

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF TV NOIR

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## ACTION AND INTEGRITY IN *THE FUGITIVE*

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*The Fugitive* aired on ABC from 1963 to 1967 and starred David Janssen in the title role of Dr. Richard Kimble, on the run from the law, wanted for a crime he did not commit. It was classic TV noir, both stylistically and thematically. In terms of the noir aesthetic—the first three seasons were in black and white, and even though the fourth season was in color, for its entire run—the series was filmed with a distinctly noir sensibility: unusual and unsettling camera angles, shots and scenes that emphasized the loneliness and isolation of the protagonist, extensive use of alleyways, warehouses, deserted streets at night, and fleabag hotels, and of course a voice-over narration. Thematically, film noir is often characterized as involving an inversion of values; this is practically guaranteed by the premise of *The Fugitive*: a wrongly accused man trying to capture the real killer while being pursued by law enforcement. This is what makes *The Fugitive* such a compelling TV noir. Every week, Richard Kimble is obliged to live an underground existence and is compelled to adopt a wary, if not paranoid, stance toward not only law-enforcement officers but all decent people.

As we see in many flashbacks over the run of the series (and summarized in the opening to every episode), one night, Kimble returns home to see a one-armed man fleeing his house. Inside, he finds his wife, murdered. But the police do not believe his story about a one-armed man, and neither does a jury, which has heard that Kimble and his wife had had a terrible argument that night. Kimble is sentenced to death, but en route to death row, as we hear in the series' voice-over opening, "fate moves its huge hand," and the train is derailed, allowing Kimble to escape. The series chronicles his quest to find the one-armed man, and the simultaneous quest by "the police lieutenant

obsessed with” recapturing Kimble, Lieutenant Philip Gerard (Barry Morse). In the pilot, we see a longer montage of backstory and narration, including a scene of Kimble looking out of the window of his train just before it crashes as the narrator (William Conrad) intones “Richard Kimble ponders his fate as he looks at the world for the last time . . . and sees only darkness. But in the darkness, fate moves its huge hand.” Over the course of the first season, the opening flashback and narration were trimmed down, and by the second season, had become “*The Fugitive*, a QM Production, starring David Janssen as Dr. Richard Kimble, an innocent victim of blind justice, falsely convicted of the murder of his wife, reprieved by fate when a train wreck freed him en route to the death house; freed him to hide in lonely desperation, to change his identity, to toil at many jobs; freed him to search for a one-armed man he saw leave the scene of the crime; freed him to run before the relentless pursuit of the police lieutenant obsessed with his capture.”<sup>1</sup>

Superficially, then, the police are the bad guys, while the good guy is a fugitive from justice; hence the seeming inversion of values. At a deeper level, though, each episode of *The Fugitive* is a self-contained morality play, in which the protagonist’s ongoing story intertwines with another tale concerning people he has become involved with: a boy who needs to get to a hospital, a woman with an abusive husband, a man who gets in trouble and needs help, workers oppressed by a sadistic boss.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist of this morality play, Dr. Richard Kimble, frequently finds himself in a dilemma: Can he do the right thing in his interactions with others while at the same time avoiding detection by the authorities? Another way to characterize that dilemma is this: Can he simultaneously maintain his integrity and his safety? Although it sometimes seems to exacerbate the situation, Kimble’s integrity turns out to be one of his chief assets. I’ve argued in previous essays on film noir that the “standard view” of noir as involving moral ambiguity is mistaken, that noir is better understood as demonstrating moral clarity and practical reason.<sup>3</sup> *The Fugitive* is yet another source of examples of this, as Kimble is consistently shown making tough decisions about what (to him) are clearly defined standards of right and wrong, struggling to preserve his integrity (and succeeding), doing the morally right thing without jeopardizing his quest to find his wife’s killer and exonerate himself. I will analyze situations or dilemmas from several episodes in terms of the issues at stake, the moral reasoning that goes into Kimble’s resolution of them, and the way his integrity plays a key role.

Kimble is a medical doctor—specifically, a pediatrician. This means

that it is in his nature to help the sick and injured, and this characteristic manifests itself in a general concern for those in distress. He seems almost constitutionally incapable of the sort of Seinfeldian indifference that would make it easier for him to elude Gerard. Indeed, he sometimes goes out of his way to help others, even in cases where he could have saved himself a lot of trouble by turning a blind eye. For example, in “Bloodline,” Kimble helps a dog breeder whose family is planning on fraudulently selling a sick dog and in the process draws the attention of the authorities. In “Angels Travel on Lonely Roads,” he helps a troubled nun recover her faith and falls into a classic noir police dragnet. Of course, in many cases, his help is needed because others have tried to help him. For example, in “The End Is But the Beginning,” Aimee Rennick (Barbara Barrie) gets shot helping Kimble escape. He feels compelled to help her, partly out of his normal, characteristic sense of duty but also because he is responsible for her injury. He knows that Gerard is nearby and on his way to the scene, but Aimee will die without attention to her gunshot wound. Kimble is still being held at gunpoint, by John Harlan (Andrew Duggan), Aimee’s jealous lover, and he has to make the case that he should be allowed to help her: “If I leave, she’ll die within a minute. I don’t want that on my conscience. . . . I’m not going anywhere.” His actions to save Aimee help persuade John to release Kimble, moments before Gerard arrives.

### Duty and Motivation

Kimble’s explanation to John is a very frank statement of one possible source of motivation for his risking his life to help another (and just to be clear, since he is a fugitive from death row, *every* case where he risks capture by Gerard is an instance of risking his life). In this case, at least, it is not so much that he has a duty to risk his life to save her but that his life would be unbearable if he had to carry the guilt his knowledge of her death would entail. Yet in other cases, Kimble is not himself responsible for the medical problems he feels compelled to solve—for example, in “All the Scared Rabbits,” he treats a young girl with meningitis. So it is important to ask: What is duty, first of all, and how does it motivate? What might motivate besides duty?

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that we can discern moral duties through our faculty of reason.<sup>4</sup> If a rational creature cannot will that the universe be governed by the rule “do X,” then X is forbidden, and if a rational creature cannot will that the universe

be governed by the rule “avoid doing X,” then X is obligatory. (He calls this the “categorical imperative.”) Kant says that we ought not to consider the consequences of our actions—including negative consequences for the actor—nor our sentiments, but only whether we are acting out of a rational recognition that what we have deduced is a universal moral obligation. On this view, helping another is one’s duty just because it is the right thing to do as commanded by the categorical imperative. This ethical theory might be seen as an illuminating way to understand Kimble, and it is tempting to see a physician’s special duty to care for the sick and injured as additional evidence.

But Kimble cannot actually be a thorough-going Kantian, since Kantian theory prohibits lying, which Kimble does in every episode. One might argue that Kimble actually is a Kantian who has no choice but to lie but then feels guilty about it because he knows he has violated the categorical imperative. But rather than try to establish which ethical framework Kimble “really” has, I am trying to show what sort of ethical theory best accounts for what we see, and I do not think the Kantian ethic of strict duty-obeying/rule-following captures it at all, even though it is tempting to characterize him, *qua* physician, as being “duty-bound to help the sick.”

What, then, accounts for his propensity to help others even when this entails risking his life? An alternative explanation to the Kantian one might be character-based motivation: his maintenance of his integrity. As we saw in the case of Aimee Rennick, Kimble has a conscience, and he takes seriously what is on it. In “Scapegoat,” Kimble discovers that someone in a town he had passed through some time ago has been convicted of murder, the ostensible victim being Kimble’s alias at the time. Since it is obvious that the man is innocent, Kimble returns to clear the man. His rationale here seems to be less a matter of unemotionally acting on Kantian duty theory than of not wanting to live with the knowledge that he could have saved the man but did not. His sense of personal integrity motivates him to do what he sees as the right thing to do. Wishing to preserve one’s integrity, wishing to have a clean conscience—these are emotional desires, which, to a Kantian, ought to be irrelevant to decisionmaking. That they are emotions does not preclude there being a cognitive basis for them, however. Aristotle, for example, suggests that there is a cognitive component to emotions. There is an objective right or wrong as to what one’s emotional reactions are: this is shown in several episodes. For instance, in “Bloodline,” we see Kimble having emotional reactions to animal cruelty. It would be evidence of a vicious

character for him not to feel compassion in these cases, just as it is evidence of a virtuous character when he responds with compassion. There are feelings one ought to have, and on this view it is right to want to seek justice.<sup>5</sup> This includes, of course, evading recapture by agents of the law so he can clear his name and bring his wife’s real killer to justice. But his sense of personal ethics places boundaries on how he may act in the course of his quest. What sort of person would turn a blind eye to the abuse of a lame dog or a battered wife? Not the sort of person Kimble sees himself as being.

Kimble lies on a regular basis, but other than that he makes a point of being ethical. He rarely steals, and when he does, he repays what he has taken (as he does, to his great peril, in “End of the Line”). He does not take advantage of the emotional vulnerabilities of the many troubled women he encounters who are attracted to him. He will not be complicit in the criminal schemes he often finds himself embroiled in (although he is frequently coerced into playing some kind of role). When he gets a job, he does it with diligence and industry. In short, while his main quest entails both defiance of the law and a good deal of deception, he remains committed to all the other moral principles he held in his previous life. I’ve argued elsewhere that integrity is best understood as fidelity in action to moral principles one has arrived at through a reasonable process of discovery and reflection.<sup>6</sup> On this view, there is no logical contradiction between Kimble’s defiance of the law, on the one hand, and his responsibility and morality, on the other. But much drama hinges on the conflicts and dilemmas that result.

### **Angels Travel on Lonely Roads**

This drama is nowhere more in evidence than in the several occasions in which Kimble actually saves Gerard’s life. In “Ill Wind,” for instance, Kimble has been captured after one member of the migrant worker community with which he had been living is coerced into revealing Kimble’s escape route. But a hurricane forces Gerard and Kimble, handcuffed together, to shelter with the migrant workers, who resent Gerard for bullying them. Their loyalty is to Kimble, whom they see as a benevolent figure. Gerard dozes off, waking up as Kimble is pulling him aside: one of the workers had tried to run him through with a pitchfork and Kimble was saving his life. Gerard is appreciative: “They must be impressed. I suppose even I am.” But he is not so appreciative that he would set Kimble free in gratitude. In response to Gerard’s remark, Kimble says: “But that doesn’t change anything,” and from

his tone of voice we know he is not really asking. "No," Gerard replies, "it doesn't change anything." Their staccato, hard-boiled dialogue is classic noir both in style as well as substance.

The workers cannot quite understand why Kimble would intercede—as Naomi (Jeanette Nolan) puts it, "It just don't seem right to us, helping him when we know he's agin ya." But for Kimble, letting them stab Gerard would cross a line he is unwilling to cross. Kimble needs to escape from Gerard, to elude him, but he cannot be complicit in murdering him or even be an indifferent spectator when he knows he could have done otherwise and prevented his murder. In "Corner of Hell," Kimble likewise saves Gerard from being murdered by backwoods moonshiners. (In this particular episode, we see the noir inversion of values folded back on itself: here, Gerard cuts a sympathetic figure.) While Gerard's sense of justice requires him to relentlessly pursue Kimble, Kimble's sense of justice requires him to prevent a murder, even the murder of his nemesis.

Ed Robertson suggests a slightly different motivation for Kimble's willingness to protect Gerard, one that goes beyond his sense of moral responsibility: "Despite the personal torment the lieutenant has caused him, Kimble continues to rescue his adversary because he needs him alive. Just as Kimble represents a failure to Gerard, Gerard represents a failure to Kimble because the lieutenant insists that the one-armed man is a fantasy. To keep the moral order straight (as well as to clear his own name), the Fugitive needs Gerard as much as he needs Fred Johnson."<sup>7</sup> I think there is a great deal of insight in this analysis, and it is entirely compatible with the ethical analysis I've been suggesting. Indeed, there is ample evidence from the show to support the idea that Kimble has a strong sense of moral responsibility even regarding Gerard. And indeed, we see on several occasions that Gerard respects Kimble for it, even if he will not allow that respect to prevent him from bringing Kimble to justice. After the pitchfork incident in "Ill Wind," Gerard remarks, "What you did, it didn't surprise me." After Kimble reminds Gerard that he will nevertheless escape if he can, Gerard replies, "That doesn't surprise me either." Gerard views Kimble as a man of integrity, with the one ethical "lapse" of having murdered his wife. He believes that Kimble invented the one-armed man as an alibi, and may now actually believe there is such a man. In Gerard's view, Kimble's subsequent good deeds do not warrant evading punishment.

Of course, we the viewers, like Kimble, know that there really was a one-armed man, Fred Johnson (Bill Raisch), and that Kimble did not kill his wife.

So from Kimble's point of view, and from ours, Gerard seems determined to an unreasonable degree to capture Kimble. But Gerard has ethics also: he is willing to risk losing his captive to enable Kimble to give medical attention to the sick or injured. For instance, in "Ill Wind," one of the children in their hurricane shelter has a bad fever, and Gerard unlocks Kimble's hands so he can tend to her. Also, in the two-part series finale "The Judgment," he grants Kimble a twenty-four-hour reprieve after arresting him and bringing him back to Stafford, so that Kimble can pursue Johnson. (Granted this is a plot necessity to allow the story to come to a conclusion, but it is nevertheless an example of Gerard acting magnanimously.)

### The White Knight

One of the most explicit discussions of Kimble's sense of integrity and moral responsibility occurs in "Ill Wind," after the pitchfork incident. Later in the evening, a section of the shelter's roof collapses on top of Gerard. Kimble naturally tends to the serious injury, and when he realizes that Gerard has lost a lot of blood, he announces to the migrant workers that Gerard needs a transfusion, and he asks them to check their worker cards to see whether they have compatible blood types. They find this appeal even more baffling than Kimble's earlier intervention, and they all refuse even to look at their cards. A young woman who has shown herself to be attracted to Kimble, Kate (Bonnie Beecher), engages him in a very revealing dialogue:

Kate: Don't help him! . . . If that man lives, he'll see you killed, so why are you trying so hard to save his life?

Kimble: For a doctor, every life is worth saving.

Kate: I guess I'm just too stupid to understand.  
Kimble [slightly annoyed reaction]: No you're not, Kate.

This brief exchange is revealing in several ways. First of all, Kate gives voice to what the viewer might well be thinking. But Kimble's answer gives us some insight into the nature of his integrity: as in "The End Is But the Beginning," he will not give up being the kind of person he is—a healer, one who cares for the sick and injured, a compassionate man—even if that means his recapture. His integrity—his fidelity to himself—requires that he make some effort to save his patient's life, regardless of the fact that the patient wants him dead. The dialogue is also interesting in that Kate tries to dismiss

Kimble's explanation as too abstract, or, engaging in a kind of reverse elitism, too "highfalutin" for simple folk like her (read: nonsense). But Kimble finds this irritating and shows this in his simple, yet effective rebuttal, the point of which is that moral principles about what is good and right are accessible to the human mind, and that Kate would see the truth of Kimble's claim if she would just think about it, unclouded by bias or personal resentments. Many philosophers have argued that this is so. Kant's categorical imperative is a simple test that anyone is capable of applying. Plato describes justice as "a model laid up in heaven, for him who wishes to look upon," suggesting that through contemplation, we can come to know right from wrong.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, argues that people have natural judgment-making capacities that allow us to discern what is right and good.<sup>9</sup> And Thomas Aquinas argues that the "natural light of reason" lets us differentiate between good and evil.<sup>10</sup> Kate's claim irritates Kimble partly because her suggestion that she (or anyone else) is "too stupid" to understand ethics misses the point that having a moral code is available to everyone, and refusal to think deeply about these matters is a way of abrogating personal responsibility.

### Never Stop Running

If Kimble's integrity gets him into trouble at times, it is also (and almost always) an asset. Most obviously, we frequently see other characters coming to trust him and believe in him because of his ethics and integrity. More centrally, though, his integrity is an asset because it is what keeps him a whole person. Notice the etymological similarity between "integrity" and "integrated"—in this context, it is one's character that might be said to be "fully integrated." Plato, for example, describes the just person as having attained a state of inner harmony, harmony with respect to himself. The just person "rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself . . . and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious."<sup>11</sup> In this view, the three "parts" of the psyche (namely, reason, emotions, and appetites) are brought together for the sake of one's overall psychological well-being. One way to understand integrity, then, is to see it as involving the pursuit of a kind of psychological wholeness. Though it is agonizing for him to risk capture to save Aimee Rennick's life, it is so obviously (to him) the right thing to do that it is worth the risk. This wholeness helps mitigate the temptation to violate his own principles for the sake of expediency, even in cases where he risks

capture.<sup>12</sup> Kimble is thus not only a person others might see as worth saving, he is a person he himself sees as worth saving, and that is partly responsible for his fortitude. His perseverance in pursuit of the one-armed man must have required considerable strength of character—never giving up, never giving in to despair. It would be difficult to continue that way if one were additionally burdened by a guilty conscience or if one had lost all sense of personal value. Although it put his quest—and his life—at risk, his commitment to his real self, to his principles, is also what made it possible for his quest to have a successful resolution. And in the final episode, Kimble does clear his name, and Gerard kills the one-armed man. The finale brings home even for the casual viewer that *The Fugitive* really is classic TV noir: we learn in flashbacks (shot in even more than usually unsettling camera angles) that there had been a witness to the slaying of Helen Kimble, whose testimony might have saved Kimble all the trouble, but whose efforts at redemption help set the stage for a tense climactic chase sequence in an abandoned amusement park. As in the best of classic film noir, Kimble successfully emerges from his dark world. After four years slinking around in alleys and freight yards, in the last scene he walks in the sunlight on a crowded street. Kimble and Gerard shake hands and go their separate ways.

### Notes

I am very grateful to Steven M. Sanders for many helpful comments on various drafts of this essay, from inception to completion. I am also indebted to Christeen Clemens for making her video library available to me, enabling me to review key episodes.

1. Transcribed in Ed Robertson, *The Fugitive Recaptured: The Thirtieth Anniversary Companion to a Television Classic* (Los Angeles: Pomegranate Press, 1993). Robertson calls this "the most famous run-on sentence in television history" (78).

2. I am grateful to Chris Scibarra for suggesting the expression "morality play" as a way to characterize the show, as well as for several other helpful comments.

3. Aeon J. Skoble, "Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 41–49; and "Justice and Moral Corruption in *A Simple Plan*," in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 83–91.

4. For example, in Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3rd ed. trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

5. Again, it is not important whether a Kantian might challenge the contrast I'm drawing between the role of emotion in ethical decisionmaking in virtue ethics and what seems to be Kant's admonition that we look not to our inclinations and passions, since

there is no fact of the matter about whether Kimble is "really" a Kantian. I am interested here in seeing which ethical theory fits *The Fugitive* best. I am grateful to Steven M. Sanders in this and the preceding paragraph for suggesting a different reading of Kant, which prompted greater precision on my part.

6. "Integrity in Woody Allen's *Manhattan*," in *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, ed. Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 24–32
7. Robertson, *The Fugitive Recaptured*, 98.
8. Plato, *Republic*, trans. by G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 592b.
9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by T. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Question 91, in *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*, trans. by Paul E. Sigmund (New York: Norton, 1988), 46–47.
11. Plato, *Republic*, 443d.
12. I explore this analysis of integrity in greater detail in "Integrity in Woody Allen's *Manhattan*," 25–28.

## Part 2

# EXISTENTIALISM, NIHILISM, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE