

# A Conflict of Interests

Aspects of Morality in Drew Karpysyn's

*Mass Effect*-trilogy

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## **Introduction**

The science fiction genre is known for being able to tell us grand stories about intergalactic conflicts, tales of mighty fleets of spaceships battling for supremacy against powerful enemies, usually with the fate of the universe at stake. Unbound by the restrictions of a realistic universe, the opportunity for creativity on the writer's part is only rivaled by that of the fantasy genre. Like many science fiction novels before them, Drew Karpyshyn's *Mass Effect*-trilogy (*Revelation*, *Ascension* and *Retribution*) deals with humanity's eventual journey to the stars and the struggles they encounter along the way. However, one of these novels' most distinguishing features is that the author takes the time to thoroughly explore the motivations behind many of the characters and take a deeper look into their personal moral codes.

The universe of *Mass Effect* was created to play host to a series of role-playing video games with the same name. The games put the player in the space boots of Commander Shepard. The player is then given full control of their character, allowing him or her to decide Shepard's first name, gender, appearance, background, psychological profile, military specialization and, most importantly, philosophical values. The games place emphasis on morality and force the player to actively take a stand in many moral dilemmas and choose for themselves which path they consider the right one. As the story progresses, the player learns more about their enemy and their motivations, leading many players to ask themselves if their morals are all that different from the game's antagonist.

This aspect of moral ambiguity is also transferred to the books. Even though there is a protagonist and an antagonist established fairly early on, Karpyshyn spends plenty of time fleshing out their moral codes and motivations, making it clear that neither of them intend to act with the sole intention of being either good or bad. There are even times when both the protagonist and the antagonist have a very similar goal but go about reaching that goal in different ways. In fact, the characters are presented in such a way that it is up to the reader to decide whether they consider a character to be either good or evil. Should the reader, for example, find a character to be evil, the author leaves it up to her/him to think about why they consider this character evil, what actions the character has taken to make them feel this way about him or her and why they think of these acts as being morally wrong.

This essay will argue that even though the novels establish certain character archetypes, such as the noble soldier, the manipulating mastermind and the cold blooded assassin, they do not actively take a stand in most of the moral dilemmas that are presented. Indeed, there are several major dilemmas where arguments are given for two opposing sides and the reader is invited to choose which side they consider the most reasonable. In order to demonstrate that there is no particular moral path that the novels clearly describe as “correct”, several characters’ actions and motivations, as well as some larger dilemmas will be analyzed. This will be done using primarily the principle of equal interests, a moral philosophical theory developed by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. Issues that will be dealt with in the course of the essay are, for example, whether the ends always justify the means, the interests of organic life versus those of artificial life and the happiness of one versus the happiness of many. However, before any of these questions are dealt with, there will be a brief summary of the trilogy’s plot. This will be followed by a discussion of the novel’s method of characterization, as well as an explanation of the principle of equal interests.

### **A brief summary of the three novels**

All three novels are set in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, not too long after humanity’s mastery of intergalactic travel. Humans are now part of a union of races, a union ruled over by a group of elite politicians known simply as ‘The Counsel’. As the main plot of the trilogy starts, the people of Earth have joined under one global government, known as The Alliance, and has just begun to colonize other planets. The first book, *Revelation* (2007), follows a young Alliance soldier named David Anderson as he tries to uncover the truth behind an attack on an Alliance research base. During his travels he encounters Kahlee Sanders, the sole survivor of the attack, and the turian (one of the fictional races in the *Mass Effect*-universe) Saren Arterius, an elite agent of the Counsel with a great deal of authority and the right to bypass any law should he deem it necessary. These agents are known as ‘Spectres’ and the role of a Spectre becomes a central question to the story. Saren and Anderson both seek to unravel the mystery of the attacked base, but they go about doing so in very different ways.

The second novel, *Ascension* (2008), is set roughly twenty years after *Revelation*. It focuses on Kahlee Sanders (the only returning major character from *Revelation*) and her friend Hendel Mitra as they try to protect Gillian, an autistic twelve-year-old girl with massive ‘biotic’ (a form of telekinesis) talents from a shadowy pro-human group known as Cerberus. Cerberus is

lead by the mysterious 'Illusive Man' (his real name is never given) and has employed Gillian's adoptive father, Paul Grayson, who is trying to get Gillian back on Cerberus' behalf. However, he is somewhat conflicted over what the Illusive Man intends to do to Gillian once she is found. In order to hide Gillian, Kahlee and Hendel seek refuge aboard the Migrant Fleet, a massive armada of starships inhabited by the Quarians, a race that was driven off their home world and now live among the stars. Eventually Grayson decides that he does not agree with either Cerberus vision of the future, their methods and their plans for Gillian. He betrays the Illusive Man and ensures that Gillian is safe and well out of Cerberus' reach.

The third and final novel, *Retribution* (2010), is set about three years later. Kahlee Sanders, David Anderson, The Illusive Man and Paul Grayson return as central characters. This time around, Grayson, following his betrayal of Cerberus at the end of *Ascension*, is captured by his former employers, who are performing horrifying experiments on him as part of a project to learn more about the 'Reapers' (the main antagonists from the *Mass Effect* games). Kahlee and Anderson are trying to find Grayson and help him, as well as trying to bring down Cerberus for good. Grayson, meanwhile, is slowly being transformed into a semi-mechanical avatar of the Reapers and as such become a major threat to the entire galaxy. In the end Grayson, now under the full control of the Reapers, is killed by Anderson. Cerberus remains intact, though they were dealt a serious blow by Kahlee and Anderson, revealing that the organization is not as invulnerable as was first believed.

### **Methods of characterization in the *Mass Effect*-trilogy**

All three novels are told from a third-person perspective with several characters used for 'focalizing', which Suzanne Keen describes as "the perspective of a reflecting character within the story world" (39). Almost every major character in the trilogy is used as a focalizer at one point or another, sometimes only for a few pages and at other times for several chapters. This allows the various characters to reflect on not only their own thoughts and actions, but also on those of the other characters. In addition, it also allows the author to give an in-depth description of the characters' views on their own actions, as well as serving as a way to illustrate how some characters view the actions and morals of his/her friends and foes as well.

The method of characterization used by Drew Karpysyn is both direct, i.e. through statements made by the narrator about the character, and indirect, i.e. character traits can be deciphered through speech, action etc. with the direct parts mostly reserved for describing appearance (Keen 64). For example, when the character Kahlee Sanders is first introduced in *Revelation*, this is how she is described:

First Lieutenant Kahlee Sanders was smart: she was one of the Alliance's top computer and systems technicians. She was attractive: other soldiers at the base were always trying to pick her up when she wasn't on duty. She was young: at twenty-six she could expect at least another half century of healthy, productive years ahead of her. [...] Average in both height and build, Kahlee's only distinguishing feature was her shoulder-length blonde hair – a genetically recessive trait, natural blondes were nearly extinct. But her hair was a dirty blonde, with streaks edging toward shades of brown [...] She normally didn't stand out in a crowd. (59)

Note that this quote primarily describes Kahlee's appearance and physical state. It gives no insight into her morals and values. When a major character is introduced, they are most often given a fairly similar description. In contrast, discussions of a character's thoughts, actions or morals are almost exclusively done by either the character in question or by someone observing them. A good example can be found in *Revelation* as one of the antagonists, Saren Arterius, gives his thoughts on his brutal yet effective methods of completing his missions. Saren has just brutally tortured a mercenary in order to find information on a conspiracy that Saren is trying to uncover:

Saren needed to know who ordered the attack on Sidon and why. Billions of lives could be at stake, and he was more than willing to torture a single merc for hours on end if there was even the smallest chance he could learn something that might help him break the case. (150)

Please note that the words spoken (or rather thought) are Saren's own as he is the focalizer of this particular section. Quotes like these are scattered throughout all three novels. However, as mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon that we get to hear other characters' thoughts on said descriptions. An example of this can be found a few chapters after the quote above. Once again, Saren needs information but goes about obtaining it somewhat differently than when he

tortured the mercenary, though his methods might still be seen as cruel. Kahlee Sanders has the information Saren needs and her father is seriously wounded. Saren, using his legal authority as a Spectre, forbids her from taking him to a hospital until she has answered his questions. David Anderson, the protagonist of *Revelation* and the focalizer of this particular chapter, is watching: “Anderson knew right then that he didn’t like Saren. Anyone who would use the prolonged pain and suffering of a family member for leverage was a sadist and a bully” (*Revelation* 167-168). Remarks like these are found in all three novels. This allows the author to show several viewpoints of one particular action or character. This is also a good example of how the author leaves it up to the reader to decide which character he/she considers to be right. Saren considers the suffering of one to be a small price to pay if it means helping a larger number of people, while Anderson considers such methods too sadistic and cruel to be worth it. Neither position is described as more right than the other, so it all comes down to the reader to decide whose argument he/she wants to side with.

Occasionally, characters openly confront each other about their moral principles, which sometimes result in an almost philosophical discussion. These discussions usually provide massive insight into the characters in question and serve as a demonstration of the novels’ method of indirect characterization. The following dialogue is taken from *Ascension*, where three characters (Kahlee Sanders, Paul Grayson and Pel) are discussing the use of medical experiments on gifted children in order to unlock their ‘biotic’ potential, experiments Grayson has allowed his adopted daughter (Gillian) to go through. Grayson starts the conversation:

“It was never meant to be like this,” he said softly. “Gillian is special. All we were trying to do was help her tap into her biotic abilities. We just wanted her to reach her full potential.”

“Kind of sound like your Ascension Project, doesn’t it?” Pel said to Kahlee, grinning.

“We would never do anything to endanger the life of a student!” she shot back at him, finally showing some anger. “Nothing is worth that risk!”

“What if it meant helping dozen -or even thousands- of other lives?” Grayson asked quietly. “What if your child had the potential to be a savior of the entire human race? What is that worth? Then what would you risk?”

“In other words,” Pel chimed in, still grinning, “if you want to make an omelet, you have to break a few eggs.” (204)

Once again we have an instance where the reader has to decide who he or she considers to be right. Both sides of the argument are presented, yet neither position is described as morally superior. While not every instance of characterization follows the exact “rules” that have been mentioned above, they are, in general, the novels’ primary ways of depicting the various characters, their personalities and their philosophical attitude.

### **The principle of equal interests**

The field of moral philosophy is extremely complicated and full of equally complicated terms and expressions. Because of this, the use of such terms will be kept to a minimum and only those vital to explaining Peter Singer’s ‘principle of equal interests’ will be described. Also, the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ will be used interchangeably, as Singer does not seem to make any major distinction between the two.

In his book *Practical Ethics* (1993), Peter Singer starts out by outright stating that people who claim to be “defenders of morality” are only really defending their own moral codes (1). In other words, there is, according to him, no such thing as a single overarching morality.

The principle of equal interests is a modified version of a philosophical theory known as ‘utilitarianism’, a theory that, simply put, states that actions may be considered right if they promote happiness and prevent suffering, and may be considered wrong if the opposite effect is achieved (Richard Norman 57). As a result, few actions can be seen as always being either right or wrong. For example, lying can be seen as both good and bad depending on the situation (Singer 3). However, Singer does not believe that morality is completely relative. Rather, he insists that the moral codes we were brought up with may have a major influence on us, but once we start reflecting on them we can decide for ourselves whether to follow them or not. In order to demonstrate that ‘hardcore’ relativism does not really work, Singer speaks of two societies, one in favor of slavery and the other against it. If we apply a purely relativistic view in this discussion, then there is no conflict as both sides of the argument are right (since morals are relative, and at the same time, equal). In other words, the relativistic view makes it impossible to argue that slavery is unethical and obviously, claiming that it is unethical is highly possible. As such, moral relativism could be seen as deeply flawed. Singer states that even though it is imperfect, ethical subjectivism, i.e. the theory that there are no objective values and that the ‘values’ we assign are expressions of our own state of mind (Norman 163), should be the preferred way of looking at things. His motivation for this is that



“it makes ethical judgments depend on the approval or disapproval of the person making the judgment, rather than the person’s society” (Singer 6). In other words, perceptions of morality should have their roots in the individual rather than society as a whole.

Next, Singer further stresses that moral and ethical codes are highly personal. He says that even though there are people who live according to what may seem like very unconventional ethical beliefs, they are still living according to ethical standards “*if they believe, for any reason, that it is right to do as they are doing*” (10). In other words, if people are prepared to properly justify their actions, no matter how wrong they may seem to us, they are living according to an ethical standard. Hence it would not be correct to call what they do ‘unethical’. However, if they cannot give us a proper justification for what they are doing, then we may dismiss their claim that what they are doing is ethical. Singer then goes on to claim that self-interest alone is not a proper justification. He states that it must be compatible with ‘broader’ ethical ideas as ethics imply that the bigger picture is more important than the individual (10). He says that “[e]thics require us to go beyond ‘I’ and ‘you’ to the universal law, the universalisable [sic] judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever we choose to call it” (12).

This is where the concept of ‘interests’ enters the picture. Since Singer claims that ethics must be viewed from a universal point of view, we must accept that our own interests cannot be given preferential treatment just because they are *our* interests. It is, of course, very natural to place one’s own interests first, but when thinking ethically we must be prepared to take the interests of other’s into consideration as well (12-13). It should also be noted that Singer defines interests as “anything people desire [...] (unless it is incompatible with another desire or desires)” (13). Thus, in order to perform a ‘good’ action, a person must take into consideration not only her own interest, but also all those affected by her decision. She must try to act in such a way that the interests of all those involved are maximized. In other words; “I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected” (13). It should be pointed out that this is somewhat of a departure from traditional utilitarianism. The main difference is that Singer has redefined “best consequence” as the maximizing of the affected people’s interests as opposed to simply increase happiness and/or minimize suffering. Singer admits that there are some ethical ideals that do not quite work

with utilitarianism and that we should not be afraid to go beyond that particular theory. He does however consider it to be a good place to start (14).<sup>1</sup>

The reason why this philosophical principle is a suitable way to examine the moral ambiguities in the *Mass Effect*-trilogy is because many of the dilemmas in the novels deal with issues regarding the happiness of many at the cost of the happiness of a few. As such, they lend themselves very well to a utilitarian study. However, it could be argued that it is easier to “measure” a person’s interests (at least when using Singer’s definition of the term) than it is to measure a person’s happiness since ‘happiness’ is extremely hard to define. In light of this, the principle of equal interests seems to be more suitable for examining these novels than the original version of utilitarianism. Also, many of Singer’s other concepts, such as the different ‘levels of consciousness’ (which will be further explained later) lend themselves very well to many of the issues that will be discussed in this essay.

### **Anderson and Saren, can either one claim moral superiority?**

One of the central conflicts in *Revelation* is between David Anderson and Saren Arterius, though the conflict is not a very open one. On the contrary, it could more accurately be described as a cold war. Throughout more or less the entire novel they have the same goal (discovering who was behind an attack on a research base and bring those responsible to justice) but go about achieving this goal somewhat differently. Can either one claim that their method is more ethical than the other?

At the time of *Revelation*, Anderson is still fairly young but already much respected within the military. He is described as a soldier through and through, with everything this entails. On several occasions it is made very clear that he puts his military career above everything else, even to the point of letting his marriage fall apart. At the very beginning of the novel, Anderson is engaged and is convinced that having someone waiting for him at home will

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously the principle of equal interests is far more complicated than what has been described here, but for the purpose of this essay, this is about as much explanation as is needed. When dealing with certain topics some further explanations will be given. However, describing the theory as a whole is largely unnecessary as there are several aspects of it which will not be brought up in the coming chapters of this essay.

make his time in the military more bearable (16). However, as the novel flashes forward several years, it becomes clear that Anderson was not able to maintain the marriage (99). There are even instances of him chastising himself for letting feelings of affection get in the way of his job: “Sacrificing everything to be a better soldier had cost him his marriage. Now that the divorce was final he’d let his personal feelings interfere with a military assignment. Cynthia [his ex-wife] would have laughed at the irony” (*Revelation* 238). Allowing his marriage to die in this way is not something that would be seen as very moral if one uses the principle of equal interests. Anderson obviously put his own interest (his career) ahead of those of his wife and has as such given his own interests preferential treatment. On the other hand, there are times when he seems to be torn between his military attitude and an admiration for solidarity and risking one’s life to save another. At one point, members of Anderson’s team ignore several direct orders that he has given them. This puts the team at extreme risk of getting killed. However, it does result in them being able to save Anderson’s life as well as that of an injured team member. Anderson makes the following comments:

“I told you not to wait for us”, he chastised his team as they made their way back up to the *Hastings*, the privates still carrying Dah’s unconscious body between them. “I should bust each of you down a full rank for disobeying orders!” He paused to let the statement sink in. “That, or recommend you all for medals.” (59)

The reader actually never finds out what Anderson decides to do with his team. It could be argued that his indecisiveness is used to enforce the notion that the author does not take a stand in this question. Once again, it is up to the readers to pass judgment. Do they think the team did right to disobey the orders to save their captain, or were they wrong to disobey orders and put the operation, as well as their own lives, at risk? According to the principle of equal interest, the team’s actions would probably be seen as right. True, Anderson had a great interest in completing the mission, but he obviously also had an interest in saving both himself and his wounded comrade. If he had not, he would not even have attempted to save Jill Dah (the injured team member) in the first place. The remaining team put their own interest in a continued existence aside for the sake of others, and while Anderson’s interest in them obeying his orders is violated, his interest in living was maximized. While not clearly the right choice, it could be argued that the result was more in line with what Singer would call ethical than if the team had obeyed the orders.

Anderson also has an admiration for 'heroic efforts'. He shows major respect for the character of John Grissom, widely regarded as humanity's greatest hero, and Anderson even admits that Grissom was the reason he enlisted in the military (*Revelation* 15). It is not uncommon for Anderson himself to 'play the hero', facing off alone against almost impossible odds and putting himself at great risk in order to save others. Indeed, saving people in a noble fashion seems to be Anderson's ideal way of doing things. On no less than three occasions does he willingly throw himself into extremely dangerous situations not knowing if he can get out of them alive.

While it might be easy to classify Anderson as a traditional hero, he has a few traits that do not really fit that archetype. He expresses a willingness to hurt his divorce attorney even though the attorney has only done his job (*Revelation* 99), he is willing to outright lie to achieve his goals (163), he goes behind the back of the Counsel to cover up illegal Alliance activities and seems ready to kill a Spectre if necessary (122). He is also a bit naïve as he is very quick to trust Kahlee Sanders and her story, despite not having much reason to do so (173), and it eventually turns out that him trusting her so quickly allowed her to lie to him and only tell him half-truths (237-238). And finally, and possibly the most striking departure from the traditional hero, Anderson does at times kill people in cold blood, even when he has a chance to save them. This occurs late in the novel as Anderson fights some mercenaries who killed a group of Alliance soldiers. After one of them has been wounded, he pleads for his life: "Please" [...] "Skarr's the one who gave the order to execute those Alliance soldiers. I didn't even want to kill them." "But you did," Anderson answered, then fired a single shot right between the batarian's eyes" (*Revelation* 259). Not long thereafter, Anderson kills an entire room of guards: "It wasn't a fair and honorable fight; it was a massacre. Considering the victims, Anderson didn't even feel bad" (*Revelation* 300). What really puts this at odds with the principle of equal interests is not only the killing itself, but the fact that Anderson seems to do it out of revenge, which could be seen as promoting his own interest (the desire to avenge) at the cost several lives. With all of this in mind, it is hard to claim that Anderson is a noble hero through and through.

Saren Arterius is not given as attention as Anderson in terms of characterization. However, he is presented in such a way that there can be no mistake about his personality. He is described as one of the most infamous Spectres around and is known for three things: "his ruthlessness,

his loyalty to the Counsel, and his ability to get results” (*Revelation* 186). At several points in the novel, Saren uses the suffering of others in order to get information. However, he claims that he does not hurt people if there is nothing to gain from it. He says that “[t]orture is only useful if it has a purpose” (*Revelation* 146). While it is hard to argue that Saren uses violence because he enjoys it, his personal motto makes it clear that he is willing to bend the criteria for what is deemed necessary if needed. Here is a dialogue between Saren, Anderson and Kahlee:

“You’re going to kill us?” Kahlee exclaimed, her voice rising in shock and disbelief.

“I have two rules I follow,” Saren explained. “The first is: never kill someone without a reason.”

“And the second?” Anderson asked, suspicious.

“You can always find a reason to kill someone.” - (*Revelation* 169)

Unlike Anderson, Saren openly admits that he considers the sacrifice of one life to be a small price to pay if it means helping several other lives. He states this both through action and speech (see for example the quote on page 7 of this essay). There is however one quote where he makes his position on the matter very clear. Saren has used Kahlee Sanders as bait in order to find the location of Edan, the man responsible for the attack on the Alliance research base, as well as a crazed scientist, Dr. Qian. Anderson, who is supposed to work alongside Saren in capturing these men, finds out what Saren has done and is outraged. Saren responds:

“This is what it means to be a Spectre” [...] “Sacrificing one life for the sake of millions. Qian’s research is a threat to every species in Citadel space. I saw a chance to stop him at the cost of a few dozen lives. The math is simple, human... but few people are able to do it right.” (*Revelation* 283-284)

So far it is not easy to conclude whether Anderson or Saren is the more moral person. Even though Anderson may have a slightly more ‘noble’ attitude towards what he does, it is hard to argue that he is the more moral person. The thing that makes both men immoral, especially if one examines their actions using the principle of equal interests, is their disregard for the lives of other beings. Peter Singer makes it clear that unless a person has a death wish of some kind, killing said person is wrong. This is because the person in question has an interest in continuing living and killing him/her would violate that interest (Singer 94). Given that the

interest in living could be seen as one of the most significant interest of them all, violating it would be seen a very immoral thing indeed. Saren openly admits that he considers the death of one to be a worthy sacrifice if it helps enough people. Anderson, on the other hand, does not condone this line of reasoning and seems to think that this kind of pain should be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, the only times Anderson has openly shown his dislike for Saren's methods is when Kahlee Sanders, a woman he is clearly infatuated with, has been the potential sacrifice. It could be argued that Anderson's feelings for Kahlee keep him from seeing the situation rationally, and as such he has put his own interests (his desire to be with Kahlee) ahead of the interests of those who might be helped by sacrificing one life. Obviously, Saren's methods are not exactly compatible with the principle of equal interests as it violates the interest of life for at least one person. Despite this, it could be argued that if it helps enough people, it could be considered worth it.

However, Saren's actions in the last few chapters of *Revelation* are what eventually turn the 'moral compass' in Anderson's direction. In order to flush out his target, Saren blows up a refinery, killing the workers inside and the people living in the nearby work camp. Not only that, but the explosion releases toxic fumes into the atmosphere, poisoning hundreds of civilians. He also kills Edan and Dr. Qian and takes Qian's research for himself. Most of this appears to be done to promote Saren's own interests. When he confronts Edan and Qian, Edan studies Saren's eyes: "Edan recognized the look in Saren's eye. He'd made his fortune of that look: hunger, desire, the lust to possess" (*Revelation* 308). This implies that Saren was willing to kill hundreds of people in order to satisfy his own interest, clearly doing what the principle of equal interest deems to be wrong. Towards the very end of the novel it is revealed that Saren intends to use Qian's discovery, a massive abandoned ship known as '*Sovereign*', to make the turians the dominant species of the galaxy. While it could be argued that he once again seeks to enrich the lives of many at the cost of a few (relatively speaking), it is obvious that this desire comes, once again, from his own interests. Not only that, but it is doubtful that the rest of the galaxy's species have any interest in being subjected to turian rule. As such, Saren's plans would also be considered wrong when using the principle of equal interests. Even though Saren's actions makes him the more immoral of him and Anderson, the difference in their attitude towards the suffering of the few to help many seems to be fairly hard to settle with Singer's theory. While it makes it clear that killing someone is a bad thing, it may be argued that the interests of those who might benefit from the sacrifice eventually

make it worth it. However, given Singer's justification for voluntary euthanasia (assisted suicide), it is very doubtful that his theory would accept such a justification for Saren's methods. In short, Singer claims that one's desire (interest) to die outweighs those of the people who oppose euthanasia because they think it immoral, i.e. has an interest in the person not dying (Singer 200). On the other hand, if the sacrifice is never made, the opportunity of helping a great number of people could potentially be lost, resulting in even more people's interests being violated. As such, the overall result could be far worse than it would have if the sacrifice had been made. Both approaches present several dilemmas, and demonstrating that one is more valid than the other is not an easy thing to do. In this essay, Singer's principle (maximization of the interests of those affected) is used, but if one approached this problem using another moral philosophical theory, the result may have been very different, and even with the current theory the answer is not crystal clear. With all this in mind, it is obvious that in the end the reader of the novel will have to decide for him- or herself which approach they consider to be the right one.

### **The Quarrians and the Geth – the interests of synthetic life**

One of the most interesting dilemmas presented in the *Mass Effect*-trilogy is that of the quarrians and the geth. It is also one of the most difficult ones to settle, even with a moral philosophical theory as guidance. Before any analysis can be done, it is necessary to explain the situation and from where the dilemma arose.

Three hundred years before the events of the novels, the quarrians (a fictional race) were looking for a way to create a synthetic work force which was "expandable and expendable" (*Revelation* 116). This resulted in the creation of the 'geth'. The geth had no proper artificial intelligence, but they were programmed to be able to carry out fairly complex tasks without needing extra instructions. However, it soon appeared that geth individuals could 'connect' to each other, and when they did, they became one unit and as such, gained increased intelligence. Soon the geth had started to become self-aware. They begun questioning their purpose, why they existed, and even started wondering if they had a soul (this is revealed during a dialogue in the second installment of the *Mass Effect* video game-series, *Mass Effect 2* (2010)). Eventually the geth rebelled against their masters and drove them from their home world, forcing the quarrians to live on a massive fleet of ships known as the Migrant Fleet. The quarrians did not have the numbers or the military power to reclaim their world, and as such

have now become what can only be described as intergalactic nomads. The geth remained on the quarian home world and, despite the galaxy fearing a massive attack, remained silent and showed no interest in interacting with the other species.

Living on sterile ships gradually changed the physiology of the quarian people. Life aboard the Fleet more or less eliminated the quarians' already weak immune-system. As such, every quarian is forced to constantly wear an 'enviro-suit' which protects them from germs and bacteria. However, this also presents a problem for the future of their people. Colonizing a new world has been made extremely difficult as it would take several generations for them to adapt to the new environment, meaning that the current population of the Fleet would most likely not live to see their civilization restored. As such, it would be far more viable to simply take back their home world where they could readapt faster. Not only that, but centuries of living aboard spaceships has led to a strong love for tradition among quarian people and most seem to enjoy the relative safety aboard the Fleet. Simply put, there is also a wide spread fear of change. This is noted by Mal, one of the captains in the Fleet (*Ascension* 296). This is where the dilemma enters the picture. Should the quarians throw their entire fleet at the geth in an attempt to take back their home or should they start exploring uncharted regions of space in search of a new planet to colonize, with all the hardships this would entail? Or should they, as suggested by the 'Admiralty' (the top rulers of the Migrant Fleet), try and find a way to take control of the geth once again and return them to their original state, a synthetic work force (*Ascension* 285)?

While it may be tempting to just analyze this from the quarians' point of view and base the entire analysis on their interests, it is necessary to also take a closer at the geth. Do they have any 'real' interests and if they do, on what level should we consider them when analyzing the various options that the quarians have? In order to determine what interests the geth may actually have, it is useful to examine Peter Singer's views on different levels of consciousness. Singer makes a distinction between self-conscious and conscious beings. A self conscious being is described as "being aware of itself as a distinct entity, with a past and a future. [...] A being aware of itself in this way will be capable of having desires about its own future" (Singer 90). Singer adds that "[t]o take the lives of any of these creatures without their consent, is to thwart their desires of the future" (90). When discussing 'conscious life', Singer makes the following comments: "There are many beings who are sentient and capable of



experiencing pleasure and pain, but are not rational and self-conscious and so not persons” (101). As for what is included in this category, Singer uses the examples of “[m]any non-human animals [...] newborn infants and some intellectually disabled humans” (101).

With these definitions in mind, what category does the geth fall into? This is a very complex question since the geth’s intelligence does not work in the same way as, for example, humans’. A single geth completely isolated appears to have little or no intelligence at all. However, when linked up to other geth, they are capable of more complex thoughts. Indications of this may be found in dialogues from *Mass Effect 2* (the second video game) between Commander Shepard and a geth known as ‘Legion’. When discussing geth intelligence Legion states that: “To be isolated within a single platform is to be reduced. We see less. Comprehend less. It is quieter”. Legion explains that geth link together to exchange “data-memories and program updates” and that this is what gives them complexity. In addition, the geth do not seem to have any concept of individuality. In the same dialogue as mentioned above, Shepard asks “If you exchange data --memories-- how do you keep track of which ones are yours? How do you stay”you”?” to which Legion replies “There is only “we”. We were created to share data among ourselves. The difference between geth is perspective”. However, it later becomes apparent that even though the geth function very differently from organic life, they are indeed capable of having interests. Legion does at several points express its (geth are asexual) desire to accomplish certain goals in order to protect its people. This can be classified as an interest in a continued existence. Also, the geth seem to be highly aware of their beginning and potential end. The only criteria they cannot fulfill is “being aware of itself as a distinct entity” (Singer 90). However, it could be argued that even though the geth do not see themselves as individuals, they are still of one mind, which could be seen as one entity. Based on the information provided on how the geth function, it could be argued that they should (at least when linked together) be considered self-conscious beings.

With the geth’s level of consciousness established, we can now approach the dilemma facing the quarians. One thing becomes quite obvious from the outset: attacking the geth head on is not a viable alternative. Not only would this violate the geth’s interest in continued living, but also that of the quarians who would be forced into the battle against their will. In addition; there is no guarantee that the quarians would actually win. An outright war with the geth could lead to the annihilation of their entire race. Moreover, an attack would be made solely

out of self-interest on the quarian's part and as such it would be completely at odds with the principle of equal interests. The same problem arises with the idea to regain control of the geth and turn them back into the labor force they were originally. Obviously the geth have an interest in their continued existence, one where they are free to make their own choices and build their own future (this is also stated by Legion in *Mass Effect 2*). To rob them of their free will would be a direct violation of not only that interest, but every other interest they ever had or would have as it would disable their ability to think logically. And again, this would be purely out of self interest and as such, it is not a morally viable option.

According to the principle, it seems obvious that what the quarians should do is look for a new planet to colonize. According to captain Mal, the Migrant Fleet is slowly but steadily crumbling and as such they cannot remain on their ships for much longer. He says that their ships are deteriorating and that they will soon run out of livable space (*Ascension 296*). He states that their best option for survival is to send ships on exploratory missions, which could take two to five years, and travel through unexplored 'mass relays' (296). A mass relay is a form of gateway allowing for intergalactic travel. Each relay is linked to another, allowing for passage back and forth between them. However not all of them have been mapped and these might send the ship traveling through them into a black hole or straight into a sun (*Revelation 12*). If these exploratory missions failed, Mal says the quarians would have to try and take their world back from the geth (*Ascension 297*). However, this approach comes with its own set of dilemmas. Given that the exploration missions could take several years to finish, it would leave the Fleet crippled while they wait for them to return, more or less handicapping the quarians. Also, given the length of the missions, it will be hard for those ships staying behind to know whether a mission is just taking long or whether the ship in question has been destroyed or has run into any other kind of problem.

Another problem is that there is no guarantee that the missions would succeed and that the ships would actually find any suitable planets. Given Mal's suggestion that they should send some of the largest ships in the Fleet (*Ascension 296*), the Fleet could be potentially weakened if those ships were lost during the missions. If it then came to a showdown with the geth, the quarians would have even less of a chance of victory. There is also the issue of adapting to a new home planet. As previously mentioned, a quarian's immune system is extremely weak and as such it would take several generations for them to adapt to the new environment. In

other words, the lives of the quarians currently living on Migrant Fleet would not change all that much and it is made clear from various dialogues in *Mass Effect 2* that most currently living quarians have a very strong interest in changing their lifestyle. As such, sending out the ships could be seen as a violation of their interest of being able to live a life where they do not have to wear an enviro-suit. Also, should the missions fail and leave the Fleet too weak to engage the geth, it could mean the potential end of the quarian race, violating every single quarian's desire to continue living. While it might be the most viable option out of the three presented, as it avoids violating the interests of the geth, it is hard to argue that it is a through and through "good" alternative. It has the potential to greatly weaken the Fleet and it risks violating the interests of several members of the quarian population.

There is, however, one aspect of this entire dilemma that has not been brought up yet, and that is the question of whether organic beings should respect the interests of synthetic life. Even if the geth are capable of rational thoughts, they are after all machines, created by organics. Do organics have an obligation to take their interests into account when making this decision, or can they be dismissed as a byproduct of a failed experiment? Not too surprisingly, this is an area which Singer does not cover in *Practical Ethics*, meaning there is no true guidance to be found there. There is also the issue of rightful ownership. It could be argued that the quarians are indeed entitled to their planet, and possibly even entitled to ownership of the geth. If we apply both of these factors, then the most reasonable approach to this dilemma would be to try and retake control of the geth and the planet. The reason this would be the most morally sensible approach would be because it avoids the risks of the exploratory missions and it avoids direct confrontation, meaning less quarians would die in combat. If we dismiss the interests of the geth on the basis of them being synthetic life and only focus on the interests of the quarians, then the exploratory missions seem needlessly risky when there are safer alternatives at hand.

As can be deduced from the sections above, this dilemma has several layers of problem, not all of which can be solved using the principle of equal interest. It becomes more and more obvious that it is up to us, as readers of the novels, to be the judge of which alternative could be considered the most ethical. Do we accept the interests of the geth as equal to those of organics? Are the quarians entitled to their home world or did they lose that entitlement when they created the geth? Are the exploratory missions worth the risk or do they bring too much

danger to the Migrant Fleet? These are all questions whose answer will vary greatly depending on the philosophical views of the reader. Even with a philosophical theory as a guideline, a clearly right answer seems to be quite difficult to come up with. It may then be concluded once again that the author does not depict one alternative as the morally superior. It should be noted that in the end, the quarians decide to send a few ships to search for new planets. However this is done after Cerberus attacks the Fleet, and as such the decision could be seen as an act of panic. Also, by the time of *Mass Effect 2*, which is set roughly two years later, the dilemma still stands and the Admiralty is still considering going to war with the geth.

### **Cerberus, a possible exception to the rule?**

So far both dilemmas brought up in essay (that of Saren and Anderson and that of the quarians and the geth) have been deemed to be morally ambiguous. However, there is one area of the novels which may prove to be the exception from the rule. In other words, this third dilemma has the potential to be one of few areas where the author has depicted a moral conflict which may not be as ambiguous as the other ones. This dilemma is the agenda of the pro-human organization Cerberus. The reason why this may be seen as one of the exception to the pattern that has been seen so far in this essay (ambiguity) is because Cerberus is the only entity who serves as a novel's antagonist twice. They were the main antagonist in *Ascension* and to a fairly large degree in *Retribution* as well. Is Cerberus as ambiguous as the other dilemmas discussed in this essay, or is it one of the few exceptions to the rule? Let us start with a brief summary of what Cerberus is and what they do.

Cerberus is introduced in the prologue to *Ascension*. They are described as an organization with humanity's best interests in mind. As stated in the prologue: "The people of Earth needed someone to champion their cause. They needed patriots and heroes willing to make the necessary sacrifices to elevate the human race above its interstellar rivals. They needed Cerberus, and Cerberus couldn't exist without the Illusive Man" (*Ascension* 3). This 'Illusive Man' is the leader of Cerberus. He formed the organization because he did not think the Alliance was competent enough to champion the interests of the human race. He describes the Alliance as "a clumsy, blunt instrument weighed down by laws, convention and the crushing weight of public opinion" (*Ascension* 2). Since Cerberus does not have to worry about such things, their methods take on a slightly different character. The Illusive Man himself

acknowledges that there are those who call what he does unethical, criminal, and immoral (3). He is aware of the implications of his work, but he does not seem worried, as he is certain that history will “vindicate him” (3). Up until the events of *Mass Effect 2* and later *Retribution*, Cerberus mainly dealt with various kinds of espionage (both on the Alliance and the other races), sabotage and biological experiments, most notably experiments that would enhance human biotic (a form of telekinesis) powers. Their primary test subject was none other than Gillian Grayson, the adopted daughter of Paul Grayson. *Ascension* focuses on Cerberus’ experiments on Gillian and their struggle to get her back once she slips out of their grasp.

However, by the time of *Retribution*, their focus has shifted somewhat. The Illusive man has learned that *Sovereign*, the massive starship used by Saren Arterius during the events of *Mass Effect* (2007), the first video game of the series, was in fact a ‘Reaper’. The Reapers are sentient machines bent on the destruction (or rather ‘harvesting’) of all organic life. According to the Illusive Man, there is no greater threat to the known galaxy than the Reapers (*Retribution* 3). Given that few people actually believe the Reapers to exist, the Illusive Man made it his mission to fight them in whatever way he could. As such, Cerberus appears to have shifted focus and is now as equally dedicated to stopping the Reapers as it is to elevate humanity. During the events of *Mass Effect 2*, Commander Shepard was then recruited by Cerberus to fight the mysterious ‘Collectors’ and their Reaper-masters. Shepard stopped the Collectors, allowing Cerberus to salvage “key pieces of technology from the remains of the Collector operation” (*Retribution* 7). In order to gain further knowledge of the Reapers, the Illusive Man decided that the best way to gain this knowledge was to replicate the experiments the Collectors had carried out on their prisoners and study the effects. The Illusive Man decided that the traitor from *Ascension*, Paul Grayson, would be the most suitable test subject. This is the starting point for the events of *Retribution*. When examining the activities of Cerberus with the help of the theory of equal interests, primary focus will be placed on their two primary activities in the novels; the experiments performed on Gillian and the subsequent hunt for her and the experiments performed on Grayson in *Retribution*.

Almost from the first time it is mentioned, it is obvious that the Illusive Man’s plans for Gillian will not be compatible with Singer’s theory. The first time she is mentioned, the Illusive Man refers to Gillian as their “asset inside the Ascension Project” (*Ascension* 5). This makes it obvious that the Illusive Man sees Gillian more as a tool rather than a person. Indeed,

he refers to her as an “asset” both in the prologue and the epilogue (*Ascension* 340). The notion that he does not see her as a person is enhanced further by examining the circumstances of how Cerberus “acquired” Gillian. She originally came from a colony which suffered a massive toxic disaster when a transport ship exploded in mid-air and covered the entire colony in a cloud of ‘element zero’ (a substance used for several purposes within the *Mass Effect*-universe). This mostly affected unborn babies, resulting in “cancer, birth defect, and even spontaneous abortion” (*Ascension* 38). However, it also resulted in several children developing biotic capabilities. Gillian was one of these children, and along with her biotic talents, she also developed autism. It is heavily implied that Cerberus was responsible for destroying the transport ship (*Ascension* 66). Next, Gillian was taken from her biological parents and given to Paul Grayson. It is never revealed what exactly happened to them, but even Grayson suspects that Gillian was taken by force: “*Grayson wondered what had happened to the girl’s real mother and father, but he wasn’t foolish enough to ask*” (*Ascension* 67).

Gillian never knew that Grayson was not her real father, but he raised her as his own. This was part of the Illusive Man’s plan as well, as he wanted her to fully trust Grayson (67). Next, Gillian was enrolled into the Ascension Project, a project run by the Alliance to help biotic children properly understand and use their abilities. It was overseen by none other than Kahlee Sanders. Once Gillian was in the project, Cerberus would occasionally use experimental drugs on her in order to try and force her biotic development. This was done by Grayson, who brought the drugs on his visits to the Grissom Academy (the name of the school where the Ascension Project conducted its business) and Jiro Toshiwa, a Cerberus agent who had infiltrated the project’s medical staff. Jiro is eventually discovered and Kahlee and the academy’s security chief, Hendel Mitra, takes Gillian away from the academy. After a run-in with a quarian named Lemm, they try to hide Gillian on the Migrant Fleet. Cerberus pursues them and attempts to get Gillian back. The mission fails due to Grayson committing treason against Cerberus. Gillian and Hendel stay aboard one of the ships sent out by the quarians to find a new potential home world for the quarians and as such, it is almost impossible for Cerberus to find Gillian.

If this sequence of events is examined using the principle of equal interests, it becomes very obvious that the Illusive Man and Cerberus have violated a great number of interests. First,

there are those of the crew members of the destroyed transport ship who lost their lives in the assumed sabotage. Then there are those of the thousands of colonists who were showered in element zero. Even though the novel does not mention that adults suffered any major consequences, those expecting children appear to have suffered a great deal as their children became sick or even died. If the parents had any interest in being able to give these children a 'normal' life, they were most certainly violated. Next there is Gillian's mother and father, who we can assume had an interest in keeping Gillian. If it is also assumed that Cerberus killed them, then their interest in a continued existence was also not respected. Then there are the conflicted interests of Grayson. Throughout the novel he is torn between his loyalty to Cerberus and his love for Gillian, as well as his desire to keep her safe. When the Illusive Man asks him if he feels torn over what is being done to Gillian, Gray responds: "'It tears me apart whenever I think about it. [...] But I understand why it must be done. I see how it serves the greater good. I believe in our cause'" (*Ascension* 259). Given that he decides to betray Cerberus in the end, it may be concluded that his true interest was to keep Gillian safe. Considering what was done to Gillian, it could be said that this violated Grayson's interests, even if he allowed that to happen. Finally, there are the interests of the quarrians living aboard the *Idenna* (the ship Gillian was hidden on, as well as the ship Mal is captain over). Seeto, one of the inhabitants of the *Idenna*, states that there are 693 quarrians living aboard the ship (*Ascension* 268). According to Grayson, Cerberus intended to more or less destroy the entire ship as a distraction while he and his team escaped with Gillian (*Ascension* 330). This would put the lives of everyone aboard at risk, and even if they survived, it would leave them without a home. It is safe to assume that destroying the ship would violate several interests of every quarrian on it. Even if this plan did not succeed, the mere fact that it was even planned could be seen as a potential violation of interests.

Finally, there is Gillian. Given her condition (autism) and her past, it is hard to figure out if she feels the experiments on her violate her interests. In fact, not much is known about how Gillian sees the world around her. Also, the novel never makes it clear if Gillian even knows she is being experimented on, as she seems to think that the injections Jiro gives her are part of her medication. What we do know is that she is trying to fit in with the other children at the academy: "She was painfully aware that she was different, and more than anything, she wanted to be normal" (*Ascension* 105). This adds an interesting variable to the analysis. Right before Gillian is taken away from the academy, Jiro Toshiwa gives her a new drug (138).

During the following weeks, her condition seems to improve. It is never made clear if this is a result of her not being injected with experimental drugs anymore, or if it is the effect of the one Jiro gave her just before he was caught. If it is the latter, Cerberus may just have maximized Gillian's primary interest in life. Still, given the nature of Cerberus, it is fairly safe to assume that even if Gillian had protested loudly to the way she was being treated, the Illusive Man would most likely carry on with the experiments regardless. As can be seen from this analysis, it is very clear that even though the Illusive Man claims to serve the "greater good", the amount of suffering and interests violated in his cause is simply too great for his actions to be justified. For the first time in this essay, a set of actions has been found which according to the principle of equal interest (the maximization of the interests of those affected) clearly are morally wrong.

The discussion regarding the experiments performed on Grayson is slightly less complicated. Following the events of *Mass Effect 2*, the Illusive Man has seized technology which will allow him to turn an organic life form into an avatar of the Reapers. The purpose of this is to study the effects of Reaper-indoctrination and hopefully learn more about the mysterious machines. As he has just recently been able to capture Grayson, the Illusive Man decides to make him his first test subject. The procedure involves injecting the subject with something called "self-replicating nanides" (*Retribution* 89), which will transform the subject into a part synthetic and part organic being, allowing the Reapers to influence and eventually control the subject. The idea is that Grayson would be kept alive long enough for Cerberus to study the effects of his transformation and was to be terminated before he grew too dangerous. However, after an attack on the research station where he was being held, he escapes. The Reapers are constantly increasing their influence over Grayson, sometimes controlling his body and at other times manipulating his very thoughts. The Illusive Man was part of the battle on the station, however he decided his own life was more important than killing Grayson. He then seeks aid from Aria T'Loak, referred to as the "Pirate Queen" (*Retribution* 15). Aria has her own reasons for seeking Grayson. However, the Illusive Man tells her lies and does not mention what Grayson has become, all in an attempt to make sure Aria kills Grayson rather than trying to capture him. In spite of this, Aria's men attempt to capture Grayson, but he escapes yet again. The Reapers have at this point begun accessing Grayson's memories and have taken a great interest in the Ascension Project (why they do this is never fully explained). Grayson is pursued to the Grissom Academy by Kahlee Sanders and David



Anderson, who are accompanied by Kai Leng, a Cerberus agent they managed to capture. After a brief confrontation, Grayson, now fully under the control of the Reapers, is killed by Anderson and Leng. Leng then escapes the academy and delivers his report to the Illusive Man.

Unlike many of Cerberus' other activities, the Illusive Man is fully aware of the moral implications of the experiment he intends to perform on Grayson, yet he still insists that they are necessary for the survival of the human race: "But ethics and morality had to be cast aside for the survival of the species. [...]. A handful of victims had to suffer to protect and preserve the entire human race" (*Retribution* 7). Still, as with the plan for Gillian, this project has a lot of collateral damage, violating dozens of people's interest in a continued existence. However, the most notable violations of interest are those of Grayson's. First and foremost, he obviously has an interest in being a free man as he changed his name and tried to get far away from Cerberus, and him being captured shows a distinct lack of respect for this desire. Next, he has an interest in keeping his identity and trying to ensure that the Reapers do not take control of him. This is seen not only through Grayson's thoughts and actions for a large part of the novel, but it is also noted by the Illusive Man while studying Grayson's transformation (*Retribution* 115). Grayson's desire to keep the Reapers out gets more and more violated as the novel progresses, eventually making him a prisoner in his own body. Clearly, his interest in being free is completely discarded by both Cerberus and the Reapers. Early on in the novel, Grayson also expresses a strong desire to remain drug free (during *Ascension* he was addicted to a substance called 'red sand'): "He'd cleaned himself up for Gillian's sake. She didn't deserve a junkie for a father" (*Retribution* 36). However, in order to make him more susceptible to the Reaper indoctrination, Cerberus inject him with red sand, violating his interest in staying clean for the sake of his daughter.

Grayson also has a desire to keep Kahlee Sanders safe. At the end of *Ascension* he tells the Illusive Man to: "[s]tay away from Kahlee Sanders. If you come after her, I go to the Alliance with everything I know" (*Ascension* 342). This desire carries on into *Retribution*. However, this interest is violated when Grayson attempts to send her a message telling her not to look for him and stay away from him. The Reapers sense what he is trying to do, and rewire his thought patterns, resulting in him sending a message telling her he needs to see her right away (*Retribution* 202). Just before this, Grayson realize that his struggle against the

Reapers is in vain, so he decides that he must kill himself before they cause any more harm (*Retribution* 199). The Reapers intercept him and manipulate his mind into convincing itself that suicide is “the coward’s way out” and that he is “better than that” (*Retribution* 201). In a similar case to Singer’s stance regarding voluntary euthanasia (page 13 of this essay), if one follows the principle of equal interests, Grayson’s desire to end his life should be respected and his interests outweigh those of the people who would rather see him live. However, since the Reapers stopped this from happening, this desire was overpowered and disrespected. Ironically, it would seem as if though this is the one interest of his that eventually gets maximized, as in his very final moments, he turns to Kahlee and smiles (*Retribution* 332). With all of these interests violated, as well as the lies the Illusive Man tells Aria in order to manipulate her, this series of actions simply cannot be seen as ethical according to the principle of equal interest.

What makes the mentioned actions in both of these cases even more immoral according to Singer’s theory is that they all seem to be made out of self interest. The Illusive Man keeps referring to a ‘greater good’ and that he is serving humanity. However, at no point is there anything that indicates that the majority of humans are interested in the services the Illusive Man is offering. Indeed, it could be argued that Cerberus seems to have done more harm than good, as seen in for example the destruction of the transport ship carrying element zero. By the end of *Retribution*, their only grand accomplishment is the medical resurrection of Commander Shepard. Other than that, they have very little to boast about. It is also curious how, for all the talk he makes about necessary sacrifices, the Illusive Man decides that his own life is more important than stopping Grayson: “He was a patriot, but deep down he wasn’t ready to be a martyr” (*Retribution* 144). He also acknowledges that he wanted to see Grayson suffer due to a lust for vengeance (144). With all this in mind, it could be argued that both the actions of Cerberus, as well as those of the Illusive Man personally, are largely driven by self-interest, which puts their actions very much at odds with what the principle of equal interest would deem as moral. In other words, the actions of Cerberus can, according to Singer’s theory, be called immoral and unethical.

There is, however, one variable that still adds a level of moral ambiguity to this case, and that is whether humans are equal to aliens. Does the reader of the novel think we should put human interests first or should we try to treat the interests of all races equally? To what extent

should the already established alien races dictate human actions? Should humanity subject itself to alien rule or should we seek to carve our own path? These are all questions whose answer will vary greatly depending on the philosophical attitude of the reader. As such, even though we have established that the actions of Cerberus are immoral, it could still be argued that they have humanity's best interests in mind and that their overall cause is noble even if their actions are not. In the end, the issue of Cerberus still has a level of ambiguity to it, even if it is not fully as complex as the two other dilemmas discussed in this essay.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this essay was to demonstrate that the three *Mass Effect* novels were written in such a way that the reader was forced to take a stance in morally ambiguous situations and that the author did not describe one "moral path" as more correct than any other. This was demonstrated using Peter Singer's principle of equal interests, a moral philosophical theory stating that in order for an action to be considered good, it must maximize the interests of all those affected by the action. Three cases were examined: Saren and Anderson, the quarians and the geth and lastly Cerberus. What could be concluded from each case was that they were indeed ambiguous, even if the principle of equal interests was applied. There were simply too many variables in place to determine a morally superior path. This was usually made even more complicated by the fact that at least two cases were connected to a larger philosophical question that could not be easily solved using the principle of equal interest. In the case of the quarians and the geth, it was whether organic beings should consider artificial beings as equals, and in the case of Cerberus to what extent humanity should demand independence from other alien races. After examining all three cases, it can be concluded that the novels are indeed written in such a fashion that they leave it up to the reader to decide for him- or herself which moral path they consider to be the most reasonable. The principle of equal interest, or any moral philosophical theory for that matter, can offer some guidance in the dilemmas, but ultimately they cannot deal with the many layers of variables brought up in each dilemma. In the end, the readers' own morals and values will have to determine their stance in the morally ambiguous situations presented in the novel.

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