

Crimes and
misdemeanors
analysis philosophy
essay



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Woody Allen's film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, explores the different ways that ethics play in the inner workings of the human mind. Throughout the film, the audience witnesses the roles that ethics play in the lives of five different men: Judah Rosenthal, a successful ophthalmologist; Clifford Stern, a struggling documentary filmographer; Lester, a famous producer; Ben, a rabbi whose sense of sight is beginning to fail; and Louis Levy, a philosophical theorist. By the end of the film, each character demonstrates, through his words and actions, how his own system of ethics affects the choices he makes in life.

The film's first central character to be introduced is Judah Rosenthal, a successful ophthalmologist who seems to be living a perfect life; he is wealthy, successful, and lives with a loving wife. However, despite how he has everything that would seemingly lead to a happy life, he remains troubled by his immoral affair with Dolores Paley, a lonesome woman whom he met years ago. Despite how he managed to keep his affair a secret, Judah realizes that his success is put in danger as Dolores begins to pressure him to make their relationship public. She threatens that unless Judah fulfills her wishes, she would jeopardize him revealing his shady financial transactions and their scandalous affair to the public, including to his wife and friends. Judah must now make a decision that is ultimately an ethical dilemma: he could either do the "right" thing by confessing his misdeed and hope for the best, which could mean potentially ruining everything he's worked for, or he could save himself the trouble by hiring his brother Jack to find someone to murder Dolores and to bring to an end all of his troubles. Though he initially hesitates to do so, Judah ultimately chooses the latter, believing that life is "

harsh and empty of values” and that the murdering of Dolores is the only way he can save himself. As the film progresses, it is revealed that Judah believes that we live in a cold world, where there is no God on whom we can look up to. He states that, “ God is a luxury that [he] can’t afford,” and reveals that he would ultimately choose not to confess and beg his wife for forgiveness. In his eyes, such mercy does not exist; he believes that, in the “ real world,” one must do whatever it takes to achieve happiness and success because there exists no higher power to maintain justice. Moreover, one must fend for himself and independently determine what is right, what is wrong, and what is best for him. This ethical system, which prioritizes self-preservation, is what ultimately causes Judah to murder Dolores. On the other hand, Ben, the rabbi, at one point states that Judah maintains a “ spark of [moral] notion” deep inside. This notion, which leads him to know in his heart the morality of his actions, is what causes him to become anxious and tense; it is what reminds him that “ Dolores isn’t just an insect” that he can “ step on.” Judah conclusively chooses to murder Dolores, but tries to justify his actions because acted using a utilitarian rationale, protecting his success and doing what is best for the most people. In the end, Judah’s decisions and his ethical rationale, which emphasizes self-preservation, have their roots in his view of the life as being cold and harsh.

A character that has a minor, but important, role in the film is Ben the rabbi. He serves somewhat as a foil to Judah: as a man of religion, he believes that the world is a lawful and loving place. He believes that the world has “ a moral structure, with real meaning, [...] and a higher power.” Without this structure, the world would have “ no basis to live.” Hence, it becomes

evident that Ben lives his life according to his system of ethics, which revolves around his faith in the omniscient God. The choices he makes pose no problem for him because he puts all of his faith and trust in a universe that is loving and lawful. When he counsels Judah, he simply tells him that he must simply accept life as it is presented because God will eventually justify everything in the future. The fact that Ben is physically blind has some symbolic significance: he disregards the wickedness and darkness of the world and blindly trusts his faith.

Despite the fact that his blind faith may be mistaken, Ben “ accepts God over truth” and believes that it will lead to “ a better life than all those that doubt.”

The film’s second central character is Clifford Stern, a struggling documentary filmmaker. Clifford is also a virtuous man, but in a different manner. Rather than putting all of his faith into one entity or idea, like Ben, Clifford lives by his own terms. He decides for himself what is right or wrong by examining the effects an action has on the world. He spends his time looking at the effects that his words and actions will lead to rather than the happiness or success to come. This is demonstrated through the manner in which Clifford creates his documentaries: he focuses on material that he sees as significant, such as pollution, cancer, and philosophy, rather than trying to earn a quick buck by simply doing what other demand of him. Though Clifford’s loving affection for Halley Reed despite his marriage may be seen as being immoral, it is ethically acceptable in his perspective because not only he knows that he and his wife are bound to become divorced, but also because he is trying to find true love with Halley, a pursuit <https://assignbuster.com/crimes-and-misdemeanors-analysis-philosophy-essay/>

that he considers to be a fundamental aspect of life. It becomes evident that Clifford is an idealist; he is always looking for meaning in both his documentaries and his life, and this ultimately serves as the basis of what he sees as right and wrong. Clifford remains steadfast in his moral beliefs despite how they may stop him from obtaining what he desires most. For instance, he makes Lester appear absurd and shallow in his biographical documentary of him despite how it could have brought Clifford recognition and success. Despite how the film closes with Clifford feeling dejected, he is still portrayed as a man of virtue who remains steadfast in his system of ethics.

The film's foil to Clifford is a character named Lester, a famous Hollywood producer.

His system of ethics mainly relies on whatever makes him the most successful and happy. To Lester, whatever bring the most satisfaction is "right" while whatever brings failure is "wrong." As a result, Lester does whatever he pleases and seems to completely ignores the moral aspect of things. This is particularly the reason why Lester is portrayed as being crude, arrogant, and womanizing. Additionally, Lester is the complete opposite of Clifford when it comes to the significance of the material he produces-he only cares about the ratings because they will grant him wealth, fame, and "a closet full of Emmys." Lester's shallow demeanor can be further seen in his seemingly only ethical question in the film when he asks, "Am I a phony?" Immediately, however, he resolves the troubling though by believing that others are merely jealous of him, and he proceeds to quickly forget about it.

The fact that Lester is able to quickly forget about the "troubling matter" <https://assignbuster.com/crimes-and-misdemeanors-analysis-philosophy-essay/>

supports the view that he is faced with seemingly no inner conflict due to how he merely accepts what grants him happiness instead of actually considering the moral aspects of his actions.

Another character in the film that has a unique ethical system that he abides by is Louis Levy, a philosopher that Clifford features in his documentaries. Levy uses love to judge whether something is right or wrong. He states that only “ love gives meaning to the indifferent universe.” He believes that life is simply a search for the thing that will allow us to survive the “ indifferent universe” and that the actions people take to attain it makes them who they are. But if love is not found and people feel that it “ isn’t worth it anymore,” people begin to feel an inner anxiety and pressure. This struggle was what led Levy to commit suicide or “ go out the window.”

Hence, by observing the actions and the words of the film’s different characters, the different types of ethical system and ways people judge right and wrong are revealed. From an examination of each character’s distinct set of virtues and ideas of morality, the audience is able to comprehend the nature and the reasoning behind their decisions and actions.