Is Woody Allen a Hedonist? A Look through the Lens of Film-Philosophy at Crimes and Misdemeanors

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In the critically acclaimed 1990 film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, two characters’ lives are juxtaposed; we see their worst fears, their desires for happiness, and their ethical decision-making paradigms. Within the timeframe of about four months, we are offered a cinematic glimpse into the morality and life-philosophy of two human beings. We are also given insights into the writer, director, and co-star’s life-philosophy. Woody Allen crafts a film that forces the viewer to ask many pertinent and probing questions. Crucially, in terms of “theoretical-applied” ethics, we are compelled to inquire: “If that were me, what would I do?”

Meet Judah Rosenthal, a wealthy, successful husband, father, and ophthalmologist who is at the end of a long-term affair with a younger woman, Dolores. Meet Clifford Stern, husband, uncle, and aspiring film-documentarian, who is at the end of his marriage, seeking to begin an affair with a younger woman, Halley. While not an immediately gripping plot premise, perhaps the questions and problems facing the characters, and by extension, all of humanity, is what makes this movie an acclaimed exposition and exploration of the philosophy of happiness. Allen’s brilliance is demonstrated as both major and minor characters’ decisions and behaviors center around the pursuit of happiness with all of its confusion, contradiction and nuance that comes with being human. Many philosophers have identified and labeled the elevation of happiness as the highest good and its relentless pursuit, hedonism. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE), is credited with first articulating the framework of morality that maximizes pleasure and avoids pain (Shafer-Landau, 2018). Briefly, hedonism’s ethic states that pleasure is good and pain is bad. Therefore, when placed in a decision-making paradigm, to pursue pleasure and avoid pain is the right and “good” choice.

The earliest scene featuring only Judah gives us the first look into his pain. He stands in front of a peacefully burning fireplace in his luxurious home where he discovers and reads an unopened letter from his lover, Dolores addressed to his wife. The missive is a desperate attempt to bring some honesty to the love triangle, of which Mrs. Rosenthal is completely oblivious. Ironically, the letter opens with the phrase, “I do not wish to cause suffering.” Judah’s expression turns to a grimace as the voice of Dolores is heard narrating the letter’s contents while the agony visibly crosses his face and the flames flicker in the background. While clearly distressed, his deliberation does not last long. The letter is committed to the consuming flames behind him. Judah encounters pain and deftly avoids it; for now. It becomes clear that at this juncture in his life, Judah is at a crossroads. Dolores’s increasing neuroticism correlate with her decreasing attractiveness, while his choice seems to be predetermined: despite the pleasure found in the affair and long-running deceit, he will not lose his social status by choosing a stewardess over his wife of twenty years. However, the pain of the guilt and the pain from dreading discovery is all-consuming; avoiding these pains quickly becomes his chief goal.

The archetypical scene establishing Woody Allen’s character, Cliff, features him and his niece exiting a movie theater in the middle of the day chatting leisurely. The act closes humorously with some unscrupulous advice on school and life given by uncle Cliff. Later, his niece is personified as the fun Cliff chooses over the work he should be doing in an admonishment from his wife. “She’s just so great!” he rebuts. Events unfold in a seemingly lackluster way for Cliff and he finds himself
documenting his despised (and much more successful) brother-in-law for a television series on brilliant minds. Things bump along dismally until Cliff meets Halley; then the pursuit of the culmination and realization of his happiness is epitomized in winning her for himself. The flippant way in which he discusses his love for her with his niece while also nonchalantly acknowledging his current marital state is greatly indicative of what Cliff is about and how he makes his decisions. Over integrity and loyalty, he is after pleasure; specifically the pleasure of Halley’s reciprocal love.

The philosophy of hedonism, in its most idyllic and authentic form, runs much deeper than quickly acquiring and consuming all the base physical pleasures possible while excluding oneself from all pain. It recognizes a hierarchy in the quality of pleasure and elevates “attitudinal” pleasures (such as the enjoyment that comes from invigorating mental stimulation and being physically fit) over the more immediate and material ones. We see the elusive pursuit of these “superior” pleasures demonstrated in the eerily relatable characters on the screen before us. Cliff idealizes and lauds an estimable philosophy professor, Dr. Levy. It seems that he is worthy of imitation and Cliff has undertaken to encapsulate his worldview by filming many hours of his existential orations on the meaning of life. Professor Levy is a holocaust survivor who eloquently states, “It is the humans’ ability to love that creates meaning which lends itself to happiness.” Halley admiringly notes that Levy’s perspective is “so large and life-affirming.” Because Woody Allen shoots these reverential interactions with no humor or tongue-in-cheek dialogue, we are led to assume that Levy’s philosophy is not only praiseworthy to Cliff, Halley (and most people), but to Allen as well. This is the single character in the movie that demonstrates what ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) referred to as “phronesis,” which is a form of wisdom that organizes the “good” in life. It is essentially the happiness to be had within one’s own life contemplations or philosophizing as it intimately relates to one’s practical existence. However, Allen hoodwinks us, because although we hear of him and see Cliff’s grainy film footage, Levy remains an eerie disembodied presence.

Anticlimactically, the last we hear, he has “gone out the window,” according to his pithy suicide note. This tragic incident is the impetus for a tender moment of confusion and sorrow shared by Halley and Cliff. However, it is in this scene that Cliff is quick to capitalize on Halley’s sympathy and procures his first physically pleasurable act with Halley. They kiss amidst the backdrop of his hero’s grand philosophical outlook evaporating in a simplistic and perfunctory act that represents humanity’s confusion and devaluation.

Congruently, we continue to witness Judah’s struggle for a life excluded from pain. It is hard to garner much sympathy for someone that has foolishly and volitionally fixed themselves in such a dilemma, however, the audience is gently rebuked by the compassionate and winsome character of Ben the Rabbi. During a doctor-patient interaction confirming the imminent loss of Ben’s eyesight, Judah forgoes his ophthalmologist persona for bit and confesses his predicament to the kindly man. The humanity and grace with which Judah is counseled highlights the singularity of Ben’s character. He is singular in that he is the only person which Woody Allen allows us to respect wholeheartedly. While potentially sympathizing with Allen’s other characters, their flaws are so apparent that the cast is nearly wholly unlikable. Upright, kind, gentle Rabbi Ben is the one exception. Ben exudes the “attitudinal” pleasures of grace and peace in the final scene where he is both completely blind and joyfully celebrating his daughter’s wedding. Woody Allen has beknighed him as the only character in his story who seems to truly “see” the way to happiness and demonstrates unflagging “moral wisdom,” which is essentially the emotional maturity and know-how to be both ethical and happy (Shafer-Landau, 2018). Both Judah and Cliff know someone exemplifying the superior pleasures of life. Although one seems to have given way to hopelessness, both Professor Levy and Rabbi Ben have confronted and, each in their own way, have overcome suffering and eloquently express contentment. Judah and Cliff can respect deeply and admire greatly yet fall short of being able to transcend to their exemplar’s heights of attitudinal pleasures. They seem stuck in the basement of hedonism—interpreting happiness as the fleeting, easily acquirable, and often unsatisfactory base
pleasures. They are marooned in the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain at the sensual level.  

By the end of the movie, all of Cliff’s pleasurable pursuits have come to naught. In a particularly brutal twist of fate, Halley, his quintessence of happiness, ends up with his detested brother-in-law. Cliff embodies what philosophers call the “paradox of hedonism” in which the myopic pursuit of pleasure often causes its complete evasion (Shafer-Landau, 2018). Conversely, Judah seems to be a paradox of pain; in exclusively trying to avoid pain, he causes much more of it. After excruciating deliberation, Judah utilizes the resource of his shady younger brother to orchestrate what seems to be the only way to escape his pain. Although it is euphemized as a “small burglary,” Judah has Dolores killed. Allen approaches this decision in terms that smack of an ethical indictment; he makes sure his audience can discern that this ultimate choice is only made after the threat to Judah’s happiness surpasses just his personal life and threatens his reputation and, notably, his finances. It seems that the pleasure money affords is one Judah will not give up at any cost. Since hedonism is an ethic that can be seen clearest through the lens of that which causes oneself the most or least pleasure, the pain this drastic measure causes Judah is what Allen highlights. Omitting any scenes showcasing hurt caused to the family and friends of Dolores, Allen only lets us into the vortex of Judah’s torment. He flails around trying a variety of pain-quenching techniques including self-condemnation and delusional attempts at elevating himself (the instigator and financier) over his brother (the engineer) and the henchman (the executor). Allen’s directorial astuteness is revealed in that the audience is never under any pressure to believe that Judah is somehow not culpable. His fears, pain, and regrets are relatable, maybe even drawing sympathy, but his guilt remains stark. Much like the letter at the beginning, Judah flings Dolores into the consuming flames of obliteration—all in the name of avoiding pain.

While the ethic of hedonism proclaims happiness to be the ultimate goal, other philosophers have placed high value on happiness only to the degree that it can and should be obtained while retaining goodness or “virtue”. To return to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, he assumed that all people seek happiness and acknowledged its value; however, he did not fully condemn suffering nor purport pleasure to be the preeminent goal (Aristotle). Aristotle is said to be a “virtue ethicist,” which, although the philosophy demonstrates hedonic originations, departs from hedonism as it incorporates virtue and character into its ethical schema. But Allen unflinchingly questions this worldview as well. Is happiness possible? Who ends up happy? In the final scene, we learn that months after his dastardly deed, Judah has successfully flung off both his religious upbringing and his guilt. To Cliff, it is greatly implausible that someone could be happy living with themselves and the knowledge of their own heinous immorality. However, Judah seems to contradict this and walks away contentedly with an affectionate wife under his arm, leaving Cliff alone in his misery pondering the ‘hypothetical’ story he has just relayed. Judah, our one happy character, has gotten away with it. He has avoided a world of pain; not only from the perspective of personal disaster and legal justice, but also from the trappings of his own morals, and seems to have successfully accomplished happiness within the working framework of hedonism.

The message that Judah is happy because he can successfully reject his religion and numb his feelings of guilt while Cliff is unhappy simply because he is not extraordinarily successful (economically, personally, and professionally) is a blatant challenge to the morals that make us comfortable. Our craving for justification is starved and our normalized principles are left dangling. Woody Allen cleverly tells us that he did not wrap up the story in a tragedy—a narrative that ends sadly, yet still retains the appeasing fact that evil meets justice. Instead, Allen leaves us with just questions; What is morality? Who qualifies as a good person? What does it take to be happy and is the cost worth it? Potentially a little more unsettling than our sense of unrest, we are also gifted a mirroring of ourselves; the cast is compiled completely of imperfect question-askers imperfectly pursuing pleasure. Is this all life is? Seeking answers? Chasing down elusive ‘happiness’? According to Woody Allen, the answer seems to be: “Maybe.” If Allen is neither a hedonist nor a virtue ethicist,
he is definitely an artful film-philosopher. He not only leaves us where we started—on our couch asking questions about the meaning of life—he is practically sitting right next to us. “Pass the popcorn please, Mr. Allen.”

Works Cited