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The Care of the Reaper Man: Death, the Auditors, and the Importance of Individuality  
Erica L. Neely

In Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, there is an ongoing battle between Death and a group of beings known as the Auditors. These beings strive to maintain order in the universe and dislike humanity and all its inherent messiness. Death, on the other hand, is rather fascinated by humans and sees value in the individuality humans exhibit. This causes tension between him and the Auditors, which comes to a head in three novels wherein the Auditors attempt to impose their view of order upon the Discworld: *Reaper Man*, *Hogfather*, and *Thief of Time*.

In each of these novels Death thwarts the Auditors by acting in concert with humans. His motives for this stem from an odd allegiance to the importance of individuality and care. Humans have different desires and beliefs; they are not all the same. While this may distress the Auditors, it is fundamental to the nature of humans – we are individuals and must be treated as such. To ignore this and attempt to deal with humans purely collectively is to be unjust.

This illustrates a more general tension between the individual and the collective. While humans are driven to form communities, we also wish to maintain our individuality; there is thus a question as to how to balance commitments to the group with commitments to the individual. One place this tension emerges is in ethical theorizing. While traditionally there is a push towards universalization in ethics, recently many have come to believe that our ethical thinking must recognize the embodied and individual nature of humans; we cannot impartially treat humans as essentially all the same. This position is echoed by Death in his battle with the Auditors; he knows that humans are inherently individual and this cannot be stifled without destroying humanity.

While there are many examples of this tension between individual and collective in the works of Terry Pratchett, I will focus specifically on the conflict between Death and the Auditors. Not only is Death the unexpected champion of humanity and individuality, he also is explicitly committed to the importance of care. This has unexpected ramifications, not least of which is that it enables Death to create justice on the Discworld; his care for humanity is the catalyst for justice.

### Individuality and Community

Humans are driven to form communities for a number of reasons. Both David Hume (1711-1776) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) discuss this drive to form communities, as well as the problems generated by such behavior. Hume notes that one of our motivations for forming communities is that humans are not well-suited to survive as individuals in the wild. Animals such as bears have tough skin, sharp teeth, and claws to defend themselves – against them, humans are relatively weak. When we join together, however, we are able to overcome our

physically weaker state by harnessing the power of our intellect and combining our forces.<sup>1</sup> This is one motivation for creating communities of people: survival.

There are further compelling reasons for joining communities. Rousseau largely agrees with Hume as to the survival value of communities, but he adds a twist. Even if humans could exist outside of communities, in perfect isolation from each other, he believes that this would be undesirable, as “The earth would be covered with men amongst whom there would be almost no communication,” and he sees this as undesirable.<sup>2</sup> Communication is taken to be a kind of good, connecting us to other people and forming a whole which is greater than the individual parts.

This idea that there is value in connecting with others, or belonging to a greater whole, is reflected at many levels of human interaction. People form families, social organizations, churches, universities, businesses, and even nations; we see value in joining with others to achieve some kind of purpose, ranging from simple enjoyment to the pursuit of knowledge, commerce, or social order. This is reflected on the Discworld as well, both with the Unseen University bringing together groups of wizards and with a variety of guilds serving various professions. We are, in general, better off when we are not trying to do everything by ourselves.

However, while we are pushed in the direction of forming communities, a conflict arises with our desire for individuality. In some ways, a community functions more smoothly when its members share certain values and ideals; a relatively homogenous community is more likely to reach consensus about what it is trying to accomplish and methods for achieving those goals. This creates a certain pressure to conform and an incentive for avoiding too much individuality among a group’s members.

Yet, of course, there is value to individuality as well, both for individual members and the community. Humans tend to value autonomy, namely, having the capacity to control one’s own life and make one’s own decisions; these are seen as important expressions of individual freedom. Most people recognize that our autonomy is not absolute, for it can be limited by other factors. Colloquially, the right to swing my fist ends at your nose; my autonomy does not extend so far that it allows me to harm others simply as an expression of my own freedom. Yet, the ability to swing my arms through the air as I walk, or choose my career path, or decorate my house as I see fit are all expressions of my personality, and most of us would be loathe to give all such rights up completely. If I cannot make certain choices in my life, there is a sense in which it is not *my* life at all.

Furthermore, it is not simply individuals who value autonomy. A community which praises conformity too much runs the risk of stagnation. Individuality allows for creativity which allows for growth in the community. Thus while a community of clones would, in some sense, be very easy to predict and govern, it would also likely be rather dull. We need a balance of the traits in order to have a vibrant community which is also cohesive enough to function.

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<sup>1</sup> Hume, D. (1978) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd edn, L.A. Selby-Bigge & P.H. Nidditch (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press) Originally published 1740, pp. 484-486.

<sup>2</sup> Rousseau, J.J. (1997) *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, V. Gourevitch (ed. & trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) Originally published 1762, p. 154.

This need for balance is one of the hardest aspects of belonging to a community. Individual members of a community will undoubtedly need to make certain sacrifices for the community. Yet there are limits to what should be required; Rousseau argues, for instance, that the members of a community should be willing to give up whatever the society asks, but the society should not ask for more than it needs.<sup>3</sup> The key question, then, is how to make this work. How can we be just to individuals while still acknowledging the needs of the community?

This debate is echoed in political philosophy in the disagreement between two competing schools of thought: liberalism and communitarianism. The tradition of political liberalism is perhaps best typified by John Rawls (1921-2002). Rawls developed a theory of justice which portrayed individuals as rationally choosing to pursue certain goals and developing their own conception of what is good; each person autonomously decides what the good life is for herself and how best to pursue it. In order to form society, the best course is to adopt rules that would be acceptable to a group of ideally rational people with no knowledge of their own status in the society. These people are often referred to as choosing from behind a “veil of ignorance,” and the idea is that they would create a society which is fair to all, since they do not know what their position in that society would be.<sup>4</sup>

Communitarians such as Michael Sandel criticize this idea, in part, for the weight Rawls places on individuals and individual liberty. First, our goals are frequently not formed independently of social ties; we are influenced by the desires of our families, the messages from society about what is possible for one in our position, and so forth. We do not simply sit down in isolation and decide what we wish to accomplish in our lives. Second, the liberal tradition contains a certain unreflective acceptance of individuals’ desires and rights which is perhaps not best for the community. The ideally rational people in Rawls’ society will likely adopt rules which preserve their freedom. Yet we may ask whether preserving our freedoms is necessarily the best way to form a community; perhaps not all of our desires and wishes *should* be protected and preserved. Perhaps the individual should give way to the community.<sup>5</sup>

Just as philosophers argue over the relative importance of individuals and communities, this conflict also arises in a number of places in the Discworld books. Lord Vetinari, the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork, is a clear example of a man who is trying to figure out how to rule a diverse population. His choice is to be a benevolent dictator who tries to give people at least the illusion of choice; this was illustrated when Vetinari freed Moist von Lipwig and gave him a choice about whether he would like to run the post office or simply leave. Of course, leaving would result in dropping into a pit and dying horribly, but Moist still had some choice in the matter.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Vetinari seems to realize that, while he is a dictator, it is not wise to rule with too heavy of a hand; not only is this likely to lead to his removal<sup>7</sup>, but the population itself needs more careful attention. Thus he is described as tending Ankh-Morpork “as one tends a topiary bush, encouraging a growth here, pruning an errant twig there. It was said that he would

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<sup>3</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press)

<sup>5</sup> Sandel, M. (1998) *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) Originally published 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Pratchett, T. (2005) *Going Postal*. (New York: HarperTorch), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Pratchett, *Going Postal*, p. 69.

tolerate absolutely anything apart from anything that threatened the city.”<sup>8</sup> Vetinari, therefore, has recognized that the good of the city depends on the freedom of its members – interfering too much with individuals is apt to cause problems for the group as a whole.

Sam Vimes is an example of a man struggling with a conflict between individuality and conformity to expectations on a number of different fronts. Starting out as a regular guardsman in Ankh-Morpork, he was mostly ignored by much of society. However, his promotion to Commander of the Watch brought him into contact with more of the political aspect of his job; he had to balance his desires to remain an ordinary working man with the need for dressing the expected part and being diplomatic.<sup>9</sup> This was further exacerbated by his marriage to Lady Sybil, since he became a member of a much higher social class than he was used to; this also carried certain expectations with it that clashed strongly with his own sense of individuality.<sup>10</sup>

The Auditors also exemplify this struggle as they engage in a number of schemes to impose conformity on the Discworld and its inhabitants, frequently coming into conflict with Death in their pursuit of structure and order. As beings which revere order above all else, the messiness inherent in living beings, particularly humans, is displeasing to them. In many ways they are the perfect embodiment of this conflict, since they strongly represent the forces of conformity in the face of humanity’s strong desire for individuality. I will thus focus on this conflict between the Auditors and Death, who becomes humanity’s unexpected champion. This will illustrate the tension between individuality and conformity, both on the Discworld and more generally. In order to do so, however, it will help to investigate both Death and the Auditors in somewhat greater detail first.

### Belief and the Personification of Death

On the Discworld, belief has creative power; if enough people believe in something, it comes into being. While people may think that an object exists and then is believed in, this is not the case in Pratchett’s universe – belief predates the object.<sup>11</sup> This is not entirely unlike our own world, such as when inventors have an idea and then work to create it; the difference with the Discworld is a matter of scope. In addition to mundane objects, belief can also create more fantastical creatures. Monsters are created and sustained by children’s beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Gods are a reflection of human beliefs and desires; they do the sorts of things we wish we could do, such as smite our enemies.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, various personifications of human concepts are also created by belief.

Death features in many Discworld books and takes the shape he does because of the beliefs of humanity. Note that belief does not create death – that existed long before humans and

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<sup>8</sup> Pratchett, T. (1990) *Guards! Guards!* (London: Corgi) Reprinted 1995, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, there is an allusion in *Jingo* to Vimes’s tendency to prefer the hands-on portions of his job to the ceremonial or diplomatic parts. Pratchett, T. (1998) *Jingo*. (London: Corgi), p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Pratchett, T. (2003) *Night Watch*. (New York: HarperTorch), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Pratchett, T. (1992) *Reaper Man*, (London: Corgi), p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Pratchett, T. (1997) *Hogfather*, (London: Corgi), pp. 37-8.

<sup>13</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 104.

is simply a ‘prolonged absence of life.’<sup>14</sup> Rather belief creates the personality and the shape; it creates Death, not death. As noted in *Hogfather*:

The shape of Death was the shape people had created for him, over the centuries. Why bony? Because bones were associated with death. He’d got a scythe because agricultural people could spot a decent metaphor. And he lived in a sombre land because the human imagination would be rather stretched to let him live somewhere nice with flowers.<sup>15</sup>

Being created by human imagination is not the same as being human, of course. Nevertheless, by being amongst humans Death picks up aspects of humanity. He is a kind of imitator of humanity. His house thus contains a bedroom, despite the fact that he does not sleep.<sup>16</sup> Why? Because human houses contain bedrooms. Similarly, he has silver backed hairbrushes by his bed, despite the fact that he has a skull for a head (and thus no use for such brushes.) Why? Again, because this is what humans keep in their bedrooms.<sup>17</sup>

One might wonder why Death tries to mimic humans. The answer to this rests with a recurring theme throughout Pratchett’s work: one’s shape influences one’s being. When belief creates a being, it creates the broad outlines. So humans imagine Death as a bony figure with a scythe, but the details get filled in over time, as the beings exist; being imagined as humanoid results in picking up certain aspects of humanity. According to Death, ‘IT CAN BE NO OTHER WAY, EVEN OUR VERY BODY SHAPE FORCES UPON OUR MINDS A CERTAIN WAY OF OBSERVING THE UNIVERSE. WE PICK UP HUMAN TRAITS.’<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this is why Death is fascinated by humans; they created him and influence his very being.

### The Auditors and Their Obsession with Order

The Auditors are a group of gray, collective beings which watch over the universe and ensure it operates in accordance with its laws; they ‘see to it that gravity operates and that time stays separate from space.’<sup>19</sup> They are not life-forms exactly – indeed, Pratchett specifies at one point that they are ‘nonlife-forms,’ and also that they hate life.<sup>20</sup> The reason for this hatred is complex and stems from their obsession with order and conformity.

The good thing about an atom of hydrogen, for the Auditors, is that it is the same as any other atom of hydrogen – it has a regularity to it. The same is true of physical laws; if you repeatedly drop something of a particular mass under identical conditions, the law of gravity should ensure the same result every time. These are the kinds of laws the Auditors find reassuring because they are regular and predictable.

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<sup>14</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 276

<sup>16</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 285.

<sup>18</sup> Pratchett, T. (2002) *Thief of Time*, (New York: HarperTorch), p. 86. As Death speaks purely in capital letters, I have quoted him as such.

<sup>19</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, p. 7.

Life, however, is not regular.<sup>21</sup> It cannot be predicted or quantified in the way physical objects can. Humans are particularly bad because they have personalities, which the Auditors regard as highly inefficient. Indeed, the Auditors are so wedded to collectivity that if any of them display personality, they are destroyed; personality and individuality are seen as leading to discord.<sup>22</sup> The universe would be far more efficient, they believe, without being hindered by the messiness that humans bring.<sup>23</sup>

This represents, in an extreme form, the view of collectivity discussed previously: that a group (in this case the universe) would run more efficiently without too much individuality from its parts (in this case living beings.) Their desire for order and, particularly, the erasure of human messiness leads the Auditors into several creative schemes. They cannot simply destroy life or humanity directly, since this would violate the Rules.<sup>24</sup> However, they employ a number of indirect tactics to attempt to impose more order on the world, frequently by involving a human. Their direct participation is not necessarily required because, as Death's granddaughter Susan observes, with humans 'At last there was a species that could be *persuaded* to shoot itself in the foot.'<sup>25</sup> The Auditors can set the wheels in motion while being confident that their human confederates will carry out the plan. Until, that is, Death and his various allies interfere.

The Auditors' first, and least ambitious, scheme arises in *Reaper Man*, when they decide that Death is inefficient because he has a personality. They do not think that such a thing is necessary in order to do his job well; as such, they petition the god Azrael to force Death's retirement and replacement. They intend to create a new Death, one which lacks personality (and, presumably, sympathy for humanity). When Death is forced to retire, he takes on the guise of a farmhand and helps a woman named Miss Flitworth with her crops. He encounters a machine, the Combination Harvester, which threatens to render him obsolete as a farmhand; this is akin to how the new Death has attempted to render him obsolete in his previous job. In both cases he fights back against the anti-individualistic threat they pose: the harvester reaps many crops at once with a kind of impersonal behavior, much like the new Death. Indeed, the final stand of the Auditors in *Reaper Man* is to harness the power of the Combination Harvester to fight Death. Unfortunately for them, Death has removed a key bolt from the machine, and this attempt ultimately fails.

The Auditors devise a second scheme for ridding the world of humanity in *Hogfather* by hiring assassins to kill the Hogfather, who is the Discworld's version of Santa Claus. They do this in order to disrupt belief in the Hogfather – after all, as Death observes, 'It is the things you believe which make you human.'<sup>26</sup> If the Hogfather no longer exists, then they assume that people will stop believing in him; more than that, those people will have their belief disrupted, since he no longer can fill the role people expect him to play. Because of this, it will cause a strong shift in belief. It is already the case that many children do not believe but rather simply pretend to believe.<sup>27</sup> The assassination and attendant absence of the Hogfather will push people

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<sup>21</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 408.

<sup>22</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 365.

<sup>24</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 409.

<sup>27</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 74.

over the edge, however, into active disbelief. Death helps thwart this scheme, partially by filling the role of the Hogfather to buy time; he goes through the motions of all the things the Hogfather is supposed to do in order to help stabilize the populace's belief. However, he also points Susan in the right direction to get her to help; together this is sufficient to retain belief in the Hogfather, so the Auditors' plan fails.

The third plan the Auditors attempt has an ingenious idea at the root of it. If the problem with humans – and life in general – is its messiness, and that humans can change in unexpected ways, then all we need to do is stop the ability to change. As such, in *Thief of Time*, the Auditors plot to stop time. If they succeed, then it will not matter that humans have so much potential chaos and disorder in them; humans will never be able to use that potential because they will be frozen in a particular moment. There will, in essence, be no future – just an eternal orderly present.<sup>28</sup> Once again, Death is involved in thwarting the Auditors by recruiting aid from Susan; he needs her help partially because he has an obligation to ride out for the end of the world, and partially because there are places humans can go that he cannot.<sup>29</sup> Between Susan and the History Monks – whose job it is to ensure that tomorrow occurs – the Auditors are thwarted in their plan to build a clock that will trap Time.

In all three of these cases, the Auditors are defeated by humans acting in concert with Death. While in *Reaper Man* there is a direct fight between Death and the Auditors' Death, the only reason why Death is able to have this fight is due to a human; Miss Flitworth gives Death some of her time once his runs out. In *Hogfather* the roles are somewhat reversed, because now it is Death who is buying time for others to act. He takes on the role of the Hogfather in order to keep belief alive, but that is not sufficient; someone still has to find the assassin and stop him, which is what Susan does. Death's role in *Thief of Time* is less prominent, as he works much more in the background than in the previous two fights. He is obligated to ride out for the end of the world, limiting his ability to interfere directly; he has duties to attend to. However, he notices the Auditors' schemes and again alerts Susan. While for much of the book Susan is less directly involved in stopping the Auditors than in *Hogfather*, she ultimately joins forces with Lobsang Ludd and Lady LeJean in order to defeat the Auditors.

### The Value of the Individual

One might wonder why Death gets involved in these disputes at all. With the exception of *Reaper Man*, where the Auditors specifically target him for replacement, he does not seem to be directly affected by most of their schemes. It is true that he would lack function in a world without life, hence perhaps one could suppose that he seeks to thwart the Auditors in *Thief of Time* in order to preserve his importance. However, the same could have been said of War, Pestilence, and Famine – none of them has purpose in a world without life. Yet they were not even moved to ride out for the end of the world; what is different about Death?

It is not due to any natural, innate difference. Death acknowledges that 'to the reaper man, all stalks start off as...just stalks,' thus naturally humans all look the same to him.

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<sup>28</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, pp. 81-2.

<sup>29</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, p. 85.



However, he continues that he has started to notice the differences among them.<sup>30</sup> Not only that, but he also values the individuality humans possess. Ironically, the attempt by the Auditors to replace Death likely hastens this development; it is in *Reaper Man* that he seems to gain the most appreciation for humans and their value. Clearly this is not the only influencing factor, since Death showed flashes of personality before the Auditors interfered – indeed, that is *why* they interfered – but when Susan asks him why he gets involved in *Hogfather* he replies ‘I THINK IT’S SOMETHING TO DO WITH HARVESTS...YES. THAT’S RIGHT. AND BECAUSE HUMANS ARE SO INTERESTING THAT THEY HAVE EVEN INVENTED DULLNESS.’<sup>31</sup>

Not everyone shares Death’s view of humans, of course, since the Auditors spend a great deal of time trying to get rid of humanity. Their perfect world is ordered and changeless, not messy with life.<sup>32</sup> They do not attach importance to humanity, seeing humans as simply an imperfection; in *Hogfather* they even state that they have ‘a duty to rid the universe of sloppy thinking,’ which is a nice justification for trying to exterminate humanity.<sup>33</sup> Yet clearly Death sees a value in humans, messiness and all, which the Auditors miss or else he would not be so intent on stopping them.

One of the key aspects of humanity, according to Death, is that the things we believe are what make us human.<sup>34</sup> This has both an individual and a collective component. Individually, people vary in what they believe. Unlike rocks or hydrogen atoms, humans are not all alike; you cannot simply substitute one for another. Part of this stems from a multiplicity of beliefs and experiences. While my beliefs may overlap with the beliefs of others, they are unlikely to be identical; we are each in part defined by what we believe.

This may well be part of what the Auditors object to, since they value conformity. A group with diverse beliefs has a harder time reaching consensus and acting than a group with uniform beliefs; similarly, that group is more difficult to rule or administrate. If you know what a person believes, you can make some predictions about how they will react to a given situation. However, if you do not know their beliefs – or if you are faced with a great many people who hold conflicting beliefs – then the person or group becomes unpredictable. The Auditors do not like unpredictability.

The overlap between our beliefs also has power, however, recall that collectively belief in Death or the Hogfather has formative force on the Discworld. Humans create the tooth fairies, the Hogfather, Death, and similar entities by the power of their belief. Certainly the concepts existed beforehand, but the personalities are created by our collective beliefs.<sup>35</sup> Events then reinforce or destroy those beliefs, which is what Death worried about when the Hogfather was missing; if too many people stopped believing in the Hogfather, there would be bad consequences.

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<sup>30</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 167.

<sup>31</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 433.

<sup>32</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, p. 301.

<sup>33</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 409.

<sup>35</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 104.

The true problem for Death was not that one particular entity would no longer be believed in; the problem is that he sees this sort of belief as necessary for humans. Susan is initially dismissive of this claim, thinking that Death means that humans need ‘*fantasies* to make life bearable.’<sup>36</sup> However, his point is larger. He argues instead that humans need fantasy in order to be human. And while belief in tooth fairies or the Hogfather may seem trivial, humans have to start out believing in them in order to believe the bigger lies of justice, mercy, duty, and so forth. Susan objects that believing in justice, for instance, is not the same as believing in the tooth fairy, which leads to the following exchange:

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN *SHOW* ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET— Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME *RIGHTNESS* IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

‘Yes, but people have *got* to believe that, or what’s the *point*—’  
MY POINT EXACTLY.<sup>37</sup>

Death’s point, then, is that humans must believe in these abstract concepts in order to find meaning in their lives. It was to preserve this belief in the point of life that he impersonated the Hogfather. Without belief in the Hogfather, the sun would not rise – it would only be a ball of gas.<sup>38</sup>

The reason for Death’s involvement in these disputes, therefore, is to protect humanity from the forces of conformity which the Auditors represent. In order to be human, we must retain our ability for unique beliefs and ideas – if we were all the same, as the Auditors desire, we would in some sense cease to be human.<sup>39</sup> Yet there is another facet to the conflict between Death and the Auditors, which also focuses on how to treat humanity.

### Death as the Embodiment of Care

One of the key aspects of the dispute between Death and the Auditors centers on the importance of care. Death has a horrified reaction to the Combination Harvester when he encounters it in *Reaper Man*. Largely this is because he saw importance in treating each human as an individual, not simply as a member of a group. Cutting many blades of grass at once strikes him as wrong; the correct thing to do is to cut one blade at a time.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, humans must also be reaped individually, not seen simply as a mass to be taken care of. In this way we acknowledge the individuality of each person, something that the Auditors do not do.

This emphasis on individuality is central to the ethics of care. Ethical theories, in general, strive to answer questions such as how we should live our lives or what sort of people we should

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<sup>36</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 422.

<sup>37</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, pp. 422-3.

<sup>38</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 422.

<sup>39</sup> The converse likely also holds true, as the Auditors discovered in *Thief of Time* – to become human is to have individual thoughts and, in some sense, to cease to be an Auditor.

<sup>40</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 91.

be. A major debate in ethics is over universalization: do we need an ethical theory to apply to everyone (or everyone in similar situations)? On the face of it, this seems plausible. Frequently we assume that being just or treating people equally is required for ethical behavior; if this is the case, then surely we are being capricious if we allow an action for one person but forbid a similar action for a different person.

There is concern, however, raised by ethicists of care that this does not do justice to lived human experience, because actual, particular relationships are at the heart of our lives. Virginia Held notes that, for the ethics of care, the central focus is on the “compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility.”<sup>41</sup> The theory calls into question the idea that we are always seeking impartiality or universal rules. For instance, it seems reasonable to assert that it is ethical to prefer our family or friends on certain occasions.

Fundamentally, the ethics of care sees a problem in too much abstraction. Nel Noddings argues that

As we convert what we have received from the other into a problem, something to be solved, we move away from the other. We clean up his reality, strip it of complex and bothersome qualities, in order to think it. The other’s reality becomes data, stuff to be analyzed, studied, interpreted. All this is to be expected and is entirely appropriate, provided that we see the essential turning points and move back to the concrete and the personal...If I do not turn away from my abstractions, I lose the one cared-for. Indeed, I lose myself as one-caring, for I now care about a problem instead of a person.<sup>42</sup>

For Noddings, this is a problem which arises in many contexts, including in situations where we are most committed to providing care, such as schools. She argues that there is a problem when we treat people only as members of a group rather than individuals, claiming that “To be treated as ‘types’ instead of individuals, to have strategies exercised on us, objectifies us. We become ‘cases’ instead of persons.”<sup>43</sup> The strategy of generalizing similar cases, or of treating individuals merely as a representative of a kind of problem, is morally problematic for Noddings; doing so strips the person of their humanity. This is, of course, exactly what the Auditors strive for: they do not wish to deal with individuals, simply categories. Humans are problematic for them precisely because of this insistence on individuality.

However, ethicists of care emphasize the need to recognize and respect this individuality. Noddings sees care as concerning a kind of engrossment, wherein you are intimately concerned with the welfare and well-being of another person.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, “To act as one-caring, then, is to act with special regard for the particular person in a concrete situation.”<sup>45</sup> She believes that,

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<sup>41</sup> Held, V. (2006) *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Noddings, N. (2003) *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, p. 66.

<sup>44</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, p. 24.

fundamentally, care is tied to a specific person – one cannot care about humanity in general, but simply for specific humans. More specifically, she equates the idea that someone should care for everyone to maintaining “an internal state of readiness to try to care for whoever crosses our path.”<sup>46</sup> However, this is far less concrete than the sort of caring she is concerned with; she sees this as “a verbal commitment to the possibility of caring”<sup>47</sup> rather than anything actualized.

Not all ethicists of care agree on our inability to care for large groups of people; Held, for one, argues that it is possible to have a kind of care for people in general.<sup>48</sup> This is due to the fact that she sees care as emphasizing the intertwined nature of the person caring and the person being cared-for. Since it is presumably possible to acknowledge that our own interests are bound up with those of people around the globe, it should be possible to have care for people we have not met. While remaining neutral on whether this is possible for the average human in our world, it seems clear that it is possible for Death if he chooses – he has a unique ability to interact with everyone individually (even if only for a short period of time at the end of their lives.) He thus has the ability to acknowledge each individual’s life.

Furthermore, he argues that this acknowledgement is important, as demonstrated by his appeal to Azrael in *Reaper Man*:

LORD, WE KNOW THERE IS NO GOOD ORDER EXCEPT THAT WHICH WE CREATE...

THERE IS NO HOPE BUT US. THERE IS NO MERCY BUT US. THERE IS NO JUSTICE.  
THERE IS JUST US...

ALL THINGS THAT ARE, ARE OURS. BUT WE MUST CARE. FOR IF WE DO NOT CARE, WE DO NOT EXIST. IF WE DO NOT EXIST, THEN THERE IS NOTHING BUT BLIND OBLIVION.

AND EVEN OBLIVION MUST END SOME DAY. LORD, WILL YOU GRANT ME JUST A LITTLE TIME? FOR THE PROPER BALANCE OF THINGS. TO RETURN WHAT WAS GIVEN. FOR THE SAKE OF PRISONERS AND THE FLIGHT OF BIRDS...

LORD, WHAT CAN THE HARVEST HOPE FOR, IF NOT FOR THE CARE OF THE REAPER MAN?<sup>49</sup>

The world requires order, perhaps. But humanity requires more than that – it requires an acknowledgement of its fundamentally messy and individualistic nature. This is what Death understands and the Auditors do not: that beyond rules and order, in the face of a seemingly unjust universe, humans can still seek care. And, as strange as it seems, Death cares for humanity. We may all fall to his scythe, but our passing does not go unremarked nor uncared for.

Moreover, this care creates a kind of justice. Death argues that there is no justice in the universe; there are simply forces such as himself and Azrael. In this sense he is denying any

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<sup>46</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Noddings, *Caring*, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Held, *Ethics of Care*, p. 157.

<sup>49</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 264.

metaphysical force of justice – it is simply a matter of people’s actions. I submit that Death himself creates justice through care. Held argues that care is ethically prior to justice in the following sense:

Though justice is surely among the most important moral values, much of life has gone on without it, and much of that life has had moderately good aspects. There has, for instance, been little justice within the family in almost all societies but much care; so we know we can have care without justice. Without care, however, there would be no persons to respect and no families to improve.<sup>50</sup>

It is not clear that Death always had care; more likely it developed over time as his fascination with humans continued. I believe that the most important step for Death occurred as a result of the Auditors’ scheming in *Reaper Man*. Because Death was forced to become mortal, he began to feel viscerally the importance of specific people rather than only experiencing people in an abstract sense. This develops over time in his relationship to Miss Flitworth, but it comes to a head when a little girl is caught in a fire. While he may believe, as Death, that everyone has a time to die and one should not interfere with that time, he realizes that his human persona, Bill Door, sees this view as rubbish.<sup>51</sup> He has moved from an abstract, detached view of humanity – where it really does not matter much whether one specific individual lives or dies – to forming personalized relationships with people. This is at the heart of care.

While it could be possible for Death to care without also creating justice, his actions demonstrate a commitment to justice as well. Held argues that an ethic of justice “focuses on questions of fairness, equality, individual rights, abstract principles, and the consistent application of them.”<sup>52</sup> These are traits which Death exhibits. For instance, he sees himself as bound by certain rules; one reason why he needs Susan’s help in *Thief of Time* is because there are places he cannot go.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, he notes in *Hogfather* that Death cannot save the little match girl from dying, but the Hogfather can; there are rules about permitted behavior, which Death adheres to.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, he sees himself as bound by these rules even when the Auditors break them by trying to assassinate the Hogfather.<sup>55</sup>

The motivating force behind Death’s actions is his commitment to individuality and to reaping one soul at a time; this is a commitment to both justice and care. It is because he sees the need to care for each person that he treats them justly. While the Auditors might seem in some sense more committed to justice because of their emphasis on abstract principles and order, they end up being less dedicated precisely because they do not care; they seek to rule humanity, not to care for them.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Death acts to preserve belief in justice, and thus the possibility of justice, the Auditors act unjustly in their attempts to eliminate the essential messiness of humanity. The side of Death is the side of justice.

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<sup>50</sup> Held, *Ethics of Care*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>51</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, pp. 137-8.

<sup>52</sup> Held, *Ethics of Care*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Pratchett, *Thief of Time*, p. 85.

<sup>54</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, p. 218.

<sup>55</sup> Pratchett, *Hogfather*, pp. 111-2.

<sup>56</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 230

On the Discworld, as in our world, there is conflict between the individual and the collective. On one side, we have Death, who champions humanity by demonstrating that each person must be reaped individually; we must show care to them by treating them as individuals. On the other side, we have the Auditors, who attempt to classify the universe and value the collective over the individual. Ultimately, Death's actions in their various skirmishes demonstrate that the only way to do justice to the group is by fairly treating the individual; to care for the individual in the way he does is to enable justice to occur. While Death may claim that "THERE IS NO JUSTICE. THERE IS JUST US",<sup>57</sup> his care is the catalyst for justice to occur.

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<sup>57</sup> Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, p. 264.