

Morally right versus logically correct

Experience, Human Nature



Encountering a dead deer on the road is not an unusual occurrence; oncoming drivers see the road block and handle the situation accordingly. Some drivers will swerve to miss the animal — it is safe to say that most drivers will swerve — but a select group of drivers will stop to move the deer out of the road. An example of a driver in that select group can be found in William Stafford's poem "Traveling through the Dark." After moving the deer out of the road, this particular driver must choose between the decision that his heart recognizes as morally right and the decision that his mind recognizes as logically correct. The driver, who is also the speaker of this poem, comes across the deer in the first two lines of the poem: "Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road" (lines 1-2). Even though it was not he who caused the death of the animal, he knows what he must do with its carcass: "It is usually best to roll them into the canyon" (line 3). By saying "it is usually best..." the driver is giving past knowledge to this type of incident; this is not the first time that the driver has had to do such a thing (line 3). It is in the line that follows that the driver offers justification for his act of rolling the deer into the canyon: "that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead" (line 4). It is clear that the driver deems the life of a human more important than the body of an animal; forfeiting the body of this already deceased animal will ensure that no man will also lose his life. His intent for the animal is clear, and his actions have been justified. In the first line of the second stanza, the driver is preparing for his coming action: "By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car" (line 5). His feelings toward the animal surface in the following lines: "and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing; / she had stiffened already, almost

cold” (lines 6-7). By using the word “ heap” to describe the dead doe, a connotation of garbage has been achieved (line 6). The driver is describing this dead animal as one would describe a pile of litter; in doing so, he is remaining impersonal, keeping his emotions out of the situation at hand. His detachment to the present situation is evident in the first half of line eight: “ I dragged her off.” This half-line reinforces the connotation of garbage through the driver’s action; he “ dragged” the doe out of the road like he would drag a bag of trash to the dumpster (line 8). It is in the second half of line eight that the driver’s apathy falters; it is here that the driver notices something about the doe that had gone previously unnoticed by him, something unforgettable: “ she was large in the belly.” This ending half of line eight marks the end of the driver’s detachment to his actions; the driver’s emotions are now involved. The driver could have disregarded his new discovery and continued with his logical action of rolling the doe into the canyon. But his curiosity was stirred, so he went searching for the answer to why the doe’s belly was large: “ My fingers touching her side brought me the reason — / her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,” (lines 9-10). The driver is no longer impersonal to the doe; he no longer views her as garbage. He did not call her fawn a heap or a lump; he immediately called it “ her fawn” (line 10). A juxtaposition between the fawn and its mother arises after line ten. In line seven, the driver describes the doe as being stiff, “ already cold”; in contrast, in line ten, he describes her fawn as being “ warm.” The significance of this juxtaposition is that the doe is dead, and as the driver will soon discover in line eleven, the fawn is not. Rather, the fawn is “ alive, still, never to be born.” By separating the word “ still” from the rest of the

sentence with commas, the driver is proclaiming that despite being in its mother's womb as she lay dying, the fawn remained alive (line 11). The "still" is acting as a breath of disbelief (line 11). It is, however, in the second half of this line that the driver remembers the context of his action: in order to keep men from dying because of this doe, he must roll the doe — necessarily including the fawn — into the canyon. His decision is not as clear as it was before because now his emotions are weighing in on it. He needs to think about his options: "Beside that mountain road I hesitated" (line 12). Logic tells him that the fawn would have no chance of survival without its mother, but his morals tell him that the fawn is not yet dead and does not deserve to have its chance of life stolen away. He is left thinking, a decision looming in the future, a decision that was once clear but is now clouded with indecision and doubt. While the driver hesitated with his decision, life did not hesitate with him.