

Are All Things Permissible?:
A Look at Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

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I. Introduction

“If God does not exist,” says the intensely cerebral Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, “then all things are permissible.”

In the absence of an objective moral authority governing the universe, claims Ivan, morality and moral rules have no legitimacy. When the Karamazov family servant, Smerdyakov, overhears this he uses it as justification for murdering his employer, Ivan’s father. Ivan is appalled, not only at Smerdyakov’s crime, but at his own culpability and complicity in the murder. His moral nihilism (i.e., denial of the validity of any moral claims) has borne a fruit that he himself finds intolerable. This finally drives him insane.

A similar theme is explored in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The poor student Raskolnikov decides to murder an old pawnbroker to whom he owes money, and rationalizes this on the grounds that great men (of which he takes himself to be one) have no obligation to obey the petty rules of society, especially if breaking those rules can help them actualize their greatness. After the murder, however, Raskolnikov finds he can no longer live with himself. It turns out that he is not in fact ‘greater’ than the moral law. In the end, he turns himself in to the police, in psychological need of the punishment that will facilitate his repentance.

In both novels Dostoevsky responds to a problem that has troubled moral thinkers for millennia: that the natural world does not appear to be morally ordered, that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad. This seems to undermine belief in any objective moral reality. Dostoevsky’s answer is that, though the natural world does indeed appear to be morally indifferent, the inner world of psyche and spirit is not. Ultimately, people cannot live with themselves without respect for moral principles.

II. Crimes and Misdemeanors

The title of Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is clearly an allusion to Dostoevsky’s novels. But Allen’s vision, for all its comedic trappings, appears (at first glance, anyway) darker than Dostoevsky’s. In Woody Allen’s world people really do seem to ‘get away with murder,’ not only outwardly, but psychologically as well. As one character says, echoing Ivan’s nihilism, “If he [a murderer] can do it and get away with it and he chooses not to be bothered by the ethics, then he’s home free.” In a universe void of any objective moral order, so the film (seems to) suggest, conscience itself is little more than a liability.

Allen’s film weaves together two independent stories that he ultimately links, both narratively and thematically.

The first is the story of Judah Rosenthal, a successful, highly respected, even philanthropic, ophthalmologist whose mistress of two years is threatening to expose their illicit affair, an exposure that would wreck Judah's family life and reputation. Judah contacts his brother, who has links with the mob, and, after some ineffectual wrestling with his conscience, arranges to have her killed. At first Judah, who grew up in a devout Jewish home, is wracked with guilt. He feels the eyes of God (whom hitherto he had not believed in) glaring at him. Like Raskolnikov, he contemplates turning himself in. But then, inexplicably, he gets over it. Allen's film suggests that Judah's pangs of conscience (and ours) do not go very deep. In the end, Judah is indeed able to live with himself, and even flourish, despite his crime.

The second story features Clifford Stern, played by Woody Allen, a failing, idealistic (if also somewhat pessimistic) filmmaker struggling to make a film about Louis Levy, a Holocaust survivor and philosopher. Clifford is impressed with Levy's humanistic philosophy, which teaches that human beings have the power to choose love and life-affirmation despite the coldness and indifference of the universe. To finance this film Clifford reluctantly agrees to direct a PBS documentary celebrating the career of his famous brother-in-law, Lester, a highly successful, but superficial, pompous, and arrogant TV producer, whose grandiosity and pretentiousness Clifford despises. While Clifford is making the documentary about Lester, however, Levy kills himself. This raises questions about the viability of Levy's philosophy, and ruins Clifford's film project to boot.

In the end, Clifford can't bring himself to present Lester in a positive light. He produces a film poking fun at Lester's egoism and pomposity, which gets him fired. To make matters worse, Clifford, whose marriage is failing, has fallen in love with the PBS series producer Halley Reed, whom he takes to be an idealist like himself. But in a final blow, Halley rejects Clifford to marry Lester, won over, so it is suggested, by Lester's glitz, wealth, and success.

These two stories are linked by the character of Ben, who is both Lester's brother (and, thus, also, Clifford's brother-in-law) and the longtime friend and patient of Judah Rosenthal. Ben is a Rabbi with a strong belief in the moral structure of the universe. He is portrayed as sincere, compassionate, honest, well-intentioned, friendly, and morally virtuous without being judgmental; a genuinely nice guy. He is also going blind.

The movie's culminating scene takes place at Ben's daughter's wedding, financed by Lester, to which both Clifford and Judah have been invited. Clifford is devastated after learning of Halley's engagement to Lester and retreats to a back room. There he runs into Judah, who has also wandered away from the main reception hall. Both have had a bit too much to drink. In response to Clifford's joshing remark that he is contemplating murder, Judah begins to tell Clifford about the murder he has actually committed, but as if it were a movie plot Clifford might be interested in producing. He finishes by saying that the murderer, despite initial horror at his crime, finally comes to accept himself, and even prosper. As Judah walks back into the main hall we see him smilingly embrace his wife.

The movie ends with a shot of Rabbi Ben, now in dark glasses, dancing blissfully with his newly married daughter--blind, so the image suggests, to the moral turpitude, corruption, and hypocrisy surrounding him on all sides. In a final ironic touch, Allen overlays this image with the voice of Professor Levy (who, we remember, has killed himself) speaking about how love and simple pleasures can render life meaningful even in an objectively meaningless universe.

III. *Are All Things Permissible?*

Humorous as Allen's film is, its (ostensible) message seems bleak: not only is there no objective moral structure to the universe, but the subjective moral constraints of conscience (Judah) and conviction (Levy) are weak, and, when push comes to shove, ineffectual. In the absence of an objective moral order, so Allen's film seems to be saying, subjective moral commitments have no real mooring and, when tested, will fail. Both Judah and Levy kill (Judah his mistress and Levy himself) in stark contravention of the moral values they profess. Rabbi Ben is able to find happiness in his moral optimism only through blindness, and Clifford, who remains true to himself and his idealism to the end (as evidenced by his suggestion to Judah that the murderer of his story turn himself in), loses everything: his career, his marriage, his love.

Allen's film raises a number of *meta-ethical* questions (i.e., questions concerning the foundations of morality) in a most dramatic way: Is there any legitimacy to moral claims? If so, what is the basis of that legitimacy, how does it manifest itself, how is it enforced? If not, must we agree with Ivan that all things *are* permissible--if only, like Judah, we are willing to permit them?

We can explore these questions by considering some of the subsidiary questions Allen's film raises.

First, we might ask about the relationship of morality to punishment. For morality to be legitimate is it necessary that moral transgressors suffer? Does the fact that Judah ends up happy (presuming that he does) mean that what he did is not wrong? Why would it? To answer this question we would have to say what wrong consists in. Does it consist in making *oneself* unhappy or in violating someone else? Allen (and Ivan) seem to suggest that where there is no punishment there is no wrong--but is this true? Can morality be legitimate even if unenforceable?

Another question we might ask is whether, even as Allen presents it, Judah really does 'get away with it.' In his talk with Clifford he suggests that he is forced to resort to rationalization and denial in order to ward off his guilt. But if rationalization and denial are forms of self-deceit does this not mean that, in fact, he *cannot* live honestly with himself? Is Allen, albeit in a more subtle way, actually *agreeing* with Dostoevsky? Is Judah's life now a sham? Does he now have to hide his actions, and the truth about himself, from everyone he cares for? Is his crime, then, really without cost? Is it, then, really possible for immoral people to live wholeheartedly?

Another question pertains to the relationship between 'misdemeanors' and 'crimes.' In each of the two stories that make up the film we are presented with a highly successful, but morally questionable, character. Judah is morally questionable, of course, because he murders. Lester's pomposity, arrogance, and superficiality, though not crimes, are represented as morally offensive

‘misdemeanors’ (at least to the moral sensibilities of Clifford). Indeed, Clifford goes so far as to accuse Lester of subverting democracy by promoting frivolous values.

Is there a relationship between what Lester does and what Judah does? Lester, of course, is a crafter of popular culture. Do the superficial values promoted by pop culture actually make it easier for people like Judah to commit and rationalize their crimes? Might the ease with which Judah is able to hide his guiltiness from himself and others be due to the fact that he lives in a culture that constantly diverts people’s attention from honest self-examination? Is individual moral decay but a symptom of societal decay?

If *this* is what Allen intends to say then his film might be seen, not so much as an endorsement of moral nihilism, as an indictment of modern American culture. Some film critics have seen it this way, even interpreting Rabbi Ben’s blindness as an allusion to the ancient tradition of the ‘blind seer,’ whose physical sightlessness betokens an acute, inner/spiritual, sight. The blind seer, not distracted by outward sights, was thought to be more fully able to exercise inner vision, through which moral truth is seen.

So it is possible, after all, to see Allen’s film as affirming an objective moral order, while suggesting that we as a society are drifting farther and farther from its truth.

Finally, we might ask about the moral role of God, as represented in Allen’s film. One traditional way of thinking about this focuses on punishment. In this view God is envisioned as a kind of divine policeman, who enforces the moral order by punishing the wicked and rewarding the good. One problem with this idea, as we see, is that evidence for it is lacking: bad people frequently go unpunished, good people unrewarded. Where was this divine policeman during the Holocaust, asks Judah’s Aunt May in a flashback to a Jewish Passover ceremony from Judah’s childhood. Aunt May, like Ivan Karamazov, claims that without God to enforce the moral law it is devoid of legitimacy.

But there is another tradition that understands God more as the basis of what is called ‘natural law’ than as a divine policeman. Natural law theory suggests that morality is in some manner embedded within human nature, such that we cannot be immoral without betraying our truest selves. The ‘punishment’ for immorality, in this view, is not necessarily, or even primarily, external. One is punished by losing touch with oneself, with others, and with one’s highest potentialities as a human being.

When Judah’s father Sol responds to Aunt May by saying that, if necessary, he will always choose God over truth, he seems to be appealing (without quite having the words for it) to something like natural law theory. His point seems to be that devotion to God and the moral order are so important to our *inner* lives, that no amount of *external* evidence could ever justify giving it up.

A first look at Allen’s film suggests that his sympathies are more with Aunt May than with Sol, but, on further consideration, we can see much in the film to support Sol’s position as well.

Our question, of course, is not about what Woody Allen thinks, but about what we think. Does morality have objective validity? If so, what is its basis? If not, *are* all things permissible?