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A Hill of Beans

by Matthew Kos

(Philosophy 1110)

The appeal of the 1942 film *Casablanca* has lasted for well over 60 years and the picture remains a consistently high-ranked feature on most top movie lists. The production mixes comedy, drama, and romanticism, featuring an undeniable chemistry between Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman as two-thirds of a love triangle that quickly becomes the main focus of the film. Nearing the end of the film, the audience becomes aware of the choice Bogart's character Rick has to make - the choice between love and virtue, to use the film's language.

To be aware of the ending of the film is to know that Rick ultimately chooses to side with virtue. Rick, a cynical drunkard filled with anger following his abandonment in Paris by his love Ilsa years prior, relinquishes his chance at freedom by allowing Ilsa and her husband, Victor Laslow, to escape Casablanca. Despite Rick's earlier attempts to feign complete indifference and neutrality towards anyone or anything beyond himself, his ending philosophy and reasoning becomes surprisingly utilitarian, recognizing decisions must be made to produce the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. Rick understands that his allowing Ilsa to leave with Victor, the symbolic leader of the Free French Revolution, will allow the international community to be the benefactors of Victor's work.

In his essay "The Conflict between Individual and Social Morality," Reinhold Niebuhr maintains that from the perspective of the individual, the highest ideal is unselfishness; from the view of society, the highest ideal is that of justice. Rick continually struggles with these two ideals and this becomes abundantly clear – that which benefits him and that which benefits society are two opposite forces at conflict. As Niebuhr goes on to say, the individual only comes to find a balance by losing oneself in a cause greater than the ego. Although it is shown that Rick has fought on the side of the underdog in the past, he himself admits financial interests the main motivator of his decisions. It is not until the end of the movie, when Rick gives up both his own chance at freedom and the opportunity to be with the woman he loves, even killing a German officer in the process, does he sacrifice and lose himself to a cause greater than his ego.

In one of the film's most memorable scenes, Rick draws the following conclusion: "I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." He knows that the choice he makes, whether right or wrong from an individual moral standpoint, affects many more people than he can directly recognize. Even Ilsa, who is an immediate benefactor Rick's sacrifice, does not understand the extent of the benefits realized as a result of Rick's decision. Through Rick's understanding, not only is his choice right by just the fact Victor is Ilsa's husband, but the cause against the Germans is one of infinitely more purpose than Rick's own satisfaction with love. The solution to the love-triangle problem stemmed directly from Rick's action, but the ideological fight was strengthened by his choice, and he knows this.

Rick, a "citizen of the world" who runs a crooked saloon under the watchful eyes of corrupt officials and makes it known he "sticks [his] neck out for no man," eventually comes to terms with what he knows is right. Not only does Rick throw away his supposed neutrality, he throws away his own happiness for the welfare of a cause he reluctantly agrees with and in the process creates one of the most unforgettable speeches and moments in film history. Rick may not be archetype of moralistic guidance, but by the end of the movie he makes the right choice. His utilitarian way of

thinking was satisfied through his self-sacrifice. By losing himself in a cause he considers much greater than himself, he thereby put at ease his struggle between social and individual morals. Casablanca is a classic movie, and this choice made through moral reasoning is one of the noblest decisions in film.

Works Cited

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