

Crimes and Misdemeanors, directed by Woody Allen, 1989, 104 minutes

A classic Woody Allen film with a 1990's star studded cast. Two separate, but interwoven plot lines surrounding two main characters: Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau) and Cliff Stern (Woody Allen). Both characters find themselves in morally charged life changing situations and differently portray "existentialist" themes: Judah feels himself compelled to choose between seeing the world as either created by God and containing a moral structure or a world devoid of God and of any moral values, whereas Cliff is an "idealist" who, while working on a documentary to promote the teachings of an existentialist philosopher, is unable to realize many of his ambitions and exhibits a type of "alienation."

Another supporting theme in this movie is the idea of knowledge as seeing. As various characters in these two plot lines seek to come to know important truths, only one seems to be successful in seeing reality as it is, another becomes blind (as he believes important falsehoods about the world), and a third believes in fantasies. One of the main characters is an ophthalmologist, an expert in sight, who through his actions believes that he has come to know the world as it really is and, as a result, claims that his worst beliefs are realized. Another main character is a documentary film director who tries by visuals to portray truths about the world, but in the end produce works that are more fiction than real.

1. Please portray accurately, according to the characters in the movie, the two world views that Judah must choose between. What follows are some rough quotes which can help: the eyes of God are on us always, the world is harsh and empty of value and pitiless, the world possesses a moral structure with real meaning, forgiveness, and a higher power, which provides a basis for how to live, you gotta look at reality, God is a luxury I can't afford, I am living in the real world, the real world has now found me, without the law, there is darkness, I believe in God because without God the world is a cesspool. Also, from Judah's childhood seder flashback: religion is a superstition, the lesson of the problem of evil is that might makes right, human impulses are basically nothing, there is morality for those who want it, nothing is handed down to us, faith is a gift, an ear for music, talent for drawing, and is independent of logic, if he chooses not to be bothered by the ethics, he's scot free, if a believer is wrong in believing that God exists, then he has a better life, this means that you choose God over the truth.

2. Characterize Louis Levy's philosophy. Some of his quotes are as follows: to create a real and entire loving image of God is beyond our capacity (this is after he has described the God of the Old Testament), what we are aiming at when we fall in love is to seek people with whom we were attached as children but at the same time we are asking our present beloved to correct all the wrongs of our past, love is a contradiction: to return to how the past was and to undo the past, when we are born, we need a great deal of love to persuade us to stay in life, it usually lasts, but as the universe is cold, sometimes it doesn't, we need to invest it with our feelings, under certain conditions, if we feel it isn't worth it anymore, then ... , it is through agonizing decisions, moral choices, some on a grand scale, but most are lesser, that we define ourselves by our choices, we are the sum total of choices, events unfold unpredictably and unfairly. Human happiness does not seem to have been included. Only by our capacity to love can we give meaning to an indifferent universe. Most humans have the ability to keep trying and do find joy in the simple things of everyday life. Is this view a viable third alternative to the two world views sketched above?

Why do you think he commits suicide? What is the role of this event in the movie? Recall how Hally reacts to the suicide: she claims that every philosophical system is incomplete. Does this repudiate Levy's world view as a viable third option?

3. What is the problem with Cliff (Woody Allen)? At one point, he claims that his heart and head are not together. William Barrett might claim that he is exhibiting a "professional deformity": meaning that he is an intellectual who believes in many abstract ideals (e.g., those expressed in Louis Levy's talk), but is unable to connect them to his actual everyday experience and life. Recall that in the movie, Cliff's life seems to be coming to a high point, he has this important directing project (which could launch his career) and falls in love with Hally (when his current marriage is failing). But, of course, he doesn't pull it off. He gets fired from the directing project and he lets Hally leave without doing anything and eventually she falls in love with his rival within four months. So, is there a lesson to be learned from Cliff?

4. The big final scene. The rabbi Ben is now blind and Cliff's worst fear is realized as Lester announces his engagement to Hally. Judah finds Cliff and begins to narrate a great murder story ... with a strange twist ... and after the awful deed is done, he is plagued by awful guilt ... he imagines that God is watching his every move ... he has violated a just and moral world (not an empty one) ... he is an inch away from confessing, then one morning, mysteriously the crisis is lifted, and after taking a vacation, he suffers no punishment, in fact, he prospers. He is scot free, completely back to normal and in a protected world of wealth and privilege. Cliff counters "can he really go back?" Judah explains that people carry sins with them all the time and with time it all fades and life goes on as if it never happened. So, Cliff concludes that his (Judah's) worst beliefs are realized and Judah concurs, yes, it is a chilling story. Cliff counters with an alternative ending: if the murdered turns himself in, then it becomes tragedy, because without God he assumes the responsibility for the action. Judah counters, that people rationalize and deny things all the time, or we simply could not go on living, he believes that Cliff's proposal is fiction, not reality, happy endings like that are for Hollywood movies. Compare and contrast Judah and Cliff in what they have learned through the events in this movie. Does the contrast between the content of their worst fears/beliefs as stated in this last scene reveal something about them?

5. There is a version of the argument from evil (for the conclusion that God does not exist) that Judah's experience suggest. Try to formulate it. Do you believe that this is the director's view? If so, why do you think Woody Allen chose the name "Judah" for this particular character in the movie? (By the way, Woody Allen uses the main elements of the Judah Rosenthal plot in his later film Matchpoint (2005), where the main character gets away with murdering his mistress with the help of a "lucky bounce," but there is virtually no mention of any religious point of view in the film.)

PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING:

The Art Discipline requests that no food or beverage be brought into HFA 6, only bottled water.

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