

The Philosophy of Neo-Noir

Edited by Mark T. Conard

Justice and Moral Corruption in *A Simple Plan*

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The American Dream in a Gym Bag

At the start of the neo-noir film *A Simple Plan* (Sam Raimi, 1998), Hank Mitchell (Bill Paxton) has a good life and is happy and well-adjusted. When he, his brother, Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton), and their friend Lou (Brent Briscoe) find a large bag of cash from what they deduce was a criminal enterprise, they hatch a "simple plan" that will enable them to keep it and enrich themselves, which they think will increase their happiness. The devestation that ensues, not just in terms of body count, but also in terms of moral and psychological decay, follows Plato's analysis of justice and corruption in his *Republic* almost exactly, especially his understanding of justice as a kind of psychological harmony in books 2-4 and his analysis of moral decay in books 8-9. For Plato, justice is internal peace or harmony, a rational self-control of emotions and appetites, and injustice is psychological disharmony, when one or another of the passions dominates, when self-control is lacking. On Plato's theory, people who allow themselves to become unjust in this way will become miserable, literally incapable of happiness. I have found few films that dramatize this theme as effectively as *A Simple Plan*. Let us see how looking at the film and the *Republic* together enhances our appreciation of both.

But is this really a neo-noir film, when bad consequences follow from bad behavior? Isn't noir really about moral ambiguity or nihilism? First of all, it isn't obvious how to categorize a film as film noir to begin with,¹ and the category neo-noir seems even more slippery. Many so-called neo-noirs are in color, of course, but being filmed in black and white isn't really the essential defining characteristic of film noir. It's the "darkness" of the situations or characters that is the true referent of the word *noir*, and many color films are dark in this way. *A Simple Plan* is dark in precisely this way: it is a

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

2007

portrait of moral corruption, and the lies and deaths that ensue. *A Simple Plan* also shares many other commonly accepted stylistic conventions of film noir, for example, the unsettling camera angles and the settings that emphasize or suggest isolation and loneliness. By showing an otherwise good man driven to lie, steal, and ultimately commit murder, the film, it might be argued, contains implicit moral ambiguity, which some take to be a hallmark of film noir. On this point, however, I would argue that there is nothing morally ambiguous about the story: it's quite plain that Hank destroys himself through his choices. And, indeed, it isn't obvious that moral ambiguity is a hallmark of film noir at all—many classic noirs turn out to present clear visions of right and wrong and demonstrate the self-destructive effects of vice.²

In the film, the plan is supposed to be simple: hang on to the illicit money rather than spend it right away, to see whether anyone claims it, and, if it remains unclaimed, then begin spending it. But no one can really stick to the plan. Lou needs the money to pay off some debts, Jacob wants to renovate the family farm, and Hank's wife, Sarah (Bridget Fonda), persuades him that they need the money for their new baby. They modify the plan by putting some of the money back, which they think will free them up to spend at least some of what's left. This decision commits them to that classic blunder: returning to the scene of the crime, and, sure enough, this results in their killing a witness to their actions. The killings, the deceptions, and the distrust continue to build. Hank and Jacob first try to blackmail Lou, and then end up killing him. Hank and Jacob are obliged to accompany (what turn out to be imposters) FBI agents to the plane wreck, which results in more killings—including the tragic killing of Jacob by Hank. Just to add insult to injury, when the real FBI agents arrive, they reveal that the serial numbers of the money have been recorded, which means that Hank and Sarah can't even spend it. Hank ends up burning it in his fireplace.

Why does the simple plan turn out to be not so simple after all? Largely because the characters underestimate the ramifications of their actions, and rationalize those actions in myopic ways. Hank's first reaction is the ethical one: this isn't our money; we ought to turn it in. How does he let himself depart from this attitude in so radical a way? We can approach this question by way of considering some of Plato's theories about justice and self-interest. One device that Plato uses to motivate this issue is a story, told by one of the characters in the *Republic*, of a shepherd, Gyges, who finds a magic ring that renders the wearer invisible.³ Eventually, liberated from the constraints of his fear of getting caught, he commits all manner of unjust

acts. The point of this device is to raise the question of whether you would commit unjust acts if you *knew* you would not get caught. If the fear of getting caught is the only reason to avoid injustice, that would suggest that justice is not intrinsically valuable and, indeed, that shrewdness is more valuable than virtue. If this were the case, then cultivating justice for its own sake would be foolish, and one would do better by oneself to care only to seem to be just, while advancing one's own self-interest as much as possible.

Why Be Moral?

Plato's *Republic* is, among other things, a lengthy discussion of this very issue, why one should be moral. Plato has the character Socrates discuss the nature of both justice and self-interest with some earnest young philosophers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, as well as the more blustery and intimidating Thrasymachus, who thinks that talking about "being virtuous" is a waste of time. Socrates has claimed that justice is more profitable than injustice, that "it is never just to harm anyone."⁴ Thrasymachus thinks that this is almost self-evidently absurd, and that what most consider injustice would, in fact, be the more profitable course of action. For instance, if I successfully stole a Lincoln Town Car, I'd be better off, since I would have the satisfaction that comes from driving one without having had to spend the money it ordinarily takes to get one. On this view, as long as *I perceive* a positive change, I'm better off. As Jacob notes: "Hell, Hank, I've never even kissed a girl. You know, if me becoming rich is gonna change all that, you know, I'm all for it." Thrasymachus argues that "those who give injustice a bad name do so because they are afraid, not of practicing but of suffering injustice."⁵ The implication is that moral rules are just an artifice to keep people from predatory pursuit of self-interest. But, toward the end of the *Republic*, Socrates notes that he and Thrasymachus didn't really disagree. What this turns out to mean is that, on Plato's analysis, there is no dichotomy between being just and being self-interested, since being just is in one's self-interest, and being unjust is contrary to one's self-interest. To see why this is so, we must note that for a moral realist—one who thinks that morality is objective—self-interest is not identical to subjective desire. For instance, if Smith is a heroin addict, what he desires is another injection of heroin, but this is not actually in Smith's best interests. One can be mistaken, in other words, about what constitutes self-interest. *A Simple Plan* dramatizes this effectively by using Hank's ultimately tragic mistake about the nature of his own self-interest.

Hank tells us in voice-over that his father taught him that what a man needs to be happy is “a wife he loves, a decent job, and friends and neighbors who like and respect him.” As we see him at the outset of the narrative, Hank seems to endorse his father’s claims about the seemingly simple components of the good life and, at worst, is afflicted with small doses of resentment or covetousness. (His wife, Sarah, is more explicitly covetous of a more affluent lifestyle.)⁶ When his friend Lou characterizes finding someone else’s lost (and almost certainly ill-gotten) money as realizing the American dream, Hank protests, championing the value of work. (“You work for the American dream, you don’t steal it.”) But, in very short order, he comes to think that he could make a better life with the found money than he could by working at his job. Plato notes that while things like money and fame may be pleasing, they are not constitutive of happiness and will not bring happiness by themselves. The virtuous man who acquires wealth might be happy, but the vicious man will not be made happy by wealth. Virtue may, indeed, facilitate the acquisition of wealth, but, Plato says, the wealth itself will not facilitate the acquisition of virtue and, thus, of happiness. Hank has thus made a calculation about how best to achieve his own interests, concluding that the unjust thing would be the self-interested thing to do. As Plato might have predicted, this turns out to be a mistake: Hank ends up making himself far more miserable. It’s not merely a calculative failure, however: the miscalculation is the product of his failing to understand the nature of his own happiness (specifically, his embrace of the idea that if only he had more money, he would have a happier life).

But why is it a mistake? Could the tragedy have been prevented? Plato argues that the just life is, in fact, the happy life, so if we can figure out what is entailed by pursuing justice, that will be sufficient for pursuing happiness. On Plato’s view, justice is a kind of internal harmony, where all the aspects of the psyche are coordinated toward well-being.⁷ “It does not lie in a man’s external actions, but in the way he acts within himself, really concerned with himself and his inner parts.” By “parts” of the psyche, Plato is referring to our various passions and appetites as well as our rational faculties. Rational self-control, he argues, will be more conducive to psychological harmony than its alternatives—a life dominated by desires for money or fame, or one dominated by fear and hate. It requires wisdom, courage, and moderation in order to bring our passions under the regulating influence of reason, but the life of rational moderation of the passions so achieved is justice, and it will result in a happier life, one free of inner turmoil. The just man “orders what are in the true sense of the word his own affairs well;

he is master of himself, puts things in order, is his own friend. . . . from a plurality becomes a unity.” Justice, then, is “that which preserves this inner harmony and indeed helps to achieve it,” and injustice is “that which always destroys it.”⁸

Virtue Is Its Own Reward

The dichotomy between justice and self-interest evaporates on this view. While others will surely benefit from my being a just person, the reason for my cultivating justice, and its most tangible reward, will be my own happiness. If I thought I would serve my own interests better by being unjust, this analysis would quickly reveal such a course of action to be self-destructive: is it even plausible to think that by pursuing ignorance, cowardice, and intemperance I should bring about my long-term well-being? In one sense, rational self-control is the only sort of self-control that is worthy of the name. To be “controlled” by one’s passions is really to no longer have self-control at all. This is because desires are directed solely at their object, whereas reason is that part of our psyche that can adjudicate between conflicting emotions, or balance short-term and long-term interests. For example, my desire for a doughnut won’t be satisfied by anything except eating a doughnut. Reason can result in my not acting on these desires—and even, optimally, in my having them less frequently. For me to be dominated by my desires, on the other hand, is essentially for me to lack autonomy, to eat a doughnut even when this isn’t in my best interests. Thus, just as I can be enslaved by another person, I can also be “enslaved” by my passions: fear, greed, unchecked desires.

More broadly, we can be mistaken about our own happiness because we can be mistaken about what *constitutes* our own happiness. Hank tells us in voice-over that he realizes now that he was, in fact, happy prior to the events related in the film, only he didn’t realize it. People with overprioritized passions for material gain are precisely those who will not be content with what might otherwise seem to be a good life. One consequence of letting one’s passions grow unmoderated by reason is that one might come to think one’s good life isn’t really so good. That is, it is one’s unmoderated desire for acquisition that leads to permanent discontentedness. Hank and Sarah did have a good life prior to the events related in the film, yet when faced with the prospect of a vast accumulation of material wealth, they became dissatisfied. On Plato’s theory, this new dissatisfaction is actually a mistake.

An easy and common misinterpretation of the Platonic theory is to characterize the role of reason as purely instrumental, assuming that one could be, for instance, a “rational thief.” Well, it’s certainly the case that the rational thief will be happier and more prosperous than the irrational one, but this misses Plato’s larger point. On this view, having rational control of the passions implies having sufficient wisdom to see that cultivating vicious lifestyles will, ultimately, be self-destructive—precisely the sort of foresight that Hank lacks. Despite what Hank and his conspirators tell themselves about the simplicity of the plan, is it even remotely likely that such a plan would *not* engender an ever-increasing network of deception and mistrust? Plato explains that it is entirely predictable that the vicious person will make himself suffer by his injustice. For example, he cannot truly have any friends, since genuine friendship is possible only among good people. He cannot have a trusting relationship with anyone, since all others will be regarded either as “flatterers or those in need of flattery”; indeed, he himself becomes a “flatterer of the most wicked men.” Those closest to him become the greatest threats to him, further eroding any chance of tranquility. All of Plato’s predictions apply to Hank, Jacob, Lou, and Sarah: “Is this not the kind of prison in which [the unjust man] is held? His nature is . . . full of many fears . . . he takes refuge in his house.”⁹ Hank avoids being sent to prison, but he has, nevertheless, become a prisoner, first of his own greed, and then of the consequences of his actions. Jacob had earlier asked Hank, referring to their scheme: “Do you ever feel evil?” Eventually, Hank clearly does, and he doesn’t like it.

To Know the Good Is to Do the Good

It is a lack of foresight combined with self-deception that facilitates the characters’ descent into corruption. Plato suggests that evil is ignorance: we are always *trying* to do what is best for us, but we might be wrong. In one sense, this claim is the subject of some philosophical controversy, for it raises questions about the nature of culpability and about weakness of will. But, in another sense, it is unobjectionable and illuminative. Why am I robbing the bank? Because I want lots of money. Why do I want lots of money? Because that will make me happy. The bank robber isn’t trying to make himself worse off; he is trying to make himself better off—or, more accurately, better off as he understands it. But his understanding of what constitutes being better off may well be mistaken, either through complete ignorance or through a kind of self-deception, perhaps an unwillingness

to acknowledge or act on difficult realities. Hank rationalizes his lies and criminal actions, deceiving himself about his need for the money, about the circumstances of finding it, about killing people.

Hank’s error is twofold. First, by acquiescing in his desire for money and choosing to value it more highly than virtue, he has produced an imbalance in his psyche, one that will necessarily lead to inner conflict as reason can no longer be a moderating influence. Second, by acting on this desire, he has created a situation that will lead to distrust, deception, and violence. Plato anticipates both dimensions of this self-deception in his depiction of the self-inflicted suffering of the unjust. Since he has characterized justice as a state of internal peace and harmony, it follows that the unjust person will be psychologically conflicted, incapable of attaining happiness, and, furthermore, will make himself the enemy of others. Jacob comes to regret what they have done, and even remarks: “I wish somebody else had found that money.” Hank loses friends, loses the respect of his wife and brother, and, ultimately, loses self-respect, as he is obliged to kill his own brother, for which he loathes himself. Like Plato’s archetypal unjust man, Hank has by his own actions rendered himself entirely unhappy. The days when he isn’t tormented by memories of what he has done are “few and far between.”

Plenty of films dramatize the theme that crime doesn’t pay, but there’s more to Plato’s theory of justice than that. In many films, the reason crime doesn’t pay is that the criminal is unsuccessful, doesn’t get away with it, and is, thus, punished. Plato’s point is that, even if one were to get away with it in the sense of avoiding capture and punishment, as is the case with Hank, one would nevertheless suffer as a result of one’s own corrupted character. This would be less dramatically interesting and less edifying if the “criminal” were a thoroughly despicable character. When the narrative centers on someone who is seeking the good but who fails, as Hank does, owing to intemperate acquisitiveness and a fundamental misjudgment of the nature of happiness, that is the stuff of tragedy.

Notes

I am grateful to Mark T. Conard for his patience with and helpful comments on this essay.

1. See, e.g., Mark T. Conard, “Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir” in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 7–22.

2. See my "Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir," in *ibid.*, 41–48.
3. For further discussion of the ring of Gyges story, see, e.g., John Pappas, "It's All Darkness: Plato, the Ring of Gyges, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*," in *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, ed. Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2004), 203–17.
4. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 335e.
5. *Ibid.*, 344c.
6. Indeed, the character of Sarah is an interesting twist on the canonical femme fatale of film noir. She is a woman of corrupting influence who induces Hank to get in deeper, yet she's also his pregnant wife. This contrast highlights the fact that she is even less in control of her appetites (to use the Platonic framework) than Hank is of his. Her immediate change of heart upon seeing the money demonstrates that, unlike Hank, she has hitherto paid only lip service to the morals she claims.
7. This conception of justice differs from many ordinary conceptions of justice, not only modern notions of justice's being related to fairness, but also ideas common in Plato's time, such as the idea that justice entails benefiting one's friends and harming one's enemies.
8. Plato, *Republic*, 443d, 443d–e, 444.
9. *Ibid.*, 579e, 579c.

"Saint" Sydney

Atonement and Moral Inversion in *Hard Eight*

Donald R. Davies and Foster Hirsch

Imagine James Cagney doesn't die at the end of *White Heat*. Imagine he lives and it's thirty, forty years later and he's got to pay for what he's done.

—Paul Thomas Anderson

In *Hard Eight* (1996), the first-time writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson offers a distinctly modern interpretation of a character type familiar from the original era of noir. In his contemporary rendering, which is neither reverential homage nor postmodern deconstruction, Anderson offers an elegant, rigorous character study as well as a provocative reexamination of some of noir's central philosophical, thematic, and visual motifs. Confronting universal moral issues—guilt and innocence, crime and punishment—raised by earlier crime dramas, the film investigates the possibilities of salvation within a traditionally treacherous cinematic realm.

Sydney, the film's generous protagonist (played with magnificent gravity by Philip Baker Hall), is a mysterious criminal with a dark and guilty past that he intends to keep secret. In classic noir, Sydney would most likely be an opaque, one-dimensional figure of corruption and vice, like Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947) or James Cagney in *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949). In Anderson's challenge to genre tradition, however, Sydney is tempted to perform a series of benevolent acts in order to unburden his conscience. Succumbing fully to the opportunity to play savior and saint, he rescues John (the irrepressibly sheepish John C. Reilly), a witless, down-on-his-luck young man. A character like John in traditional noir would be lured into some sort of dubious criminal activ-