

## TO THINK ABOUT

1. What do you think is meant by the Precrime slogan "That which makes us safe is that which makes us free"? Is there anything dissatisfying about that kind of freedom? Are there any other conditions we require in order to be free except safety?
2. How does Newtonian mechanical science eliminate the possibility of freedom? How do Freud's insights curtail it? How would you defend freedom against them?
3. If the determinists are even partially right, how can we justify our everyday activities of punishing and making moral judgments?
4. Some thinkers have claimed that freedom is possible inside a solitary confinement cell and even at gunpoint. How is this possible?

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## 18

Grace, Fate, and Accident  
in *Pulp Fiction*

MICHAEL SILBERSTEIN

"If my answers frighten you then you should cease askin' scary questions," proclaims the morally awakened Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) to the doubting Vincent (John Travolta).

*Pulp Fiction* (1994), directed by Quentin Tarrantino, is a buzzing, blooming confusion, presenting a variety of subcultures, races, ethnicities, lifestyles, religious and non-religious worldviews, and moral perspectives. Given such a world, how are we to figure out what is right and what is wrong? How could there exist any universal moral truths or values? And if universal moral truths or values don't exist, how can we agree upon how we should live our lives, much less whether or not these lives are meaningful?

Do life and existence have a universal and objective meaning or purpose? Are the events of our lives and the events that make up existence meaningfully connected in some way—is there some purpose, plan, pattern, ultimate end or grand narrative that connects all these events? In the words of Leo Tolstoy in his essay *My Confession*, "what's the point of it all?" Questions about the nature of meaning and morality are, unlike many others, philosophical questions that deeply concern us all. In the words of the great existentialist philosopher Camus, "the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions . . . judging whether life is or is not worth living is the only serious philosophical problem."<sup>1</sup> (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955, p. 3).

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 3

*Pulp Fiction* presents us with a conversation between nihilism and relativism, on the one hand, and meaningfulness and universalism on the other. *Nihilism*, literally, a belief in nothing (*nihil* in Latin), suggests that there are no values or truths, moral or otherwise; at the very least, we're certainly not justified in believing in any of these truths.<sup>2</sup> According to the nihilist, the universe is a cosmic Rorschach print, a morally blank canvas onto which we project meaning, values, and purpose. *Moral nihilism* holds that moral claims are meaningless and *meaning or purpose nihilism* holds that life is without any objective or universal meaning—life is pointless. *Relativism*<sup>3</sup> is the related view that certain facts or truths are not universal and objective, but *relative* to individuals, cultures, or other groups. By contrast, *moral universalism* is the claim that moral facts or truths are the same *everywhere* and *every when*, while *moral objectivism*<sup>4</sup> holds that moral facts are real and independent facts given by the universe and not merely subjective human projections or conventions.

These questions about morals and meaning are inseparable. For example many people of radically different philosophical persuasions have felt that only the existence of God could

<sup>2</sup> "Most contemporary discussions of nihilism arise out of a consideration of Friedrich Nietzsche's remarks on nihilism, especially in *The Will to Power*. Nihilism can also be described as an extreme form of *existentialism* or *pes-simism* which holds that life has no meaning and that even if you try to achieve your goals, in the end your life must necessarily come to nothing—thus nihilism is similar to *fatalism*. Sometimes, nihilism is worse than fatalism because nihilists don't usually say that life comes to zero but to less than zero, since they hold that life really just consists of one thing: pain. See the Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy for more details.

<sup>3</sup> The doctrine of moral relativism goes back to the Sophists, such as Protagoras, who argued against Socrates's moral objectivism in Plato's dialogues. Sophists would also invoke cultural relativism in these debates which they learned about in detail from the historical works of Herodotus. See the Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy for more details.

<sup>4</sup> The origins of moral objectivism and universalism also go back to ancient Greece. Plato himself defends a kind of objectivism grounded in the forms and a type of objectivism known as the Divine Command Theory. The theory holds that moral facts are determined by God's will. The Ten Commandments for example are often thought to be the manifestation of God's will. See the *Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for more details.

ground universal and objective moral facts and objective purpose or meaningfulness. If God does not exist it is hard to see how meaning and morality can be anything but the interpretation or projection of various individuals. As the famous existentialist<sup>5</sup> philosopher Sartre put it: "The existentialist thinks it very distressing that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this. Because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with him. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist."<sup>6</sup>

If God exists then it is possible that the events of our lives are meaningfully connected and that through God's *grace* our suffering is not a random and meaningless *accident* but rather a necessary vehicle of moral and spiritual transformation. If God exists to give us guidance and also freedom, then it is possible the future is open in such a way that there is fate without *fatalism* and we have the choice to accept or reject God's grace. As we shall see the existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard thinks that the resolution to the problem of meaning and morality can only be resolved by a "leap of faith."

At first glance, *Pulp Fiction* appears to be nothing more than an innovative take on *film noir*, and a sympathetic meditation on relativism. The non-linear structure of the movie forces us to consider how, if at all, the five seemingly unrelated 'episodes' within the film are meaningfully connected. The very structure of the film raises the question as to whether or not there is any temporal, narrative, and moral order in this pulp world. At every key point in *Pulp Fiction* we are faced with a turn of improbable events that begs the question: Was it fate, grace or accident? Consider the following examples:

<sup>5</sup> Existentialism was a philosophical movement that had its roots in the late nineteenth century but really blossomed in the mid-twentieth century. In addition to Sartre, Camus and Nietzsche, some of the great figures in existentialism include Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Jaspers. While part of the same movement (or better yet anti-movement) there was as much disagreement as agreement among the existentialist philosophers. For example, some existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard thought that the belief in God was necessary to ground meaningfulness, whereas others such as Sartre disagreed. See the *Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for more details.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism* (New York: Citadel, 1947), pp. 25–27.

1. Vincent and Jules escape death at point-blank range.
2. Shortly thereafter Marvin inexplicably gets his head blown off when Vincent's gun misfires.
3. Vincent and Butch happen to meet in Marsellus's bar and take a disliking to each other before Butch kills him.
4. Vincent and Mia have a lot in common, both having unknowingly spent time in Amsterdam at the same bar with the same people.
5. Mia mistakes Vincent's heroin for coke and thereby overdoses. If that had not happened they might have had sex together with dire consequences for both.
6. Fabian, Butch's girlfriend, forgets his watch at the apartment.
7. Butch runs into Marsellus while escaping from his apartment.
8. Butch and Marsellus end up in the Mason-Dixon Pawnshop.
9. Vincent and Jules find themselves near Jimmie's house when they are in need.
10. Vincent and Jules encounter Pumpkin and Honeybunny at the coffee shop.

Is there any moral and purposeful order in these events? At the beginning, *Pulp Fiction* feels like pulp—a soft, moist, shapeless mass of matter, but by the end of the movie we can see its meaningful shape. In contrast to its title, it's much more than a lurid tale filled with rough characters and unfinished thoughts, it's a movie that is alive with the possibility of meaning and salvation.

### Relativism with a Vengeance

If relativism endorses the general claim that certain facts or truths are not universal or objective, but relative to individuals, cultures, or groups, *moral relativism* is the normative claim that moral truths are relative to cultures or individuals. *Cultural relativism* is the simple descriptive claim that different cultures have different values and practices. Moral relativism is a norma-

tive claim—it makes a value judgment, whereas cultural relativism is an indisputable factual claim—it is just a fact that human sacrifice was practiced by some cultures but to claim that such sacrifices were not immoral in such cultures is a relativist value judgment. *Pulp Fiction* flirts with moral relativism by getting us to sympathize with its main characters who are, after all, criminals and thugs.

In a modern streetwise version of a Platonic dialogue, the main characters Jules and Vincent engage in conversation about cultural and moral relativism.

**JULES:** Okay now, tell me about the hash bars? [Vincent has just returned from Amsterdam]

**VINCENT:** What do you want to know?

**JULES:** Well, hash is legal there, right?

**VINCENT:** Yeah, it's legal, but it ain't a hundred percent legal. I mean you can't walk into a restaurant, roll a joint, and start puffin' away. You're only supposed to smoke in your home or certain designated places.

The conversation continues in the same vein, drifting from Vincent informing Jules of various rules and regulations regarding hash bars in Amsterdam to other cultural differences between Europe and America, such as beer being served in the movie theaters in Amsterdam, mayonnaise being served on fries in Holland, as well as various complications with the metric system. Their dialogue turns explicitly to ethics when they debate the fate of Antwan Rockamora, whom they believe was thrown out of a four-story window by Marsellus (Ving Rhames) merely because he gave Mia (Uma Thurman) a foot massage.

**JULES:** Look, just because I wouldn't give no man a foot massage, don't make it right for Marsellus to throw Antwan off a building into a glass-motherfuckin'-house, fuckin' up the way the nigger talks. That ain't right, man.

**VINCENT:** I'm not sayin' he was right, but you're sayin' a foot massage don't mean nothin', and I'm sayin' it does. I've given a million ladies a million foot massages and they all meant somethin'. We act like they don't, but they do. That's what's so fuckin' cool about 'em.

We begin to see a moral universe emerge. Vincent and Jules each operate with competing codes of morality. Vincent personifies an ethical perspective that holds that the rightness or wrongness of an act is determined primarily by the intentions and feelings of the agent. Because Vincent thinks that the real intention behind a foot massage is seduction motivated by lust, he concludes that a foot massage can constitute an act of sex. By contrast, Jules seems to think that a foot massage is not a sexual act because the foot is not a sexual organ. For Jules it is not the intention of an act that determine the act's rightness or wrongness, but whether or not one's actions adhere to standard normative practices.

### Old versus New

The previous conversation takes place right before Vincent and Jules are about to enter an apartment and execute several young men. Ironically it never occurs to either of them to discuss whether or not murder is wrong. They both feel that the young men who are about to get capped deserve to be killed because they have wronged Marsellus by stealing his briefcase. Jules accuses the young men of trying to "fuck Marsellus like a bitch," effectively equating their act of theft with the immoral act of rape. This harsh moral judgment may have something to do with the value of what is in the case (the contents are never revealed). There does seem to be a code of ethics at work here, which is based upon the principle of "honor among thieves."<sup>7</sup>

This principle amounts to an Old Testament "eye for an eye" morality that is rooted in revenge. In the Old Testament, God frequently doles out a fire and brimstone brand of justice, which amounts to vengeance or retribution. By contrast, in the New Testament, God in the form of Christ urges us to repay hate and violence with love and passivity. Throughout *Pulp Fiction*, we will see that the main characters who move away from Old Testament morality towards New Testament morality will end up faring much better than their more morally recalcitrant peers. By the end of the movie, one of the characters, Butch the boxer

(played by Bruce Willis), rides to freedom on a chopper named "Grace," suggesting that he was saved by the grace of God. The very notion of God's grace only makes sense from the point of view of the New Testament in which God does not engage in well-deserved retribution, but rather acts with compassion and forgiveness.

Jules and Vincent believe that the young men were aware of the code and the consequences for transgression; therefore, they deserve to be executed. Interestingly, Brett, the young men's apparent leader, tries to defend their actions by saying, "When we entered into this thing, we only had the best intentions . . ." But before Brett can finish his thought, Jules retorts:

Yes ya did Brett. Ya tried ta fuck 'im. You ever read the bible Brett? There's a passage I got memorized, seems appropriate for this situation: Ezekiel 25:17. "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you."

Jules always recites this passage right before he "blasts a cap in somebody's ass." The passage is in fact a contrived version of Ezekiel's prophecy against the Philistines. The actual text of Ezekiel 25:17 reads as follows: "And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them" (King James Version). Jules's tweaked version conveys both Old and New Testament moral sensibilities, which signifies his struggle to ultimately embrace New Testament morality.

While Vincent and Jules are career criminals, they're not amoral sociopaths, for each of these characters operates out of his own idiosyncratic moral code. Vincent and Jules exhibit the virtues of professionalism, loyalty, and honor. After all, they only kill people in self-defense, or when someone has dishonored them, their family, or their boss. The movie's main characters engage in immoral acts—murder, robbery, drug dealing—but they also exhibit virtues such as loyalty, honesty, diligence, and

<sup>7</sup> One can find the same theme in Tarantino's film, *Reservoir Dogs*.

integrity. If the moral relativist is right, then it may be that this cast of criminals are, in the end, morally decent. At the very least, they would be able to justify their actions by invoking their individualized moral codes of conduct or those of their criminal caste.

### Virtue among Thieves

Now let's consider the following scene in which Vincent's value system is put to the test. After the discussion of what happened to Antwan Rockamora for giving Marsellus's wife Mia a foot massage, Vincent finds himself in the unenviable position of being ordered by Marsellus to take Mia out for the evening while he is out of town. As we watch Mia and Vincent flirt and dance barefoot with one another, we can't help but recall Vincent's earlier remarks about foot massages. Dancing can certainly be regarded as a surreptitiously sensual act. Mia is beautiful, sexy, smart, and has much in common with Vincent. Vincent's attraction to Mia, plus the ribbing he has received from his peers about the date with his boss's wife, makes him very nervous. While washing his hands in Mia's bathroom at the end of the evening, Vincent tries to psyche himself up to practice restraint:

One drink and leave. Don't be rude, but drink your drink quickly, say goodbye, walk out the door, get in your car, and go down the road. It's a moral test of yourself, whether or not you can maintain loyalty. Because when people are loyal to each other, that's very meaningful. So you're gonna go out there, drink your drink, say "goodnight, I've had a lovely evening," go home, and jack off. And that's all you're gonna do.

It is clear from Vincent's thoughts that the virtue of loyalty is truly important to him. He feels a real duty toward Marsellus, and he is not avoiding cheating with Mia merely because he fears the possible consequences.

After having recovered both Marsellus's briefcase and Marvin, Vincent accidentally blows off Marvin's head while driving around L.A. With Marvin's brains splattered all over their car, Vincent and Jules find a port in the storm in the home of Jules's old partner Jimmie (played by Quentin Tarrantino).

Jimmie wants to help them to dispose of the body but he's worried that his wife will come home and find the gangsters and the headless corpse. Even though Jules's ass is on the line we see him exhibit the virtue of friendship.

**JULES:** Well, we ain't leavin' til we made a couple phone calls. But I never want it to reach that pitch. Jimmie's my friend and you don't bust in your friend's house and start tellin' 'im what's what . . . Don't forget who's doin' who a favor.

In another scene, when we first encounter Butch (Bruce Willis), he is not a very sympathetic character. He is, at Marsellus's order, agreeing to throw an upcoming fight.

**MARSELLUS:** Boxers don't have old timers' day. You came close, but you never made it. And if you were gonna make it, you'd a made it before now. Now, the night of the fight, you may feel a slight sting, that's pride fuckin' wit ya. Fuck pride! Pride only hurts, it never helps. Fight through that shit. Cause a year from now when you're kickin' it in the Caribbean you're gonna say, Marsellus Wallace was right.

**BUTCH:** I got no problems with that.

**MARSELLUS:** In the fifth, your ass goes down. Say it!

**BUTCH:** In the fifth, my ass goes down.

When next we meet Butch, he is escaping from Marsellus after having inadvertently killed the boxer to whom he was supposed to throw the fight. Apparently Butch took the money Marsellus paid him to throw the fight and bet it on himself to win. Here he explains to the cabdriver, who functions as his get away driver, how he feels about having killed the other man:

**ESMARELDA:** I want to know what it feels like to kill a man—

**BUTCH:** —I couldn't tell ya. I didn't know he was dead 'til you told me he was dead. Now I know he's dead, do you wanna know how I feel about it?

**ESMARELDA:** Yes.

**BUTCH:** I don't feel the least little bit bad. You wanna know why, Esmarelda?

**ESMARELDA:** Yes.

**BUTCH:** Cause I'm a boxer. And after you've said that, you've said pretty much all there is to say about me. Now maybe that son-of-a-bitch tonight was once at one time a boxer. If he was, then he was dead before his ass ever stepped in the ring. I just put the poor bastard outta his misery. And if he never was a boxer—That's what he gets for fuckin' up my sport.

First impressions can be tricky. Initially we think that Butch is all too happy to sell his soul and compromise his profession for money. Having agreed to throw the fight, and then welch on the deal seems even more reprehensible. He seems heartless about having unintentionally killed his opponent. But the preceding dialogue between the cab driver Esmarelda and Butch shows us that Butch was under duress when he agreed to throw the fight. It was his sense of pride, his honor, and his love of the sport that drove him to give it his best shot. Butch no doubt rationalizes that since Marsellus was forcing him to throw the fight that it would be okay to break his promise and thereby profit from the deal. Butch feels little sympathy for Marsellus because he has no respect for the sanctity of boxing. As for his deceased opponent, Butch reasons that if he was once a true boxer then the fact that he was selling out meant that his soul was already dead and thus Butch was doing him a favor by killing him. On the other hand, if he was not ever really a boxer then he got what he deserved for disrespecting the sport. Here it appears that even the initially unlovable Butch is operating according to some sort of moral code.

### Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged

There is an obvious tension between the relativist bent of the film, the relativist pattern of rationalization used by the criminals to justify their actions, and the universalist "eye for an eye" ethic prescribed by the Old Testament that Jules, Vincent, and Butch use to justify their violent retribution. No doubt Jules and Vincent do not view themselves as nihilists or moral relativists but rather as acting according to some universal principles. However from the perspective of the viewer, much of the justification that the gangsters give for their violent criminal behavior rings as hollow

rationalization. We feel that only the truth of moral relativism could redeem these characters, just as the dialogues at the beginning of the film tacitly suggest. These moral tensions are eventually resolved one way or the other for each of the main characters, depending on their capacity for a change of heart and, if you will, the grace of God.

After Jules and Vincent "miraculously" escape being shot by the .357 magnum "hand cannon" unloaded at them at point blank range, Jules sees it as an act of God and decides to quit the criminal life: "That's it for me. From here on in, you can consider my ass retired. I'm tell'in' Marsellus today I'm through." To the best of our knowledge Jules lives out the rest of his natural life walking the Earth and searching for God "like Caine in Kung Fu."

When Pumpkin (Tim Roth) threatens Jules at gun point for his wallet and Marsellus's briefcase in the coffee shop, Jules gets the drop on him and could easily kill him. Instead, he turns the other cheek.

**JULES:** . . . I'm givin' you that money so I don't hafta kill your ass. You read the bible?

**PUMPKIN:** Not regularly.

**JULES:** There's a passage I got memorized. Ezekiel 25:17 . . . And if you ever heard it, it meant your ass. I never really questioned what it meant. I thought it was just a cold-blooded thing to say to a motherfucker 'fore you popped a cap in his ass. But I saw some shit this mornin' made me think twice. Now I'm thinkin', it could mean you're the evil man. And I'm the righteous man. And Mr. .45 here, he's the shepherd protecting my righteous ass in the valley of darkness. Or it could mean you're the righteous man and I'm the shepherd and it's the world that's evil and selfish. I'd like that. But that shit ain't the truth. The truth is you're the weak. And I'm the tyranny of evil men. But I'm tryin'. I'm tryin' real hard to be a shepherd.

Jules remains true to his moral epiphany, letting Pumpkin and Honeybunny (Amanda Plummer) go in peace with his fifteen hundred dollars. Maybe Jules has come to realize that both his relativistic posturing and proclamations of Old Testament vengeance were little more than rationalizations for his immoral

behavior. Jules has stopped deceiving himself about his actions. He now realizes that he has been leading an immoral life and he must change his ways or truly lose his soul.

Vincent, by contrast, sees nothing divine or meaningful in the fact that all of the bullets missed them when they were surprised by an attacker with a .357 magnum. He sees it as merely an improbable event; they were lucky and that is all. Vincent is still morally and spiritually asleep and he pays the ultimate price for it shortly thereafter when he is shot by Butch with his own gun while walking out of Butch's bathroom holding a copy of *Modesty Blaise*. Vincent was waiting in Butch's apartment to do unto him what Butch did first.

Shortly after Butch escapes death at the hands of Vincent, he is presented with his own critical moral test. The only reason Butch risked his life by going back to his apartment was to retrieve his father's gold watch that had been passed down through several wars and generations of family soldiers. For Butch the gold watch symbolizes honor, familial piety, respect, bravery, and courage. In short, the watch symbolizes everything that is moral and meaningful to Butch. As he tells himself:

This is my war. You see, Butch, what you're forgettin' is this watch isn't just a device that enables you to keep track of time. This watch is a symbol. It's a symbol of how your father, and his father before him, and his father before him, distinguished themselves in war. Using that perspective, going back for it isn't stupid. It may be dangerous, but it's not stupid. Because there are certain things in this world that are worth going back for [i.e., worth dying for].

Butch, speeding away from his apartment, is quite proud and happy with himself after killing Vincent. To himself he says: "That's how you're gonna beat 'em, Butch. They keep underestimat' ya." Just when Butch thinks he has gotten away free and clear, he quite unexpectedly encounters Marsellus in the street. A struggle ensues and out of rancor they try to kill one another.

Both Butch and Marsellus find themselves in the Mason-Dixon Pawnshop and just as Butch is about to shoot Marsellus in the head, the owner of the shop (the redneck Maynard) knocks Butch out. When next we see both Butch and Marsellus tied up, beat up, and gagged in Maynard's S&M hillbilly dun-

geon below the pawnshop, we are reminded of Marsellus's earlier speech to Butch about pride. Both men are indeed learning the hard way that "pride cometh before a fall." As Maynard and Zed are avariciously deciding who to rape first, we see Butch and Marsellus look at each other, all traces of hostility gone, replaced by a shared terror.

Unsurprisingly the two rednecks pick Marsellus to rape first. Butch manages to escape, but just as he is about to leave the pawnshop and thereby abandon Marsellus to his fate, his conscience kicks in. Listening to the two rednecks have their way with Marsellus, Butch decides he cannot leave anybody in such a hellish situation and begins rooting around in the pawnshop for a weapon. He tries several weapons on for size, a big hammer, a chainsaw, a Louisville slugger, but then he sees the perfect weapon hanging on the wall above a neon sign that says "Dad's Old-Fashioned Root Beer." The weapon is a samurai sword, a katana, the ultimate symbol of honor, duty, and the Bushido warrior code.

Ironically, Butch cannot abandon Marsellus for the very same reason he could not throw the fight. Butch frees Marsellus ending the feud between them: Butch rides away a free man, having passed his moral and spiritual test. Butch and Marsellus crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, both becoming slaves to and allies against a common enemy: rednecks who rape, torture, and kill their victims just for fun. Only the humility of cooperation and the Golden Rule can deliver these two from the bondage of truly evil men.

### Epilogue: From Nihilism to Redemption

As we saw earlier, philosophical questions about meaning and morality are inextricably connected. Recall that Vincent thinks it is loyalty that gives life meaning hence his demeanor toward Mia and it is Butch's belief that honor and respect for his father are worth dying for that sends him back for the watch.

Let's take a look at the debate that breaks out between Jules and Vincent regarding their Near Death Experience brought on by the .357's being unsuccessfully unloaded in their face:

**JULES:** We should be fuckin' dead right now.

**VINCENT:** Yeah, we were lucky.

**JULES:** That was . . . divine intervention. You know what divine intervention is?

**VINCENT:** Yeah, I think so. That means God came down from Heaven and stopped the bullets.

**JULES:** Yeah man, that's what it means. That's exactly what it means! God came down from Heaven and stopped the bullets.

**VINCENT:** Ever seen that show "COPS?" I was watchin' it once and this cop was on it who was talkin' about this time he got into a gun fight with a guy in a hallway. He unloads on this guy and he doesn't hit anything. And these guys were in a hallway. It's a freak, but it happens.

**JULES:** If you wanna play blind man, then go walk with a shepherd. But me, my eyes are wide fuckin' open.

**VINCENT:** I guess it's when God makes the impossible possible. And I'm sorry Jules, but I don't think what happened this morning qualifies.

**JULES:** Don't you see, Vince, that shit don't matter. You're judging this thing the wrong way. It's not about what. It could be God stopped the bullets, he changed Coke into Pepsi, he found my fuckin' car keys. You don't judge shit like this based on merit. Whether or not what we experienced was an according-to-Hoyle miracle is insignificant. What is significant is I felt God's touch. God got involved.

Jules has had a religious existential experience. He decides to make a leap of faith based on a personal subjective experience. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1833–1855) talked about the true leap of faith whereby, through the sheer force of passion, the individual rips himself out of his old form of existence and throws himself into a new existence where he will hold himself responsible to the will of God. This new life represents a commitment to self-perfection and other human being's welfare. For Kierkegaard what is essential about such a leap of faith is that it is beyond reason and empirical justification.<sup>8</sup>

Jules and Vincent are faced with the same question we all are, how to interpret our experience? Whereas Jules sees a moral, spiritual and meaningful order in existence (fate without

fatalism and the grace of God), Vincent sees only chance and accident when he reflects on the recent events that comprise the film. Just as Jules and Vincent cannot resolve their philosophical differences with any certainty—in the end an inductive leap is unavoidable when choosing a worldview or interpretation of experience—we the viewers cannot know with certainty how best to interpret this film. Based on the ultimate fate of the characters (those who refuse to listen to the angels of their better nature are laid to waste) and based on the highly improbable chain of events that comprise the film, my conclusion is that Tarantino's worldview is closer to that of the transformed Jules.

Finally, consider the fate of Butch. After rescuing Marsellus he rides away into freedom on a chopper named "Grace," perhaps suggesting that he is literally being carried away by the grace of God. Earlier events in *Pulp Fiction* foreshadow this eventuality. The viewer notes earlier in the film that the partially burned out Killian's Red Beer neon sign in the pawnshop reads "kill ed" and that Zed's key chain for Grace is a large gold metal "Z." Add the Z to the sign and you get "Kill Zed." Is this mere coincidence or a meaningful synchronicity foretelling the future? We can never know with certainty but we do know Butch escapes on Zed's chopper Grace, leaving each of us to decide for ourselves whether or not to make the leap of faith in this apparently pulp world.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.



## TO THINK ABOUT

1. How do the ethical perspectives of Jules and Vincent differ? Can you think of specific examples?
2. Some people believe that relativism is better because it encourages toleration of others' beliefs; however some claim relativism is bad because "all is permitted." Which do you think is right?
3. Can life be valuable even though it lacks meaning?
4. Can meaning or morality be subjective or grounded in human experience without implying nihilism?

## TO READ NEXT

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# What Nietzsche Could Teach You: Eternal Return in *Groundhog Day*

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What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence, even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*

## Nietzsche and Eternal Return

In *Groundhog Day* a weatherman must relive the same day over and over again, with no hope of escape. Only when he begins to live for the present (despite the fact that it is always the same day) is he released from this curse. The story beautifully illustrates Friedrich Nietzsche's thoughts about eternal return and how we perceive the importance of the future, and we will see how Nietzsche was able to offer an alternative to the Christian view of the meaning of life.

Any discussion of the meaning of life quickly invites one very difficult question: Is that meaning self-created and self-imposed or is life meaningless without some form of validation from outside itself? Traditionally, in western societies, the prevailing view