

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARTIN SCORSESE

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## God's Lonely Man *Taxi Driver* and the Ethics of Vigilantism Aeon J. Skoble

Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* takes us through a brief but eventful period in the life of one Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro). We don't know much about Travis's background, except that he is an honorably discharged former marine and that he has trouble sleeping. He takes a job driving a New York City taxi because he's up all night cruising the streets anyway and figures he might as well get paid for it. But we come to find out some of what is on his mind, thanks to the sporadic voice-over segments. We learn early on, for instance, that although Travis is willing to work in parts of New York others are afraid of, he is disgusted by what he sees: "All the animals come out at night. . . . Sick, venal." He thinks that something should be done about the rampant depravity he witnesses nightly. He isn't sure what, but he is confident that it will happen eventually: after noting with satisfaction a cleansing rain, he muses: "One of these days a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the street."

*Taxi Driver* shows us the thoughts and actions of a protagonist who seems slightly deranged, but in many instances it is the rest of the world that seems crazy. Every night, Travis sees prostitution, violence, and drug use. One passenger (a cameo appearance by Scorsese) describes to Travis in detail his wife's infidelity and how he intends to kill her. Iris Steensma (Jodie Foster) thinks Travis is "square" because he disapproves of her life as a teen prostitute. ("You call that bein' hip?" he says. "What world are you from?") Travis, of course, is not entirely competent to distinguish which is which: initially he sees Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) as an angel in an otherwise hellish environment. ("Out of this filthy mess, she is alone.") But when he becomes disillusioned about her, the disillusionment morphs into a plan to assassinate Senator Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris), for whom Betsy is working. Though unrealized, the plan seems entirely the product of an unbinged mind. There is no logical reason it should follow from Travis's

disappointment with Betsy.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, his attempt to rescue Iris from her world of drugs and teen prostitution, though bloody in its achievement, isn't at all crazy and is, arguably, noble. By allowing us to get inside Travis's mind, Scorsese's film presents an opportunity for undertaking an exploration into the ethics of vigilantism. In this essay, I hope to use the film to explore the questions of when, if ever, vigilantism is justified, in what ways vigilantism is epistemologically or ethically problematic, and how we are to differentiate justice from revenge and madness.

By definition, vigilantes are those who, as the cliché has it, take the law into their own hands. We might distinguish between *self-defensive vigilantism*, as when Bernhard Goetz shot his would-be assailants on a New York City subway or, fictionally, when Travis defends a bodega owner against armed robbery, and *adventuresome vigilantism*, which is how we might characterize Travis's later actions and most of what comic book superheroes spend their time doing.<sup>2</sup> The former is, I suspect, largely unproblematic, although subject to constraints of proportionality. It is the latter that is more complicated.

The very existence of that clichéd formulation *taking the law into their own hands* implies that, according to most people, this is morally problematic. For example, John Locke argued that part of the defining conditions of civil society was that each individual gives up his or her right to private vengeance, delegating it to the consensually formed government for the purposes of objectivity.<sup>3</sup> If everyone were a judge in his or her own case, mistakes and overreactions would be legion, so, to be more secure in our rights, we form governments and delegate to them the authority to make and enforce laws. It makes us all more secure, on this theory, to have the pursuit and punishment of wrongdoers be the delegated task of some agency of the state. On this view, it's wrong for *me* to try to apprehend or punish robbers, as this is the assigned function of the state's police force and court system. Even on this standard account, however, there are exceptions. For example, I may defend myself against an attacker, and I may come to the aid of a third party suffering an attack, especially where authorized law enforcement agents are absent or powerless. Travis judges that Iris is a virtual prisoner of Sport (Harvey Keitel) and the Mafia underboss (Bob Maroff) he works for and, hence, needs rescuing. This is potentially debatable: at their breakfast date, Iris talks as if she is involved of her own volition and describes her plan to save enough money to move to Vermont. But it's pretty clear, not just to Travis, but to most viewers of the film, that Iris is indeed "trapped" in a situation not entirely within her control (and indeed is a minor, a child, not entirely capable of full legal autonomy). We see evidence

of this later (although Travis does not) in the scene where Iris complains to Sport that she doesn't like what she's doing. Sport gets her to stay not with direct coercion (of the sort he used the night she tried to get in Travis's cab) but with lies: "If you ever liked what you were doing, you wouldn't be my woman." He keeps her in prostitution partly by lying about his love for her, which he senses is the most effective tactic with this very young girl: "I only wish that every man could know what it's like to be loved by you. That every woman everywhere had a man who loves her like I love you." While Travis isn't privy to this disturbing scene, he has seen the way she is guarded in her apartment. When he queries Iris about her plan to leave, he knows Sport won't be amenable:

TRAVIS: So what are you going to do about Sport and that old bastard?

IRIS: When?

TRAVIS: When you leave.

IRIS: I don't know, just leave 'em, I guess.

TRAVIS: Yeah, you're just gonna leave?

IRIS: Yeah, they've got plenty of other girls.

TRAVIS: Yeah, but you just can't do that, what are you gonna do?

IRIS: What should I do? Call the cops?

TRAVIS: No, the cops don't do nothin', you know that.

If she cannot expect the police to help her, and she cannot help herself, then it becomes morally legitimate for Travis to help her. While it remains problematic what level of violence is justified in the course of his action, it seems plain that *taking* the action is permissible.

As a possible objection to this analysis, one might note that there are rules that bound this sort of "private justice," and among them, typically, is a rule that says: I may not go out of my way to look for trouble and then defend against it. In Michael Winner's 1974 movie *Death Wish*, it's true that the architect Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) is defending himself (or others) against attackers, but the ostensible objection to his behavior is that he is going out at night *looking for attackers to defend himself against*. This is what causes the police to label him a vigilante. In *Taxi Driver*, however, it's less obvious that Travis is looking for trouble: Iris gets into his taxi trying to get away from Sport. It is a chance encounter that becomes part of Travis's growing determination to "do something." Another chance encounter occurs when Travis foils a robbery of a bodega, shooting the criminal. This is not a Kersey-like case of looking for trouble—Travis reacts fairly reasonably to circumstances that appear before him unbidden. His ability to do justice in

this case, in contrast with his inability to help Iris that first time (and his general sense of inability to cleanse the city), is also a critical catalyst in his transformation from passive-if-disgruntled observer to vigilante.

### “I Got Some Bad Ideas in My Head”

In his voice-over at the beginning of the film, Travis simply yearns for a solution to the city's problems (“a real rain will come”). Later, he personalizes it, but abstractly (“Somebody's got to do something”). He tries to give the responsibility to Senator Palantine: “You should clean up this city here, because this city here is like an open sewer; you know, it's full of filth and scum. Sometimes I can hardly take it.” When he becomes disillusioned with Palantine, Travis assumes responsibility himself: “Listen, you fuckers, you screwheads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is a man who stood up.” Travis comes to think (rightly or wrongly) that Palantine will not do anything about the crime in the city. He takes responsibility for doing justice partly because he increasingly feels that no one else will do so. Travis is “God's lonely man.” He stands up against the evil because someone has to, and no one is. Spider-Man, while much more sane, offers a similar rationale for his becoming a vigilante: “With great power comes great responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> His own failure to intervene earlier resulted in the murder of his uncle. Many superhero origin stories—from Zorro to Batman to Rorschach—involve the theme of “someone has got to do something” that Travis here appeals to.

The problem is that Travis is not entirely sure what it is he needs to stand up against.<sup>5</sup> There's a critical distinction between fighting evil and fighting perceived evil. How to tell the difference? It's relatively uncontroversial that Iris needs to be rescued from the Mafia, but it is far from obvious that Senator Palantine should be killed. Other than as an unwarranted inference from Betsy's rejection, there's no evidence in the film whatsoever to suggest that Palantine is an evildoer. So, when Travis is finally energized to “stand up,” his initial object is actually unconnected to his disgust. Regardless of what he thought he might accomplish by assassinating Palantine, when he realizes that that won't work, he sets his sights more microcosmically: rescuing Iris.

This, then, is one of the key problems facing any discussion of the ethics of vigilantism: epistemology. One has to know that the target “has it coming.” Since Paul Kersey waits until the muggers confront him, each of his targets is correctly chosen: someone intent on violently assaulting Kersey. This is

a common trait among fictional vigilantes: they are, at least, correct about identifying deserving targets of their private justice. Historical vigilantes, for instance, lynch mobs, are frequently *incorrect* about who is deserving of their justice, even if, within their own false worldview, they have a framework for distinguishing good from bad. (For example, the Ku Klux Klan might offer its antipathy toward race mixing as a rationale for its vigilante tactics. My point is that, even if Klan members claim to have a good reason, and even sincerely believe they have a reason, that doesn't imply that they *actually* have a good reason.)

Comic book superheroes are, technically, vigilantes, and what makes them at least nominal allies with the police is that they correctly identify and harm only criminals.<sup>6</sup> From Bob Kane's staid Batman to Alan Moore's more unhinged Rorschach, the costumed vigilantes know who the evildoers are, so even though it's private justice, the bad guys “had it coming to them” every bit as much as when they're pursued by Dick Tracy or Eliot Ness. Comic book superheroes, then, are taking the law into their own hands *correctly*. One reason Travis Bickle is disturbing, more disturbing than Paul Kersey or Batman, is that he is sufficiently confused as to *lack* solid epistemological grounds for his vigilantism. While he's right to want to rescue Iris, he's wrong to want to kill Palantine.<sup>7</sup> More specifically: rescuing Iris is justice; assassinating Palantine is madness. If Travis is mentally unstable, that might tend to undercut the justifiability of his vigilantism, even if it's true that Iris deserves to be rescued—it might be a case of Travis doing the right thing for the wrong reason. But it's not clear just how unstable he is. When he talks to her at breakfast about leaving, his reasoning is entirely correct: she needs to get out, and Sport won't be too keen to let her go. One needn't be insane to conclude that she needs rescuing, and indeed Travis's recognition of her legitimate distress is evidence that he isn't entirely deranged.

### “One of These Days I Gotta Get Myself Organized”

That is not to say that Travis's *method* of rescuing Iris is entirely sane: he could have spirited her away in his taxi as easily as he met her for breakfast and driven her to the commune in Vermont. Instead, he elects to kill those participating in Iris's subjection. He really does get himself “organized”—in addition to buying several guns, he cleverly fashions an arm-mounted slide mechanism that he can use to rearm quickly when necessary. (This is, in principle, no different from the gadgetmaking savvy shown by Spider-Man and Batman.) Perhaps, by this point, Travis has a death wish of his own, and is hoping to go out in the proverbial blaze of glory. We know he feels

if not duty, to fight crime—we *are* the people, and we must all do what we can to seek justice. This seems to be the case for Travis as well: a man who would not take it anymore, who will stand up against the scum. He, too, is the people.

What do we conclude about vigilantism, then? On the one hand, we do not want to countenance Klan lynchings or Travis's scheme to assassinate Palantine, but, on the other hand, neither do we want to approve of the indifference shown by Kitty Genovesé's neighbors, who refused to intervene as she was attacked near her apartment.<sup>11</sup> A slogan like "let the police handle it" seems prudent in some cases yet morally obtuse in others. But it's not especially helpful either to formulate a rule such as "if you're a sane and prudent person, and can correctly identify situations calling for vigilantism, and can determine how to respond in a sensible manner, then you may proceed," for such a rule simply begs all the relevant questions. But one thing we can do is devote some time to contemplation and discussion of what is right and wrong. As Socrates put it, "It is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day . . . for the unexamined life is not worth living for man."<sup>12</sup> At a minimum, we would then be able to recognize and confront the obvious badness we see before us rather than turning a blind eye. We can all stand up against the sick and venal. We *are* the people.

## Notes

I am grateful to Mark T. Conard for his helpful suggestions on this essay, and for many thought-provoking conversations about *Taxi Driver* over the years.

1. Charitably, perhaps Travis is reasoning in the following way: (1) Betsy is an angel; Betsy works for Palantine; therefore, Palantine is God. But (2) Betsy turns out to be "like the others," "living in hell"; thus, Palantine must be the devil. This isn't highly rational.
2. On Bernhard Goetz, see Suzanne Daley, "Man Tells Police He Shot Youths in Subway Train," *New York Times*, January 1, 1985.
3. See John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), chap. 8.
4. Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Amazing Fantasy*, no. 15, 1962.
5. Of course, it would be impossible to rid the city of crime completely, but this can't be what makes Travis lose faith in Palantine, as Travis himself seems to understand, settling (à la Tolstoy?) for saving Iris.
6. I discuss this context for studying the ethics of vigilantism in "Superhero Revisionism in *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*," in *Superheroes and Philosophy*, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 29–42.

alienated and isolated generally: "Loneliness has followed me my whole life, everywhere. In bars, in cars, sidewalks, stores, everywhere. There's no escape. I'm God's lonely man." We know this feeling of loneliness has been greatly exacerbated by Betsy's rejection of him. (This would not be the same as Kersey's death wish, however. Kersey is *risking* death, maybe even inviting it, having lost his wife and daughter. He's quite content *not* to die, and even comes to rediscover meaning in his life, from the satisfaction of ridding the city of criminals.<sup>8</sup> Travis, on the other hand, tries to shoot himself after he is finished killing the criminals, failing only because he is out of ammunition.) But, even if Travis's means are unwarranted, his end is, in fact, a correct one. We see at the end of the film that the newspapers have painted him as a hero, and, ironically, he even earns Betsy's admiration for his deeds. In our last few glimpses of him, he seems lucid enough, although the film's conclusion leaves it an open question just how stable he really is.

## "We Are the People"

The ambiguity in Palantine's campaign slogan is used for comic relief, yet it raises an interesting question about Locke's skepticism about private justice.<sup>9</sup> The powers of the government come from the people, but, in delegating power, do we give up all our prerogatives? Assuming epistemological correctness, who has the right to pursue justice? If the answer is everyone, does that imply that Locke's argument about civil society is incorrect? If the answer *isn't* everyone, then who, and under what circumstances?

While Locke is surely right that we cannot expect objectivity from people serving as judges in their own cases, we *can* often know what justice entails. The bodega owner, for instance, is entitled to be protected against armed robbery. There are no police on the scene, and the bodega owner himself is powerless to repel the robber. Does that mean that private third parties are not entitled to assist? Travis is correct to intervene here, just as Batman or Spider-Man would under similar circumstances. Perhaps it is the lethal nature of his intervention that disturbs viewers who might prefer a less violent form of intervention. But, lacking superpowers, Travis really has no choice but to use his weapon.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, we can correctly infer that Iris needs rescuing. In this case, as noted, Travis does have a choice about the means of effecting the rescue, but his coming to see *that* she is in trouble is no different from how any decent person would think. If she cannot free herself, and, as Travis reminds her, the police cannot either, then the question is not so much who has the *right* to help as who has the *responsibility* to help. Contrary to Locke, the superhero's attitude is that it's everyone's right,

7. The lapse of logic in this latter case was tragically repeated in reality, in John Hinckley's rationale for his assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981.

8. An interesting question, not to be pursued here, is why audiences tend to find this attitude creepy in Kersey's case but heroic in Batman's. It might be that Batman apprehends without killing, but I suspect there's more to it, perhaps having to do with Kersey's story being more realistic.

9. Regarding the ambiguity of the campaign slogan, Betsy's coworker Tom (Albert Brooks) is seen arguing with the supplier about whether the campaign buttons should read "We are the people" as opposed to "We *are* the people," ultimately concluding: "We won't pay for the buttons."

10. The bodega owner's follow-up actions, however, are potentially controversial: he tells Travis to leave, and then sets about beating the (dead?) robber with a baseball bat. It's unclear whether this is part of the bodega owner's attempts to protect Travis or simply sadistic revenge taking.

11. Martin Gansburg, "Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call Police," *New York Times*, March 27, 1964.

12. Plato, *Apology*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1975), 38 (Stephanus number).