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# The Indifferent Universe: Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

MARK T. CONARD

In his earlier, funnier works (*Love and Death*, *Sleeper*, *Bananas*), Woody Allen raised certain philosophical issues, but typically only in passing, and he treated them in a humorous fashion. Then, in his more mature period, and prior to *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Allen made three completely dramatic (and Bergman-esque) films, *Interiors*, *September*, and *Another Woman*, which dealt with the personal crises of the characters, as well as profound and universal human themes, and in which he (Allen) did not appear.

In his best and most mature works, however, Allen combines the serious (and philosophical) with the humorous.<sup>1</sup> *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) stands among these best works; but it also stands out, insofar as it deals with some of the most important and serious questions about the meaning of life and the existence of God, and at the same time amuses and entertains with Allen's characteristically New York, Jewish, neurotic humor. Allen is able to achieve this by brilliantly interweaving two stories, one largely comedic and the other dramatic, into a unified whole.

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<sup>1</sup> These works include *Manhattan*, *Stardust Memories*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

### The Misdemeanors

In the (largely) comedic story, Clifford Stern (Woody Allen) is an unemployed filmmaker who is hired to make a PBS biography about his wife's brother, the rich and successful TV producer, Lester (Alan Alda). While shooting the film, Cliff meets Halley Reed (Mia Farrow), the producer of the project, and the two of them hit it off. Cliff has been working on a film about philosophy professor Louis Levy (Martin Bergmann), who is a sensitive, life-affirming Holocaust survivor. Halley appreciates Cliff's work and believes that together the two of them can produce the film about Levy for the PBS series, which would assure Cliff a wider audience and some measure of success. Cliff and Halley also share a contempt for Lester, who is vain, pompous, and crass towards women. Cliff's marriage is in its last stages, and as they work together, he becomes more and more interested in and attracted to Halley.

In the end, the life-affirming Levy commits suicide (thus wrecking Cliff's film project); Cliff exposes Lester's faults in the PBS documentary, comparing him to Mussolini and a talking mule, and is subsequently fired from the project; and, last, after having been separated from Cliff for several months while she was in England, Halley returns to New York as Lester's fiancée. Cliff's life is in ruins, and his worst fears have been realized (and, yes, this *is* the funny part of the movie).

### The Crimes

In the (more) dramatic story, Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau) is a wealthy and successful ophthalmologist, who has been having an affair with the neurotic Dolores (Anjelica Huston). Judah wants to break off the affair, but Dolores threatens to reveal their relationship (along with some questionable financial moves on Judah's part) to his wife and the community if he does. Judah was raised very religiously, and although he has abandoned his faith for science, he confides in his lifelong friend and patient, Rabbi Ben (Sam Waterston), who is also Cliff's brother-in-law, and who is progressively going blind. Ben advises Judah to come clean to his wife about the adultery, but Judah rejects the advice and instead seeks help from his brother, Jack (Jerry Orbach), who has ties to the underworld. Jack arranges for Dolores's murder, and at first, after the deed is

done, Judah is guilt-ridden, and his religious background re-emerges to weigh on his conscience. The final scene of the film is the wedding of Ben's daughter, where Judah and Cliff meet at the reception, after Cliff has learned that Halley is going to marry Lester. Judah relates to Cliff the story of the murder as if it were the plot of a movie. As it turns out, after a few months the protagonist of the story—Judah himself (as we know)—is more or less guilt-free and has gone back to his former, happy life in which he has even prospered.

### The Existence of God and the Meaning of Life

In *Crimes*, the issues about morality which drive the film are deeply connected to questions about the existence of God and the value and meaning of life. In one telling scene in which Judah confides in Ben about his affair, Ben remarks that the two of them have had the same discussion their whole adult lives, in which they express contrasting views about the universe. Judah sees the world as "harsh and empty of values and pitiless," says Ben. That is, Judah believes that we live in a godless universe, which contains no inherent and absolute meaning or value. Whereas, speaking for himself, Ben says:

I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel with all my heart a moral structure, with real meaning, and . . . forgiveness. And some kind of higher power. Otherwise there's no basis to know how to live.<sup>2</sup>

This dispute between Judah and Ben is the central theme of *Crimes*. Life is meaningful, and there is a moral structure, *only if* God exists. If God doesn't exist, then there's no "real meaning," and "no basis to know how to live." As Judah himself expresses it, initially reeling under the weight of the guilt of Dolores' murder: without God, "the world is a cesspool."

It's clear that if the Judeo-Christian monotheistic God (loving father-figure, creator of all) exists, then meaning and value are built into the universe. We're God's children, made in his image. Good and evil exist in the world; and we know what we have to do to achieve salvation, and what to do to avoid damnation.

<sup>2</sup> All movie quotes in this chapter are from *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, directed by Woody Allen, 1989.

But if God doesn't exist, why can't our lives still be meaningful? The answer to this in Allen's films is that both meaning and value require permanence. That is, any real meaning and value in life would have to be something that doesn't change, that is inherent in the universe, that is absolute. For Allen, nothing that is fleeting, that is corruptible, that doesn't last can be truly meaningful or valuable. So, without God, given that everything in the universe is continually changing and breaking down, there can be no permanent, absolute meaning or value.<sup>3</sup> Again, *only if* God exists can there be meaning and value.

### God Doesn't Exist

The title of Allen's film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, is clearly intended to be an allusion to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In the latter story, the main character, Raskolnikov, murders an old woman and initially gets away with it. However, he comes to be haunted by the action, and plagued with guilt; and so he experiences remorse, confesses to the murder, goes to prison, and eventually finds redemption. But note the significant change in the title of Allen's film. For Dostoyevsky, there was crime *and* punishment. For Allen, there are crimes and lesser offenses, misdemeanors, but there's no punishment in sight.<sup>4</sup> I'll mention in passing, too, that in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the intellectual, atheist brother, Ivan, says that (to paraphrase) "if nothing is true, everything is permitted." This seems to be one of the central themes of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: Without God, and thus without eternal and absolute truth, there are no values, no moral guidelines, no reward or punishment.

The change in the title of the movie hints at Allen's second premise: that in fact God doesn't exist, and so there is no one to punish us. This is neatly symbolized by Rabbi Ben's progressive blindness. One of the primary, and almost overwhelming,

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of this issue, see my "God, Suicide, and the Meaning of Life in Woody Allen's Films," in Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble, eds., *Woody Allen and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Mary Nichols's discussion of the alteration of the title in her *Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody Allen* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), pp. 149–151.

symbols of the movie is sight. Recall that Judah is an ophthalmologist; he's told as a boy that God sees all; and there are numerous other references to vision.<sup>5</sup> Since the time of Ancient philosophy, sight has been a metaphor for truth and understanding. Plato, for example, in his "Allegory of The Cave," found in his *Republic*, likens grasping and understanding truth to sight and the things seen in the visible world around us.<sup>6</sup> And when we talk about reason or the intellect discovering truth and gaining wisdom, we refer to "enlightenment"; finally, when we understand something we say, "I see!" So, the literal blindness of Rabbi Ben symbolizes his metaphorical blindness to the truth about God and the nature of the universe. As Judah contemplates the murder of Dolores, Ben appears in his thoughts as the voice of conscience:

**JUDAH:** What choice do I have, Ben? Tell me . . . I will not be destroyed by this neurotic woman.

**BEN:** It's a human life. You don't think God sees?

**JUDAH:** God is a luxury I can't afford.

**BEN:** Now you're talking like your brother Jack.

**JUDAH:** Jack lives in the real world. You live in the Kingdom of heaven.

In believing in a God who provides a moral structure to the universe, Ben blinds himself to reality; he doesn't live in the real world. In an interview, Allen confirms that this is indeed the message: "Yes, my own feeling about Ben is that, on the one hand, he's blind even before he goes blind. He's blind because he doesn't see the real world." Allen goes on to say:

Ben is the only one that gets through it, even if he doesn't really understand the reality of life. One can argue that he understands it

<sup>5</sup> A few examples: Dolores says that the eyes are the windows to the soul. Joking with his niece, Cliff tells her that she shouldn't listen to her school teachers; she should just *see* what they look like, and that's how she'll know what life is really like. Through most of the film, Halley wears glasses, as do most of the principal characters, but when she appears at the end as Lester's fiancée, she's not wearing them. Notice that the camera pans down to the headlight on Judah's car, and we see it go dark, when he pulls up to Dolores's apartment, immediately after she's been murdered.

<sup>6</sup> See his sun metaphor, 507a–509d.

more deeply than the others. I don't think he does myself. I think he understands it less, and that's why I wanted to make him blind. I feel that his faith is blind. It will work, but it requires closing your eyes to reality.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Allen seems to consider these coping mechanisms to be useful, if not necessary, fictions. He refers to Ben as lucky and blessed "because he has naïvety."<sup>8</sup> I'll discuss this more below.

Further, in one powerful scene, Judah visits his childhood home and imagines looking in on one of his childhood Seders. His very religious father, Sol (David S. Howard), is attempting to pray in Hebrew, when he's interrupted by his sister, Judah's Aunt May (Anna Berger), who is an atheist. A discussion ensues about the nature of truth and morality:

**AN UNCLE:** And if all your faith is wrong, Sol? I mean, just what if? If?

**SOL:** Then I'll still have a better life than all of those that doubt.

**AUNT MAY:** Wait a minute. Are you telling me you prefer God over the truth?

**SOL:** If necessary, I'll always choose God over the truth.

Judah's father juxtaposes God and truth, so that the lesson here is that God is opposed to truth; God is tantamount to falsity. In other words, Allen is telling us, God doesn't exist.

### So Everything Is Permitted?

So if morality and a meaningful existence are only possible if God exists, and God doesn't exist, then the conclusion would have to be that there is no moral structure to the universe, and life is inherently without meaning (it's a "cesspool"). Everything *is* in fact permitted. At the imagined Seder, Aunt May remarks that six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, and yet the Nazis "got off with nothing," and this is because "might makes

<sup>7</sup> From Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (New York: Grove Press 1993), pp. 223–25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

right." The conversation goes on thus (and Judah steps into his own imagined scene to interact with the others):

**SOMEONE:** What are you saying, May? There's no morality anywhere in the whole world?

**AUNT MAY:** For those who want morality, there's morality. Nothing's handed down in stone.

**WOMAN:** Sol's kind of faith is a gift. It's like an ear for music, or the talent to draw. He believes and you can use logic on him all day long, and he still believes.

**SOL:** Must everything be logical?

**JUDAH:** And if a man commits a crime . . . if he kills?

**SOL:** Then one way or another he will be punished.

**AN UNCLE:** If he's caught, Sol.

**SOL:** If he's not, that which originates in a black deed will blossom in a foul manner . . . Whether it's the Old Testament or Shakespeare, murder will out.

**AUNT MAY:** And I say if he can do it, and get away with it and he chooses not to be bothered by the ethics, then he's home free. Remember, history's written by the winners. And if the Nazis had won, future generations would understand the story of World War Two quite differently.

Again, the faith of Rabbi Ben and of Judah's father blinds them to reality, and leads to a belief in fictions. And so it's Aunt May who seems to express the lesson of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: In a world without God, there is no moral structure to the universe, and thus "no way to know how to live," as Ben says, and consequently—as we've seen—there is no inherent meaning to life.

This lesson is also vividly manifested in the fact that Judah reports having gotten away with the murder: he escaped punishment, was able to leave behind or overcome the guilt, and has even prospered and become more happy in his life. In the documentary, *Woody Allen: A Life in Film*, Allen tells us that one of the essential messages of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is that:

there's no God, and that we're alone in the universe, and that . . . um, there is nobody out there to punish you, that your morality is

strictly up to you. If . . . if you're willing to murder and you can get away with it, and you can live with it, that's fine.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, Professor Levy seems in the end to grasp the truth about the universe that Allen is expressing.<sup>10</sup> Despite his overall positive outlook on life, he claims that "the universe is a pretty cold place," and that under certain circumstances, we figure out that life "just isn't worth it." As I mentioned above, Professor Levy, having gained this understanding, subsequently commits suicide.

### The Indifferent Universe

Admittedly, the end of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* seems to suggest a different position or outlook than the one I outlined above. In a very touching scene, the now-completely-blind Rabbi Ben dances with his daughter at her wedding, while we hear Professor Levy's voiceover.

We are all faced throughout our lives with agonizing decisions, moral choices. Some are on a grand scale. Most of these choices are on a lesser scale. But we define ourselves by the choices we have made. We are in fact the sum total of our choices. Events unfold so unpredictably, so unfairly. Human happiness does not seem to have been included in the design of creation. It is only we with our capacity to love that give meaning to the indifferent universe. And yet most human beings seem to have the ability to keep trying, and even to find joy from simple things, like their family, their work, and from the hope that future generations might understand more.

Levy seems to be suggesting here that even if God doesn't exist, and the universe is "indifferent," we can still invest our lives and the world with meaning and value. And this has led a number of commentators and critics to conclude that *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is ultimately a hopeful, optimistic film. In her *Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody Allen*, for example, Mary Nichols says that Levy articulates a middle ground between

<sup>9</sup> *Woody Allen: A Life in Film* (Turner Classic Movies, 2002. Directed by Richard Schickel).

<sup>10</sup> We only ever see Professor Levy in film clips that Cliff has shot.

Ben's pious blindness to reality and Aunt May's nihilism, since "while he acknowledges that human happiness is not included 'in the design of creation,' he does not claim that it is precluded by it. An 'indifferent universe' is not a hostile one."<sup>11</sup> Sander Lee likewise takes *Crimes and Misdemeanors* to be optimistic in its outlook, and even goes so far as to argue that Judah is not guilt-free at the end, that he's deluding himself or lying when he claims to have gotten over the moral crisis (even over the objections of Woody Allen himself!)<sup>12</sup>

This optimism, however, is not warranted. 1) Accepting Allen's position over Lee's, consider first that Judah has gotten away with murder, scot-free. He feels no guilt, no remorse, and is happily back with his family, his position in the community secure. 2) Remember that Cliff, the good guy, attempted to do exactly what Levy suggests: to invest his life with meaning and value through love, family, work, and so forth; yet all his efforts were in vain. As his soon-to-be-ex-wife remarks, Cliff makes these little films and in the end "they come to nothing."<sup>13</sup> He has aspirations, but they don't pay off, and his attempts to reveal the truth about Lester resulted in his getting fired and losing the one opportunity that might have given him a real career.

Further, and shockingly, Halley—his beloved—shits on him. In a very funny but disgusting scene, Cliff's sister, Barbara (Caroline Aaron), relates to him a misadventure that she had while on a date with a man from the personals. The man tied her to the bed and defecated on her. The suggested metaphor

<sup>11</sup> Mary Nichols, *Reconstructing Woody*, p. 159. Her optimism includes arguing that Judah is in the end punished "by having to face an empty universe that does not punish" (p. 158), and thus Judah doesn't get away scot-free. Yacowar says: "Allen wields Levy's words against the moral darkness." Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen* (New York: Continuum, 1991), p. 279.

<sup>12</sup> In an interview contained in Lee's book, Allen says: "You are wrong about Judah; he feels no guilt and the extremely rare time the events occur to him, his mild uneasiness (which sometimes doesn't come at all) is negligible." Lee says: "While the reader is free to accept Allen's response as the final word on this point, I would argue that the film's text gives stronger support to my interpretation." Sander Lee, *Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002), pp. 162–63.

<sup>13</sup> This could be understood as self-referential on Allen's part, reflecting his true feelings about his own work.

couldn't be clearer: this is what we do to one another in relationships—we shit on each other. This undercuts Levy's suggestion that love can provide meaning and value to an indifferent universe. 3) Last, consider that the suggested optimism comes from the voice of a man who killed himself because of the emptiness and coldness of the universe; and that we hear that voice while watching the blind rabbi, the one who has closed his eyes to reality.

So why does Allen present us with this false optimism? One reason might be that the movie would just be too dark, too bleak, if it concluded with the good man's life in ruins, and the murderer happy; and so Allen had to give us viewers *something* to make us feel better. This is certainly possible, but I want to suggest too that the ending is meant to be ironic. Ironic certainly because of the elements I listed above—Cliff's ruin, Judah's happiness, Levy's suicide. But also ironic because of something that Judah tells Cliff in their conversation at the wedding. As I mentioned, Judah tells the story of the murder to Cliff as if he's relating a movie plot. In his story, of course, the murderer gets away with the crime. Thinking that Judah is really talking about a movie, Cliff suggests a different ending:

**CLIFF:** Here's what I would do. I would have him turn himself in. Because then, you see, your story assumes tragic proportions, because in the absence of God or something, he is forced to assume that responsibility himself. Then you have tragedy.

**JUDAH:** But that's fiction. That's movies. You've seen too many movies. I'm talking about reality. If you want a happy ending you should see a Hollywood movie.

Cliff is suggesting the kind of ending that Dostoyevsky provides in *Crime and Punishment*, but, as I noted, here there is no punishment. As Aunt May says, if you can commit the crime and choose not to be bothered by the ethics, then you're home free. Note too the interesting shift in the way Judah describes the story. It's no longer fiction; his story is about *reality*, it's about the real world. And this real world is so harsh and so bleak that tragedy would in fact be a happy Hollywood ending (that's how bad things are).

So Levy's voiceover at the end is exactly the kind of happy Hollywoodish ending that Judah scoffs at and rejects.<sup>14</sup> And therein lies the irony: the ending is falsely and naively optimistic and is at odds with our understanding of the real world, which is expressed throughout the rest of the film. To accept the Hollywood ending, we have to close our eyes to reality, as Ben does.

Thus, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is deeply pessimistic. Allen is telling us that we live in a godless universe which is devoid of meaning and value; and that the best that we can hope for is to blind ourselves to, or deceive ourselves about, this ugly truth. Regarding Levy's claim that we invest the universe with value and our own feelings, Allen says:

Right, so we create a fake world for ourselves, and we exist within that fake world . . . In the same way we create for ourselves a world that, in fact, means nothing at all, when you step back. It's meaningless. But it's important that we create some sense of meaning, because no perceptible meaning exists for anybody.<sup>15</sup>

The world of love, meaning, and value that Levy describes is a fake world, a self-deception, if a necessary one.

<sup>14</sup> See Sam Girgus, *The Films of Woody Allen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 127, for example, on the Hollywoodish nature of the ending. Like others, Girgus argues that Allen is presenting us with a picture of "moral ambiguity." He also claims that Cliff misunderstands the nature of tragedy, so that he's offering Judah a "neat ending," which is why Judah dubs it a Hollywood ending and rejects it. This misses the point, I think, insofar as Allen is presenting us not with moral ambiguity, but rather with a picture of the world as amoral. And, as I said, the point of the discussion about tragedy is that Judah's picture of the world (which is also Allen's) is so bleak that even tragedy would seem like a happy ending.

<sup>15</sup> Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, p. 225.

## TO THINK ABOUT

1. How are the issues about morality in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* connected to questions about the existence of God and the value and meaning of life?
2. Would life lack meaning if some evil actions were never punished or some good actions were left unrewarded?
3. Do you think that the only thing that keeps most of us from acting like Judah is the belief that God is watching us?
4. Is there any good reason to believe that being overly intellectual, like the professor, or too idealistic, like Cliff, will only cause us to be unhappy?

## TO READ NEXT

- Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*. New York: Grove Press, 1993.
- Mark T. Conard. God, Suicide, and the Meaning of Life in the Films of Woody Allen. In Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble, eds., *Woody Allen and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).
- Sam B. Girgus. *The Films of Woody Allen*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Sander H. Lee. *Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2002.
- Mary Nichols. *Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody Allen*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.

## 9

Rats in God's Laboratory:  
*Shadowlands* and the  
Problem of Evil

DAVID BAGGETT

Love is something more than an accident that bubbled to the surface of the human condition, a fortuitous experience or fuzzy feeling deriving from a particular collocation of atoms. It's the wild truth, the essence of what is ultimately real and what we as human beings were designed for. Love is the end towards which we rightly strive. Without love, life is an emaciated caricature of its true potential. Love on such a view goes all the way down to the core of reality. It's truly what life's meaning is all about.

Loving relationships—both earthly and divine—do however require a willingness to suffer. Grasping this truth may help us to cope with various aspects of suffering caused by these relationships. Richard Attenborough's beautiful 1994 film *Shadowlands* (based on a stage play written by William Nicholson) powerfully depicts such a hard lesson, learned in the context of an unlikely and moving love story between an Oxford don, C.S. ("Jack") Lewis (played by acclaimed actor Anthony Hopkins, who won a British academy award for his performance), and an American poet, Joy Gresham (played by Debra Winger).

**Jack at Oxford**

The opening scenes of *Shadowlands* showcase the complexity of C.S. Lewis (1898–1963). His colleague and fellow Inkling J.R.R. Tolkien once said of Lewis that we'll never get to the bottom of him. In the classrooms of the hauntingly beautiful