

## **The Pride of the Walt Disney World Characters: Too Much Rainbow or Not Enough?**

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**Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	3
The Issue: Differing Opinions.....	4
Conservatives.....	4
Progressives.....	6
The Ethical Framework: Three Theories.....	8
Deontology.....	8
Virtue Ethics.....	8
Social Contract Theory.....	9
The Solution: More Queer Characters.....	9
Applying Deontology.....	9
Applying Virtue Ethics.....	10
Applying Social Contract Theory.....	10
Conclusion.....	11
References.....	12

### **Introduction**

The Walt Disney Company is a multi-billion-dollar company that is known to have an extreme influence on people of all ages, from infants to adults to the elderly. The Company accomplishes such influence by producing a wide array of products and services, including its theme parks around the world, such as the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida and Disneyland Resort in California, its plethora of movies, including ones brought in by acquisitions of Marvel, Star Wars, and Fox, its many television shows, such as ones found on the Disney Channel and FreeForm networks, its merchandise that can be found within the Disney stores or online, its music that many artists are creating, and so many more products and experiences. The list could truly go on and on when discussing what the Walt Disney Company creates. With all of its creations, however, the company definitely takes on a large amount of social responsibility. Fans around the world tend to expect the Walt Disney Company to represent ethical values and be a trail blazer in pushing humanity into a future of morals and goodness. The issue, though, is that many people disagree on what is considered morally good. Especially today, a huge debate centers around the inclusion of homosexuality. Over time, the Walt Disney Company has begun to slowly introduce LGBTQIA+ characters into its library of intellectual property. This effort seems to be in line with the company's new emphasis on "inclusion." However, many fans and stakeholders in the company have different reactions to this new frontier of the company. Some conservative Christians believe that the Walt Disney Company should not be promoting and supporting the queer community, claiming that the company is brainwashing their kids into supporting something that they view as unethical. Progressives, on the other hand, disagree, believing that Disney is not doing enough to be inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community, claiming that the characters representing the community are simply cop outs and queer coded.

Applying ethical theories such as Immanuel Kant's deontology, Aristotle's virtue theory, and Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory proves that, while some may disagree, the Walt Disney Company is not doing enough to be inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community in terms of representation through its characters and intellectual property.

### **The Issue: Differing Opinions**

#### **Conservatives**

In the article titled "The Disadvantage of a Good Reputation: Disney as a Target for Social Problems Claims," Joel Best and Kathleen S. Lowney claim that usually, companies with bad reputations tend to be viewed with high scrutiny and judgment when it comes to whether they are acting ethically or not (2009). Yet, they also say that "there are scandalous exceptions, instances where individuals or organizations with good reputations stand revealed as involved in problematic behavior" (Best et al., 2009, p. 432). This is because the company is held in such high regard that the scandal of them doing something wrong causes quite a large amount of attention. The Walt Disney Company is one of these companies that is so good that it falls under extreme scrutiny. People truly believe that the company produces movies and experiences that are considered "'teaching machines'...that help children understand who they are, what societies are about" (Key, 2015, p. 270). Adults allow their children to consume Disney media because they actually rely on the media to educate their children on all things right and wrong. In 1934, the Production Code was written with the purpose of "constrain[ing] offensive content and cooperat[ing] with the Roman Catholic Church's Legion of Decency" (Best & Lowney, 2009, pp. 434-435). The Walt Disney Company had all eyes on it as people expected it to follow this code, which is exactly what it did. Most Disney films that were created after this code was written actually lacked queer characters because of its restrictions! However, slowly, the Walt Disney

Company started to introduce queer characters into its media through acquisitions of studios like Miramax, which had queer movies like *Chasing Amy*, *Lie Down with Dogs*, *Chicks in White*, *Satin*, and *Priest* (Best et al., 2009). It can be assumed that people were not happy with this acquisition, as parents believed that kids would associate the Walt Disney Company with promoting homosexual actions, which they deemed incredibly immoral (Key, 2015). Even when the Production Code was repealed in 1968, people still continued to boycott the company (Key, 2015). Conservative Christians could not stand the fact that it seemed like the Walt Disney Company was moving in a progressive direction, especially when characters like Elsa from *Frozen* were introduced. The host of multiple conservative radio shows, Kevin Swanson, says that *Frozen* the movie is inherently evil and “pro-homosexual” (Charania et al., 2018, p. 140) because it includes Elsa as a queer coded character. Something that is odd to note, however, is that whenever a queer coded character is a villain or some type of negative character, conservatives receive it very well, as it aligns with their personal agenda that homosexuality is evil (Brown 2021). Conservatives love Disney villains like Ursula, Hades, Jafar, Captain Hook, Tamatoa, Prince John, and so many others for this exact reason (Brown 2021). As Disney has begun to support the LGBTQIA+ community in its theme parks by including characters dressed up in rainbow colors during events like Gay Days, conservative Christians have become even angrier, especially when they see Minnie, Mickey, Donald, and Daisy supporting the gay community, and thus teaching their children that homosexuality is okay (Best et al., 2009). The conservative Christian community is definitely of the opinion that there is too much representation of homosexuality within the intellectual property of the Walt Disney Company.

## **Progressives**

Progressive individuals tend to feel that the Walt Disney Company does not include enough queer characters, saying that there are only a few ways that the company introduces homosexuality into their films. In an article titled “Disney Has Drawn an Outline for Gay Characters,” it is said that one of the ways the company incorporates gay characters is by “incorporate[ing] them into the broader, universal message of individual freedom” (2017, p. 1). This can be seen in characters like Tamatoa, the crab from Moana, who no longer cares about what people think about him and just decides to let his sparkly light shine (“The Economist: Prospero - The Economist: Disney Has Drawn an Outline for Gay Character, 2017, p. 1). It can also be seen in characters like Elsa, who find themselves by shedding all of the superficial layers they project into the world (“The Economist: Prospero - The Economist: Disney Has Drawn an Outline for Gay Character, 2017, p. 1). A different way that Disney stories and narratives tend to include queer narratives in their substance is by “fit[ting] them into the acceptable paradigms of romance and marriage” (“The Economist: Prospero - The Economist: Disney Has Drawn an Outline for Gay Character,” 2017, p.1). It is much easier for people to understand something taboo if it is put into context of something that is already known and familiar to them, thus it makes a little more sense when a gay character is introduced when it is involved in something understood such as marriage (“The Economist: Prospero - The Economist: Disney Has Drawn an Outline for Gay Character,” 2017). This is why Disney will sometimes include queer characters as extras in a movie, making them a married couple that does not draw too much attention. However, for the most part, when queer characters are included in Disney stories, they are not overtly queer or out-of-the-closet (“The Economist: Prospero - The Economist: Disney Has Drawn an Outline for Gay Character,” 2017). Usually, there are instead much more subtle

references to their sexuality, as the characters are given traits that would be tied or connected to members of the queer community (Brown, 2021). This kind of mechanism is called queer coding, and it is heavily unfavored by people of the LGBTQIA+ community as people feel it is a cop out and not true representation (Brown, 2021). Unfortunately, even though they are queer coded, these characters are almost never the main characters, with the exceptions of Merida and Elsa (Charania et al., 2018). Usually, the characters are queer-coded villains like Governor Ratcliffe, Scar, Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear in the attraction named Splash Mountain (Bringardner, 2019), supporting characters or any sort of side kick like Lumiere and Cogsworth from *Beauty and the Beast*, Gus and Jaq from *Cinderella*, Pleakley from *Lilo and Stitch*, Timon and Pumbaa from *The Lion King* (Towbin et al., 2004), or Lefou from *Beauty and the Beast* ("The Economist: Prospero - The Economist: Disney Has Drawn an Outline for Gay Character," 2017), or characters that seem to be a complete recreation of ones that already exist, such as Mulan in the show on television called *Once Upon a Time* (Key, 2015) and the villain Maleficent in the movie all about her origin story titled *Maleficent* (Charania et al., 2018). Furthermore, other characters that are queer coded tend to come from acquisitions of previously established companies, like the acquisition of Miramax and ABC Family (Best et al., 2009). Very recently, new movies like *Luca* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* have included main characters that are queer coded, so the company is moving in the right direction, but this is still not enough. These characters should be openly gay and not have to hide behind the image or identity of a heterosexual being. The LGBTQIA+ community truly feels a lack of representation in terms of queer characters created by the Walt Disney Company.

### **The Ethical Framework: Three Theories**

The three main ethical theories that can be applied to this issue are the ethical theories of deontology, virtue ethics, and social contract theory, which will be explored more here.

#### **Deontology**

Ethical theorist Immanuel Kant proposed an ethical theory that focuses on “the intention or motive to do the right thing specifically because it is one’s duty” (Stanlick et al., 2015, p. 15). One should not do what is right because of the consequences, such as resulting happiness or pleasure, but rather simply because it is the right thing to do (Stanlick et al., 2015). Kant emphasizes the categorical imperative, which states, “‘Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law’” (Stanlick et al., 2015, p. 19). In other words, one should only act in a way that would be acceptable to become a universal law that all people must follow. For example, lying and suicide are always wrong, according to Kant, and thus cannot be universalizable, making them immoral (Stanlick et al., 2015). Immanuel Kant truly believed that a person should only act in a way that would be acceptable for all other people to live.

#### **Virtue Ethics**

Aristotle created virtue ethics in order to help understand how to live a good, ethical life (Stanlick et al., 2015). Virtue ethics involves asking oneself the question, “‘What traits of character make someone a good person?’ and then trying to cultivate those traits” (Stanlick et al., 2015, p. 16). Essentially, acting ethically is simply just trying to do the right thing and making all of one’s life decisions on the principle that doing the right thing that promotes good for all is the moral way to live. According to virtue ethics, all humans should strive for the golden mean, which means that all people should “avoid... extremes and seek... the intermediate, the mean”



(Stanlick et al., 2015, p. 17). As an example, honesty is a virtue that all people should strive to display; however, people should avoid the extremes of honesty, including extreme bluntness and extreme withholding of information. What is important is that an individual strives to live their life according to virtues such as acceptance, inclusion, wisdom, honesty, courage, and more; yet one should not indulge in any extreme of these virtues, rather, they should strive to live according to the golden mean (Stanlick et al., 2015).

### **Social Contract Theory**

According to Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory, the "government exists by consent and agreement of the governed...[and]...morals, too, exist by agreement" (Stanlick et al., 2015). Therefore, when people sign into a contract or agreement with a government to be governed, it is understood that the government should do everything in its power to protect individuals and promote their equality and freedom (Stanlick et al, 2015). While the social contract theory was originally created to discuss a government's duty to its people, it has been broadened to address a company's duty to its stakeholders (Stanlick et al., 2015). A company must uphold its duty to follow through on its promises to its guests and customers, and it also must treat all stakeholders and fans as equal people, providing opportunity and representation for all. When a company fails to uphold its promises to its people, it is then acting unethically.

### **The Solution: More Queer Characters**

#### **Applying Deontology**

Since deontology is all about the duty to do the right thing and following the categorical imperative, which says that to be ethical, an action must be universalizable, the Walt Disney Company must implement more queer characters into their movies, media, and productions. It is inherently wrong to exclude and not represent a particular group, as the Walt Disney Company

has usually done to the LGBTQIA+ community. While it is appreciated that the company has included some queer characters, they are simply not enough, especially given the fact that most are queer coded. Universally, no one should be excluded, therefore, deontology would claim that inclusivity and representation of the LGBTQIA+ community is inherently ethical and necessary.

### **Applying Virtue Ethics**

Virtue ethics focuses on living a life of virtues, good will, and good action. People should simply live to be as ethical and moral as possible in their decisions. They should not, however, be too extreme of any virtue. When talking about the virtue of inclusion, it is wrong to extremely exclude people, but it is also wrong to over-include one group, and thus not include another. Currently, the Walt Disney Company has not included the queer community enough. They should not erase all of their heterosexual characters and only include gay ones, but, they also have not included enough of queer characters to begin with.

### **Applying Social Contract Theory**

While the Walt Disney Company is not the government, it is still a company that has made a promise, or a contract, with its stakeholders to create happiness for all. Currently, it is not creating happiness for all because it is excluding an entire group of people with regards to representation. Gay, transgender, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, and queer people deserve to feel the happiness that the Walt Disney Company has promised by being represented by characters in the movies and parks. These characters should not just be sidekicks, villains, recreations, or queer coded; rather, their sexuality should be embraced and obvious as main characters of movies and media.

### **Conclusion**

The Walt Disney Company has a responsibility to its people to be a pioneer in terms of social responsibility and progress. When it comes to the company's creation of characters and its inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community, there are very few queer characters in the company. Some conservatives are happy about this, as they believe that homosexuality is inherently wrong. Progressives, on the other hand, are offended by the lack of representation and demand better. Using ethical theories such as Immanuel Kant's deontology, Aristotle's virtue ethics, and Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory, it can be proven that more queer representation through Disney characters is imperative to promote a more inclusive and ethical culture and environment throughout the company and the world at large.

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