The Last of Us

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I don't write about American popular culture much. It's not that I don't participate in it — I do, although not as fervently as many Americans. Mostly, though, I don't find pop culture compelling enough to warrant my time writing about it or yours reading whatever I might write about it.

I'm making an exception this week. The nine-episode first season of the new HBO-Max series "The Last of Us" has been running since January of this year, with one episode per week made available to stream. Last night — Sunday evening, March 13th — was the finale for the first season. A second season has been green-lit and funded, but production hasn't yet begun. That second season probably won't air until 2024 or even 2025.

This TV series is based on a 2013 video game of the same title. In fact, the TV show is a faithful replica of the video game version, not quite literally scene-for-scene, but close. Some dialogue was changed, and new scenes were added in various episodes, mainly to explore and flesh out the backstory of the context (the apocalyptic plant-based fungal disease that turned most of humanity into monstrous zombies) or the personal stories of the main characters. Mostly, though, the TV series remained remarkably true to its video game origins.

The finale of this initial series, based as it was on only a single season, wasn't nearly as big a pop culture event as, say, the last-episode series finale of The Sopranos or, more recently, Game of Thrones, but that's to be expected, since those earlier series ran for six and eight years respectively. Still, for a one-season event, Sunday's finale of "The Last of Us" was this year's first pop culture watershed moment, commanding a substantial streaming audience of 8.1 million viewers on Sunday night alone.

Part of the reason for the show's success, and almost the entire reason I'm writing a post about it, is due to the central questions raised by the finale. The context of the series isn't new or striking, of course. Like so many video games and TV shows before it — dating all the way back to movies and the early days of television in the 1950s — the setting is about what's left of humanity struggling through a post-apocalyptic world where civilization has been destroyed. That scenario is so ho-hum commonplace as to be almost banal these days.

No, what's compelling about "The Last of Us" is the story it tells about the protagonists journeys and the difficult moral issue it raises.

Turns out that the main protagonist and heroine of the story, a 10-year-old girl named Ellie, is biologically immune to fungal infection. If her bodily immunity could somehow be replicated, it might save what's left of humanity and allow a new civilization to be built by a recovering human species. The other protagonist is Joel, a man who has a violent past — not surprising, since violence in the post-apocalyptic world has been typical of most survivors). Joel had a daughter Ellie's age, but she was killed, and Joel's grief and guilt over his daughter's death (since he feels that he failed to protect her) has left him psychologically traumatized and emotionally incapacitated. Yes, Joel is a survivor, but he's so damaged that he's lost whatever humanity he once had.

Joel takes on the mission of guiding Ellie across America — from Boston, Massachusetts, all the way to Salt Lake City, Utah — where people are waiting for Ellie to manufacture the immunity vaccine. The arc of storytelling in the nine episodes in the first season is about the challenges, travails, and experiences these two damaged protagonists undergo — the dangers they face, the situations they encounter, and the people they meet. Central to all this, and underlying everything, is the gradual bond of love and family that develops between Ellie and Joel, a band that begins tentatively, with great doubt and difficulty, but which progresses to become stronger throughout the nine episodes, and has by the finale become as strong as the other theme of saving humanity. Initially, Joel is abrasive and Ellie is cynically mistrustful, but by the finale their cold negativity toward each other has been gradually eroded and finally replaced entirely by warmth, affection, mutual gratitude, and profoundly deep love. They have become father and daughter.

The twist in the story isn't fully revealed until late in the series (although even new viewers may suspect it early on). To extract Ellie's biological immunity to the fungus and manufacture the vaccine that might save humanity, she will have to die. Ellie never learns this, and Joel doesn't find out that harsh fact until halfway through the finale — although the people in the group that awaits them in Salt Lake City (called "Fireflies") do know it. That group includes one character, a woman named Marlene, who was a dear friend of Ellie's mother and originally enlisted Joel to protect Ellie on their cross-country journey. Marlene appears critically in only the first and last episodes. She too loves Ellie, but Marlene believes that the future of humanity rests on sacrificing her, and that possibility is more important to Marlene than her personal love for Ellie.

In the finale, when Joel learns that Ellie will be killed, he goes on a rampage, killing many of the Fireflies without hesitation or remorse — lots of them, including Marlene — in order to rescue Ellie and prevent her from undergoing

the medical procedure that will kill her. Having first lost his own daughter, but then given a "second chance" at life by meeting and bonding with Ellie, Joel doesn't hesitate to choose her over humanity. He may turn into a monster — a killing machine — to rescue her, but he has no conflict at all about doing so.

Therein lies the terrible moral question at the heart of the series. Is Marlene justified in her reluctant but firm willingness to sacrifice Ellie for the greater good of humanity as a whole? Or is Joel justified for choosing to murderously protect the life of his now-beloved "adopted" daughter over the decidedly more iffy prospect of perhaps saving humanity?

After Ellie has been rescued and she and Joel are leaving Salt Lake City, heading back to Joel's brother Tommy's encampment in Wyoming, Ellie asks Joel to tell her the truth about what happened and whether Marlene survived. She was anesthetized and unconscious on the operating table, so she knows nothing of what Joel did. After a moment's hesitation, Joel lies to her about all of it. He does so for many reasons — among them guilt over his recent killing spree, the fatherly wish to protect Ellie from the savagery that occurred, and Joel's wanting her not to suffer any personal remorse about not sacrificing herself to maybe save humanity. Ellie says OK, but the look on her face in the last shot of that final scene makes it uncertain if she truly believes what Joel told her. Perhaps we'll find out in the second series of "The Last of Us."

In the aftermath of the finale's airing last Sunday evening, social media has been ablaze with opinions about this. Seemingly hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of viewers hold strong and often absolute opinions about who's right and who's wrong, and whether Joel or Marlene are good or evil. From the little slice of this I've seen, I'd say that the votes are just about divided down the middle — pretty much 50/50. What I haven't seen any of are reports of social media posts that take the middle ground, where the poster doesn't have a firm judgment about which decision is right or wrong. I'd like to step into that gap with this commentary.

In my understanding, the show present us with the central, paradoxical problem between Individuality and Collectivity. In the language and metaphors of Moral Psychology, this is about the amygdala's biologically fear-based function that causes us to love and trust those who are like us, and conversely, for us to hate and fear those we see as not like us. This is the "Us-versus-Them" dilemma. The vexing question is *Who is Us, and Who is Them?* Of particular concern is the ratio of Us to Them. How many humans or other creatures are included in either category?

For some people (and I assume some here to mean "many"), Us is a very select club that includes only a small number of members — our families, meaning our human partners and children, along with some relatives. Us might also include certain friends and associates, and probably our animal pets (dogs, cats, etc.).

But that's it. *Everyone else*, and even all other creatures (animal, plant, insect, etc.) is Them. That orientation — having only a few of Us and many of Them — tends to go with the philosophical and moral embrace of Individuality.

For other people, Us is a large club that includes much of humanity. It goes way beyond just the individuals we know and love as personal family, friends, and associates, to include thousands or even billions of people we don't know and will never meet. Us might also include many non-human creatures (animals, for instance). That orientation — having a great many of Us and only a few or even none of Them — tends to resonate with the philosophy and morality of Collectivity.

I've written about this on numerous occasions in my commentaries over the past six years, so I won't reiterate it all here. Suffice it to say that we love and care about Us. We are generous to a fault with anyone whom we regard as Us. On the other hand, we don't love and don't care about Them. We aren't generous at all, nor are we compassionate toward anyone whom we regard as Them. In fact, we may not even recognize Them as human, so that if people who we feel to be Them get in our way, we are not opposed to killing them.

In "The Last of Us," Joel represents ultimate Individuality. Marlene represents ultimate Collectivity. For Joel, "Us" is him and Ellie, and maybe his brother. No one else. For Marlene and the Fireflies, "Us" includes both Joel and Ellie, but when their welfare is held up against the collective welfare of all humanity — the "greater good" — humanity wins and Ellie loses. Marlene doesn't feel good about this, but she's willing to suffer those consequences of grief over Ellie's death. Joel doesn't actually feel good about killing so many people (the Fireflies) to save Ellie, but those guilty feelings only rise to the surface later, after the fact. During his rampage of killing to reach Ellie in time, he wasn't thinking rationally about the value of the lives he was ending with violence. He was driven by self-centered emotions to rescue and save Ellie. (Ellie was Us for Joel; the Fireflies he killed, including Marlene, were Them).

Is one orientation correct, moral, and good, while the other is wrong, immoral, and bad? Obviously many people think so. I find that kind of simple, black-and-white judgment impossible to make. Personally I lean toward the Collective orientation with many of Us and few of Them. My ideal would be all Us and no Them, although I haven't achieved that and doubt that I ever will. Some people are Monsters whom I will always see as Them and even refuse to include in Us. Nonetheless, I don't feel morally superior about my Collective way of thinking and feeling about all this. I can easily see the Individual orientation, with a few of Us and many of Them. It's harder for me personally, but I can certainly entertain it.

Perhaps that's a significant reason why I never married, had no children, and don't see myself as a person for whom biological family-of-origin is meaningful.

The easiest way I can simplify all this is to say that, for some people, personal love trumps everything else. For others, universal love is what matters most. It's not that one kind of love is right and true, while the other kind is wrong and false. They're both real, and they're both meaningful. But the two kinds of love represent unique paths, with very different experiences and quite separate outcomes. We can't walk them both, although we may go back and forth, depending on the particular situation or where we are in our lives when we're choosing.

Anyway, that's my two cents on the pop culture phenomenon of "The Last of Us" and the ripples it's made in the social zeitgeist. The many deaths of well-meaning characters throughout the series were central to setting up the last episode, and the choice presented in the finale turned out to be both unresolvable and painful. Either would end up as a Pyrrhic victory.