taken by the main characters of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales in a particular situation.
3. To justify the reason behind the actions that prompt the main characters of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales to make certain decisions based on Kantian Ethics.

Scope of the Study

For this study, five out of the nine Oscar Wilde's fairy tales are chosen. The selected tales are "The Happy Prince" (1888), "The Nightingale and the Rose" (1888), "The Selfish Giant" (1888), "The Devoted Friend" (1888), and "The Birthday of the Infanta" (1891). In these stories, the main characters commit specific actions that readers would perceive as morally good. However, in the end, the characters experience either death or physical disfigurement; these are aspects in classic fairy tales commonly used by authors to educate readers on the consequences of one's actions. However, "The Remarkable Rocket" (1888) and "The Young King" (1891) are omitted because the main characters did not die in the end because of their actions. Although main characters in "The Fisherman and His Soul" (1891) and "The Star-Child" (1891) experienced death and/or physical disfigurement due to their actions. The stories are not chosen because the characters go through trials that determine the morality of their actions; hence, there is no distinct indication of who provides or receives the moral treatments.

Conceptual Framework

In the first part of the analysis, this study examines the relation of the main characters' personalities in Wilde's fairy tales and the actions committed in the stories. As this study will apply Kantian Ethics (1997-1999), the main characters chosen for the analysis are the ones who commit the acts. In his work *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1997) suggests that the concept of moral duty or obligation itself consists of the "goodwill though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances" (p. 10). Therefore, Kant's definition of personality refers to an end in itself, whereby one's reason to commit an act is good to exclude others. The personalities of the selected characters are portrayed through various aspects of characterization, such as dialogues that display the characters' nature through their own words, descriptions, and metaphors of their appearance and behavior, and their thoughts and reactions at certain moments. The main characters' interactions and how the other characters perceive them are also considered because these two aspects reveal their personalities from different perspectives within the chosen stories. When a shift occurs in the plot, the characters begin to reveal more about themselves through their actions to respond to what the other characters say or do. With this, this present study examines the connection between the main characters' personalities and the actions they committed.

In the second part of the analysis, this study discusses the consequences of the actions committed by the main characters of Wilde's selected short stories, whether those actions are done voluntarily or not as a response to others. Their motivations and intentions to commit an act to leave an impact. Which eventually creates a shift at the climax that diverts the story in another direction. In each of the selected stories, the main characters face death their actions due to the decisions they made prior to committing the act. Based on how Wilde narrates his characters' deaths, this present study examines direct information of what the main character would expect when they decide to commit an act and the characters' subtle reactions to their surroundings which reveals the implications of their actions. In addition, the researchers in this present study

analyze the descriptions of the main characters' death as it possibly reveals the impacts of the actions committed by the characters.

In the third part of the analysis, this study intends to justify the reasons behind the main characters' actions of Wilde's selected short stories based on Kant's principle of the Good Will. In each of the five selected stories, this study investigates the reasons or motivations behind the main character's actions. These reasons explain the character's decision to commit an act and what made them proceed with the action. By identifying those reasons, the study proceeds to examine each of the consequences, which would then be utilized to reconsider the main character's action to verify whether the act is done out of the characters' own will or for the sake of others or society. At the end of the analysis, this study could form a conclusion that justifies the main characters' actions in Wilde's selected short stories. Kindly refer to Appendix 1.0 for the Conceptual Framework.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

This study aims to discuss the theme of morality in Oscar Wilde's selected fairy tales through Kantian Ethics. For this study, the selected tales are investigated accordingly, and the results are presented based on the research questions as follows:

The relationship between the personalities and actions of Wilde's main characters

Personalities generally reflect the thoughts and actions of a person in certain situations, including how one relates to another, how their values and beliefs prompt them to act in specific ways. Kant (2015) defines personality as the "freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature, regarded nevertheless as also a capacity of a being subject to special laws—namely pure practical laws given by his own reason" (p. 71). This means that one is truly free when their actions are determined by their own free will due to their underlying motivations and intentions.

Hence, the following sections categorize Wilde's characters into two distinct categories regarding the relationship between personality and action based on Kant's definition. The first category comprises characters whose actions and personalities adhere to Kant's definition of personality. These characters have demonstrated that they acted freely based on what they believe to be their moral duties. Another category is made up of characters whose actions and personalities oppose Kant's definition of personality, in which they did not act freely following their moral law.

Characters whose actions and personalities adhere to Kant's definition of personality

Based on the analysis, the characters under this category are the Prince, the Giant, and the Dwarf. These characters have demonstrated that they acted freely based on what they believe to be their moral duties. For instance, the Prince disliked seeing his people starving and feeling cold, for he believed their world should be as beautiful as his when he was still alive. This became the underlying goal that prompted him to commit various acts in ensuring his people could sustain comfortably throughout Winter. Moreover, the once selfish Giant became kind after realizing his shortcomings and then atoned for his selfishness. His desire to experience joy, along with the willingness to make amends, became the moral duty that prompted him to do so. On the other hand, the Dwarf's actions reflected his genuineness and kindness towards the children and the Infanta. He approached them out of pure intentions to befriend them, and this became his moral duty.

The Prince from "The Happy Prince" (1888)

In this story, the Prince was portrayed to be compassionate towards his people suffering from poverty. Before his death, he was a happy prince who had neither sorrow nor worries, as shown in the following excerpt, 'My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness' (Wilde, 2008, p. 8). Throughout his life, the Prince had lived within the comforts of his palace. Furthermore, he

never asked about the outside world because he believed it was as beautiful as his world. When his statue was placed on a high pillar overlooking the city, he realized that the people had suffered from poverty and were not receiving any help. The Prince was heartbroken by this and wept, for he believed that the civilians deserve to experience a bit of comfort in their lives instead of starving or feeling cold. As such, this belief prompted him to commit various acts of compassion. This included sacrificing the extravagant jewels adorning his statue to bring a little wealth to the seamstress, who had neither time nor money to treat her young son's illness—a young scriptwriter who was too cold and hungry to finish the script.

She was the little girl her father would abuse if she did not bring home the money. He also requested the Swallow deliver the gold leaves adorning his statue to the poor after sending the Swallow to go around the city before reporting what he witnessed to him. Albeit the Swallow's reluctance, the Prince was committed to carrying out the acts as mentioned earlier as means of elevating his people's suffering even though he would be at a loss. Therefore, the Prince's actions have reflected his personality as a sympathetic and compassionate character who was willing to sacrifice for the benefit of the needy.

The Giant from "The Selfish Giant" (1888)

As the title suggests, readers are first introduced to the main character, depicted as selfish. After seven years, the Giant returns to the palace and relaxes in the comfort of his territory. Only to find a group of school children playing in his garden without his permission; consequently, he became angry and chased them away while saying, "My own garden is my own garden, [...] any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself" (Wilde, 2008, p. 34). He also rejected their happiness by keeping them out with a wall he built around his garden and added a sign which read, "TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED." His actions emphasized his selfishness because he planned to take legal action against innocent and naive children playing in his garden. However, later in the story, The Giant transforms from a selfish Giant into a kind being who wants to experience joy. When he drove away from the children, he had unknowingly driven away the seasons that would have brought him joy and invited Winter to occupy his garden. It did not take him long to realize that it was his selfishness that had brought misery upon himself. Thus, the Giant declared to himself that he would atone for his actions by helping the boy climb up the tree and then knock down the wall to play in his garden whenever they wanted to. His actions also showed his willingness to admit his mistakes and make amends for his selfishness, and these became the moral law that prompted him to do so.

The Dwarf from "The Birthday of the Infanta" (1891)

The Dwarf is portrayed as a character who enjoys the simple things in life. Prior to the story's main events, he spent most of his life in the forest with his father, who did not love him and cared more about money. This could be shown in the excerpt "[...] his father, [...] being but too well pleased to get rid of so ugly and useless a child" (Wilde, 2019, p. 22). Nevertheless, there was no indication that the Dwarf was aware of how his father perceived him and still went on with his life running around the forest, appreciating the simple things he found joy in. During the story's main event, when he was brought to the palace, although being laughed mockingly at by the Princess and the other children, the Dwarf still approached them, thinking that they were genuinely happy to see him. The Dwarf's simpleness and genuineness are further emphasized when he falls in love with the Infanta, who gave him a white rose. When everyone in the palace was on a break, the impatient Dwarf began to wander inside just to see the Princess hoping that he could dance for her and make her laugh again. He saw the King's throne, ornate, and other riches inside the palace, but neither of them swayed his feelings towards the Princess. The Dwarf acted out of pure intentions based on these two actions, which became his moral law. His actions reflected his genuineness and kindness towards the Infanta and the other children, whereby he had to approach them if he truly wanted to establish new friendships with them.

Characters whose actions and personalities oppose Kant's definition of personality

On the contrary, the characters under this category are the Swallow, the Nightingale, and Hans. As Kant suggested that rational beings should commit an action as an end of itself, the characters mentioned earlier were chosen because they acted as means to something or someone else. For instance, the Swallow was loyal and stayed to help the Prince. However, this does not comply with Kant's definition of personality because the Swallow acted out of regret and guilt for disappointing the Prince when he declined the latter's request. Apart

from that, Nightingale searched for the red rose when the Student matched her idea of a true lover. This, however, opposes Kant's definition of personality because she believed that the rose would manifest her ideal true love through the Student, who was revealed to the contrary. In addition, Hans went out of his way to help Miller as a means of showing his gratitude. However, this contradicts Kant's definition of personality, as Hans acted out of the belief that friends should help each other and feared disappointing his friend.

The Swallow from "The Happy Prince" (1888)

Wilde depicts the Swallow as a loyal character that stayed with the Prince to help him carry out his acts of kindness. Initially, the Swallow was attached to the Prince because he thought the Prince looked so beautiful that he could not help but feel sorry when the Prince cried for his people. However, he only takes action when the Prince shows disappointment or sadness because he feels guilty or regrets making him that way. When the Prince asks for the ruby to be delivered to the seamstress, the Swallow informs the Prince that his friends were waiting for him in Egypt, and he does not like boys due to an incident with the Miller's sons always threw stones at him. Nevertheless, the Swallow does as he was told due to pity after seeing the Prince's disappointment. Seeing that his excuse made the Prince sad, he believes that it was his responsibility to help the Prince to feel happy. His attachment to the Prince makes him loyal to the Prince as he loyally remains in the city when he is asked to stay for a few more nights and help out the young scriptwriter and the little-match girl. Although reluctant to remove the sapphires, which were the eyes of the Prince, he still does what he was told when the Prince insisted, even though the Prince is aware that this would make him go blind. Eventually, although the Swallow is supposed to depart for Egypt as Winter comes, his attachment to the Prince makes him permanently stay, as found in the excerpt "[...] You are blind now [...] so I will stay with you always" (Wilde, 2008, p. 16). Abandoning his plan to join his friends, the Swallow continues to help the Prince by delivering the gold leaves from the Happy Prince's statue to the needy civilians upon request once the Swallow informed what he had seen. The Swallow's loyalty to the Prince, whom he befriended in a short amount of time, leads him to commit the actions as mentioned earlier. This form of attachment is proven when the Prince insists that the Swallow should leave for Egypt, only to have the Swallow say, "I will stay with you always [...]" (Wilde, 2008, p. 16).

The Nightingale from "The Nightingale and the Rose" (1888)

Nightingale is depicted in this story as a romantic character who believes that true love exists, which is the main reason behind her actions for the sake of the Student. When the Nightingale first saw the Student, she said, "Here at last is a true lover, [...] His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, [...]" (Wilde, 2008, pp. 21–22). Moreover, Nightingale admires his tearful declarations of all the things he would do if he could find a red rose for the Professor's daughter. Nevertheless, when he could not find one and cried that the girl would ignore him and how his heart would break, the impressed Nightingale said, "Here at last is a true lover, [...] What I sing of, he suffers—what is joy to me, to him is pain" (Wilde, 2008, p. 22). She thought the emotional description indicated that his emotions ran deep, for his "real" love contradicted her singing happy songs. Believing that the Student was the answer to the song of a true love whom she had been singing about, she makes every effort to search for the red rose, reflecting her perseverance and determination stemming from her strong faith in true love. Her values and beliefs are soon challenged when the red rose tree hints that she has to give up everything for the sake of true love, foreshadowing her demise. However, Nightingale's persistence resurfaces when she says, "Tell it to me, [...] I am not afraid" (Wilde, 2008, p. 25).

Hans from "The Devoted Friend" (1891)

As stated in the story, Hans is described as a kind and honest person who is also gullible and naive when it involves his friend, Miller. Throughout the story, Miller consistently indicates that true friendship is unselfish. However, his actions are perceived to be the opposite of what he preaches, as written in the excerpt "Real friends should have everything in common" (Wilde, 2008, p. 44) when he had been taking flowers and fruits from Hans's garden during his every visit. Hans, however, admires Miller for having such – what he thought was – noble ideas on friendship and eventually believes that this is the standard of what true friendship means. He does many things for Miller out of kindness because he believes it is his way of showing his gratitude towards his friend. This includes giving away the wooden plank he needed to repair the wheelbarrow. Plucking

all the primroses in his garden and filling up the Miller's basket; doing long and tedious errands or helping at the mill - carrying a sack of flour to the market, mending the Miller's barn roof, and driving the herds of sheep to the mountain - and even calling the doctor in the middle of the night after the Miller's son had fallen from the ladder. Despite all this, Hans prioritized his friends because of his strong belief in helping each other.

The consequences of the actions taken by Wilde's main characters

As mentioned before, Kantian Ethics suggests that for one's action to be deemed of goodwill, the underlying reason must stem from the agent's own will without the expectation that the outcome would achieve or accomplish something. Hence, as death is associated with a character's misdeeds, the application of Kantian theory in analyzing Wilde's selected fairy tales would demonstrate that justifying the character's morality does not necessarily depend on the simple concept "right and wrong." Instead, there is a need to consider how their intention or maxim enables them to fulfill their moral duties or obligations.

The actions of Swallow and Hans are for the sake of others in hopes that their actions benefit others. Despite their good intentions, they are unable to avoid their demise. For example, Swallow sacrifices his escape to Egypt due to his commitment to the Prince despite the lack of food and shelter to sustain the harsh cold season. On the other hand, Hans is committed to Miller, which eventually leads him to his death. Both of Wilde's characters demonstrate good intentions through their actions but cannot avoid death in the end.

Besides, the Prince and the Dwarf experience death as a result of heartbreak. The Prince mourns the death of his friend who had helped him, while the Dwarf is grief-stricken after learning the hard truth. Based on these observations, characters could die of a broken heart due to a sorrowful or traumatic event. In the case of the Prince and the Dwarf, their maxims lead them to their demise. The Kantian theory states that one's goodwill is still expressible if the act is done as an end of itself even though the agent fails to achieve their desired outcome.

In Nightingale's case, the events that led to her self-sacrifice were caused by the ideal concept of true love. Her death could be interpreted as the highest form of true love, whereby one is willing to endure or sacrifice for the sake of others. Self-sacrifice also contradicts the typical connotation of death. The Nightingale does not carry any malicious intentions or committed acts that would be regarded as punishable. However, Kant argues that suicide is not morally permissible because the agent is escaping from the natural law of life to avoid a more painful end.

However, the Giant's death shows that deaths in classic fairy tales are not necessarily associated with evil characters. Death could be a form of a happily-ever-after for characters whose actions are acknowledged as morally permissible. In this respect, the Giant's action is rewarded with an invitation to Paradise by the Child Christ. Due to its connotation as the final resting place for the benevolent, the Giant's death is an example that the aspect of death could be used as a reward for characters whose actions are deemed reasonable. From the perspective of Kantian theory, for the Giant's actions to be acknowledged as morally permissible, his will must encompass the goodwill itself.

The reasons behind the actions of Wilde's main characters based on Kantian Ethics

Kantian Ethics suggests that the morality of an action should be based on the agent's maxims or motivations that comprise the goodwill itself. In respect of this, the underlying reasons behind Wilde's selected main characters are categorized into "for duty" and "for other means" to determine if their actions are morally permissible.

For duty

For one's action to be morally permissible, the goodwill must satisfy two conditions – first, the agent seeks to achieve the desired outcome while renouncing certain circumstances; second, the agent's decision should

be governed by their moral laws. Based on the analysis, the characters whose actions fall under this category are the Prince, the Giant, and the Dwarf. In the case of the Prince, helping his people requires him to sacrifice his beauty, but he still proceeds to his decision. His moral principle drives this: giving away his wealth would improve civilians' lives if they could get what they need with the fine jewels and/or gold leaves. The Giant decides to forgo his selfishness before allowing the children to play in his garden. After experiencing the cold and loneliness due to his selfishness, his desire to experience joy becomes his moral duty, prompting him to correct his own mistakes.

Meanwhile, the moral duty behind the Dwarf's actions is his genuineness to befriend the Infanta. He has this intention when he decides to search for her in the palace, where the story highlights that he is not distracted by the royal family's wealth as he has an obvious goal in mind. In short, these three main characters demonstrate that their decisions are wholly determined by their moral duties or obligations. Even though they face their demise in the end, their actions are justified as morally permissible as they were able to express goodwill under Kant's theory.

For other means

In comparison, the reasons behind the actions of the Swallow, the Nightingale, and Hans were for other means. As Kantian theory suggests, one's will must encompass the good itself. Otherwise, the agent would be constrained to carry out an activity for the sake of something without any natural inclination. For instance, although the Swallow's actions do not express goodwill, they are performed upon request or command, making the Prince happy. Additionally, the maxim behind Nightingale's self-sacrifice does not express goodwill based on Kantian Ethics because she is giving her life up for the sake of the Student. In the case of Hans, his actions throughout the story are motivated by his desire to please Miller. This emphasizes his obligation towards his friend and that he does not commit acts for himself. Briefly, the characters' actions, as mentioned earlier, are motivated by other means, which compel them to act in specific ways. The underlying reasons for their actions to be morally permissible must stem from their moral laws relinquishing certain circumstances. However, the Kantian theory does not deny the characters' good intentions. As long as they desire to adhere to moral law and that their decisions are freely based on their reasons, their will could be regarded as encompassing the good itself.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings indicate that the personalities of Wilde's main characters in the selected fairy tales affect their actions as depicted in the stories. Based on Kantian theory, the actions of Wilde's selected main characters are governed by their intentions, which, in turn, reflect their personalities. Besides, the study has addressed the consequences of the characters' actions that contradict the typical usage of death in classic fairy tales often associated with antagonists. These include inevitable deaths after committing altruistic acts, a broken heart due to a traumatic event, self-sacrifice, and peaceful death. Moreover, the study's findings suggest that the reasons underlying the actions of Wilde's main characters could be categorized into "for duty" and "for other means." The Prince, the Giant, and the Dwarf are regarded as morally permissible because their actions are done for their moral duty, which expresses goodwill. On the other hand, the acts committed by the Swallow, the Nightingale, and Hans are for other means instead of goodwill due to underlying obligations constraining to act for the sake of other ends.

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Appendix 1.0

