

# Crash

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According to John Stuart Mill, an individual is at liberty to do whatever he or she chooses as long as they do not harm others in the process. However, this liberty is consistently being constricted by societal norms or as Mill would refer to as the Tyranny of the majority.

In the movie Crash, directed by Paul Haggis, a set of individuals experience racial and social tensions and in turn unintentionally affect each others lives in a profound way. None of the characters turn out be the person that they are at first perceived to be. What constitutes a good person and a bad person, if we all act solely and selfishly in order to benefit ourselves Is a person that thinks negatively but acts positively necessarily any better than a person that thinks positively, and when given the chance to correct a negativity, but does nothing at all John Ryan(Matt Dillon), is a white officer in the LAPD. His racism seems to manifest from a deeper anger and frustration. When Officer Ryan pulls over the black couple Cameron(Terrance Howard) and Christine Thayer(Thandie Newton), he searches them both for weapons even though they seem to pose no threat; in the process he sexually molests the aggravated and slightly intoxicated Christine. Then in a surprising turn of events Officer Ryan is on a scene of an accident and finds no other than Christine in a compromising position.

He offers to help her but understandably fights him off as he is the person that molested her before. When it seemed as if there is no way of saving Christine, John risks his life to pull Christine out of the car before it explodes. In his introductory Mill writes, ??? He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him

happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right???(Mill, 4).

In this instance Officer Ryan was compelled to save Christine??™s life; not because it would make him happier, nor was it wise, but it was right. The opening lines of chapter four of Mill???'s On Liberty reads, ??? What, then is the rightful limit to the sovereignty of the individual over himself Where does the authority of society begin How much of human life should be assigned to individuality, and how to much to society???(Mill, 30). Graham Waters(Don Cheadle)exemplifies this point as he is a black detective that is disconnected from his drug addicted mother, and criminal young brother. Graham consistently ensures his mother that he will find his younger criminal brother but is preoccupied with other cases. Graham is a man that is indeed sovereign and is offered a chance to further his career by an assistant to the district attorney. The stipulation is that his brother being a criminal hinders his chances of going further in his career. The assistant offers to withhold information about his brother being a criminal if he withholds information regarding a case concerning a suspected racist white cop. Graham offers to do so and ties the deal.

Instead of making this deal and disregarding his brother, Graham could have kept his promise to his mother and perhaps his brother would still be alive; as his brother is later revealed to be in fact Peter Waters. If we can genuinely do what we choose so long as we do not harm others in the process, it would be unfair to say that Graham is an immoral person. Graham simply acted in self-protection and unknowingly is a factor in his brothers harm. To make

matters worst, the district attorney's authority is one that is corrupt. As it turns out he manipulates racial politics and only wanted to convict a potentially innocent white cop of being a racist murderer in order to receive more black votes in the next election.

When it comes to limiting sovereignty of individuals, greater powers at work must be considered; such as a corrupt society and random chance itself. Mill includes, "Though society is not founded on a contract, and though no good purpose is answered by inventing a contract in order to deduce social obligations from it, every one who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit" (Mill, 30-31). Perhaps in turn for protection of this society, Graham's owed debt is his brother's life. "The greatest difficulty to be encountered does not lie in the appreciation of means towards an acknowledged end, but in the indifference of person in general to the end itself" (Mill, 23). This point that Mill makes can be observed in the part of the movie in which a seemingly not racist, white Officer Tommy Hansen (Ryan Phillippe) offers Peter Waters (Larenz Tate), a black hitch-hiker, a ride. In this telling scene, Tommy is shown to disregard negative racial stereotypes; however, what happens next exposes Tommy's insecurities about racism. While in the car, Peter expresses his liking to Tommy's country music and even says he has written a couple of country songs himself.

Tommy then casually dismisses Peter's claims and any other similarities that the two might share. Peter then laughs to himself and Tommy pulls over to tell Peter to get out of the car assuming that he is being laughed at. After

repeatedly being told to get out of the car, Peter finally reaches into his pocket to reveal the reason behind his amusement; as he does so Tommy wrongly assumes that Peter is reaching for a gun and shoots Peter dead. It turns out Peter is reaching for a figurine that happens to be the same one Tommy has on his dashboard. Tommy then frantically removes Peter from the car and burns the car.

Tommy rightfully helps a stranded hitch-hiker perhaps even to receive a acknowledged end. However, in during the incident, ??? He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold his deliberate decision???(Mill, 24). Clearly Tommy??™s observation, reasoning and judgment is handicapped by the ever present negative stereotypes that lie inside him; his subsequent action results in a death of someone he knows nothing about. In the story aches of these characters, Mill??™s ideas on harm and tyranny of the majority are vividly depicted. Officer John Ryan is a man that thinks negatively but ultimately acts positively.

Detective Graham Waters on the other hand, is a man that fails to act when it comes to looking for his brother and ultimately could have saved Peter??™s life. Officer Tommy Hansen represents an end of an entirely different spectrum all together. He is a man that thinks positively but in the end acts negatively. He is prime example of what we know and what we fear because even though he tries so hard to behave rightfully; it may be that the tyranny of society is so strong, it somehow manages permeates even the best of us.

If we are mere bets in time??™s risky game of roulettes or lab rats in society???'s greatest experiment.

How then, can we be moral individuals if there are so many greater forces that work against us Are we just zombies or are we just robots