



# THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARTIN SCORSESE

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# The Philosophy of Popular Culture

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*The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, edited by Mark T. Conard

*The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, edited by Mark T. Conard

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# **THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARTIN SCORSESE**

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Edited by Mark T. Conard

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# Introduction

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In the introduction to *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir* (University Press of Kentucky, 2007), I noted the conspicuous absence in that volume of the films of Martin Scorsese, who might rightly be regarded as a master neo-noir filmmaker. Indeed, Scorsese is best known for his works centering on the noirish elements of gangsters and/or violence, such as *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Casino* (1995), to the point where he's identified with these types of films in the way that Billy Wilder is often thought of as primarily a maker of screwball comedies (*The Seven Year Itch* [1955], *Some Like It Hot* [1959]) or Woody Allen is often seen as the maker of existentialist comedy/dramas (*Annie Hall* [1977], *Manhattan* [1979]). But we should remember that Billy Wilder also directed *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and that Woody Allen's oeuvre includes *Interiors* (1978), *Another Woman* (1988), and *Match Point* (2005). The stereotyping of Scorsese is equally unjustified since, over his career of some thirty-four years and counting, his films have covered a wide range of topics and themes, from the Dalai Lama in *Kundun* (1997) and Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) to Howard Hughes in *The Aviator* (2004), social roles and morality in nineteenth-century New York in *The Age of Innocence* (1993), pool hustling in *The Color of Money* (1986), and the boxer Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (1980). Indeed, Scorsese's work hasn't been limited to narrative feature films, also including documentaries (*The Last Waltz* [1978], *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* [2005]) and music videos (Michael Jackson's *Bad* [1987]).

As I also noted in the neo-noir introduction, I omitted Scorsese from *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir* because I planned to devote an entire volume in the Philosophy of Popular Culture series to his films and the present work is the fulfillment of that promise. *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese* investigates the philosophical themes and underpinnings of the films of this master auteur as well as using the movies as a vehicle for exploring and explicating traditional philosophical ideas. The book comprises thirteen essays from scholars in both philosophy and film and media studies. The essays are written in nontechnical language and require no knowledge of philosophy to appreciate or understand.

**Part 1**, "Authenticity, Flourishing, and the Good Life," begins with "No Safe Haven: *Casino*, Friendship, and Egoism," in which Steven M. Sanders uses Scorsese's film to explore the uneasy relation between egoist ethics, which claims that the only duty one has is to oneself, and friendship, which seems at times to require self-sacrifice. Next, in "God's Lonely Man: *Taxi Driver* and the Ethics of Vigilantism," Aeon J. Skoble investigates the story of the assassin/savior Travis Bickle, wondering when and under what conditions vigilantism is ever justified. In "*Goodfellas*, Gyges, and the Good Life," Dean A. Kowalski uses the case of the mobster Henry Hill to examine and evaluate Plato's claim in the *Republic* that the immoral, unjust person is necessarily unhappy. Last, in "*Mean Streets*: Beatitude, Flourishing, and Unhappiness," I use Scorsese's first masterpiece to examine different philosophical conceptions of unhappiness, raising the issue of whether unhappiness is the natural state and condition of human beings.

**Part 2**, "Rationality, Criminality, and the Emotions," begins with "The Cinema of Madness: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Films of Martin Scorsese," in which Jerold J. Abrams discusses a prevalent theme in Scorsese's films: the relation between madness, creativity, and criminality. Next, in "*The Age of Innocence*: Social Semiotics, Desire, and Constraint," Deborah Knight explores Scorsese's adaptation of Edith Wharton's 1920 novel, in which the characters' actions are scrutinized by a surrounding social group whose values are dominant and whose decisions will inexorably win out.



out, much as with Scorsese's gangster characters. In "After Hours: Scorsese on Absurdity," Jennifer McMahon uses Scorsese's comedy to discuss the existentialist notion of absurdity. Last, in "The Pupkin Gambit: Rationality and Irrationality in *The King of Comedy*," Richard Greene wonders whether it's rational to act as Rupert Pupkin does in Scorsese's film, risking short-term harm to himself and others for possible long-term benefits.

Part 3, "Vision, Salvation, and the Transcendental," opens with "*The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Bringing Out the Dead*: Scorsese's Reluctant Saviors," in which Karen D. Hoffman discusses the similar experiences of self-sacrifice and temptation of the protagonists of the two films. Next, "Flying Solo: *The Aviator* and Libertarian Philosophy," Paul A. Cantor argues that Scorsese's Howard Hughes is the kind of visionary entrepreneur extolled by libertarian thinkers. In "Art, Sex, and Time in Scorsese's *After Hours*," Richard Gilmore argues that Scorsese's film contains important lessons about our experience of time, our interpersonal relationships, and the power and meaning of art. "The Ethical Underpinnings of *Kundun*," Judith Barad uses Scorsese's film about the young Dalai Lama to explore Buddhist ethics—particularly its commitment to nonviolence. Last, in "Scorsese and the Transcendental," R. Barton Palmer examines Scorsese's obsession with the spiritual, which pervades not only his European-style art films, such as *Kundun* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, but also his genre projects, like *Taxi Driver* and *Goodfellas*.

At the heart of this volume lies our deep admiration for Scorsese's work. We sincerely hope and believe that our analyses of his films will not only enrich and deepen your understanding of them but also introduce you in a richly rewarding fashion to certain philosophical issues and ideas that are well worth considering.

## **Part 1**

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# **AUTHENTICITY, FLOURISHING, AND THE GOOD LIFE**

# No Safe Haven

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## *Casino*, Friendship, and Egoism

Steven M. Sanders

With *Casino* (1995), Martin Scorsese leads us back into the noir landscape of damaged selves that he created to such stunning effect in the critically acclaimed *Goodfellas* (1990). In the words of the film historian David Thomson, ever since *Taxi Driver* (1976) Scorsese's work has reflected "a man happy with the fervent claustrophobia of film noir."<sup>1</sup> *Casino* is a significant addition to Scorsese's body of work in this vein, for the film does nothing less than restage the familiar noir themes of criminal violence, betrayal, loss, and the corruption of the American dream against the backdrop of 1970s Las Vegas.

*Casino's* thematic elements are pursued with all Scorsese's relentless logic. The narrative opens with a pretitle sequence as Sam "Ace" Rothstein (Robert De Niro) lights a cigarette and gets into his car while in voice-over narration he utters the film's ominous opening lines: "When you love someone, you've got to trust them, there's no other way. You've got to give them the key to everything that's yours. Otherwise, what's the point?" Moments later, a car bomb explosion tosses him into midair. With this sequence, Scorsese lays the film's philosophical foundation stone: *There is no safe haven without its own trapdoor*. The safe havens—Ace's love for his wife, Ginger McKenna (Sharon Stone), his \$2 million stash in a safe-deposit box in Los Angeles, the only key to which he has entrusted to Ginger—are no more important to Scorsese than the trapdoor, the way Nicky Santoro (Joe Pesci) exploits his friendship with Ace to manipulate the complex set of activities surrounding casino management for his own enrichment, even to the extent of placing Ace's well-being in jeopardy.

In a sense, *Casino* is less a crime drama than a set of essayistic excursions into the underside of the casino operation, with dramatic scenes added to the fact-based reportage provided by Scorsese and coscenarist Nicholas Pileggi, on whose book *Casino* the film is based.<sup>2</sup> Of course, *Casino* is much more than a sequence of excursions. Scorsese does not seem to care very much about gambling. His film neither explains nor seems very interested in the mechanics of poker, dice, or roulette, for example, or the psychology of the gambler. So he must be using the rituals of casino operation for an expedition into its heart of darkness. With its sense of the present prefigured in the past, its motifs of paranoid suspicion and ultimate betrayal, *Casino* is an exemplary film in the noir tradition, with the themes and stylization of those films noirs like *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950) and *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick, 1956) that deliver on their promise to expose the human dimension of the criminal enterprise.<sup>3</sup>

## Las Vegas Noir

In *Casino*, Scorsese uses the backdrop of Las Vegas, a "new" noir city—unlike New York and San Francisco, the cities of classic film noir, shadowed in chiaroscuro—to create a galaxy of meaningful associations, and signifiers. Shot compositions, camera movements, decor, and design combine

relations of near orchestral partnership and balance. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of gorgeously intoxicatingly rich images bring 1970s-era Vegas to life, with the vernacular architecture and neon signage effectively camouflaging the Strip's sordid realities and the sound track music pushing the drama and dissonance to extremes. The details steadily accumulate and anchor *Casino* in its time and place.

The Las Vegas setting provides the context for the social and psychological realism that film *Casino* and propels the plot, whose moral center lies in a predetermined ending, another element found in film noir. Scorsese gives us acid-etched sketches of Ace's micromanagement of an array of manipulations at the Tangiers, the casino he runs for the mob, Nicky's increasingly self-destructive behavior, and Ginger's two-timing and squalid end. Scorsese likely excised, expanded, and otherwise altered the factual incidents in Pileggi's book to suit his own purposes. And, while we are not given enough backstory to fully understand what formed any of the protagonists, the coscenarists expose the characters of Ace, Nicky, and Ginger, who, in their incarnations as actual persons, would no doubt have not wanted to be so exposed.

Scorsese goes beyond the classic noir convention of the voice-over narration by presenting both Ace's and Nicky's points of view in their own voice-overs. Ace, the antihero and predominant narrator, is sufficiently savvy to know his success at running a licensed casino depends on maintaining the appearance of a clean operation, even as he functions as a cash cow and conduit to the Midwest mob bosses who await their monthly skim in Kansas City, which, Nicky tells us, is as close as they could get to Las Vegas without getting arrested. Ace is a quick study, and succinctly explains the mood of paranoia surrounding the casino operation, where everybody watches everybody else: "Since the players are looking to beat the casino, the dealers are watching the players, the box men are watching the dealers, the floor men are watching the box men, the pit bosses are watching the floor men, the shift bosses are watching the pit bosses, the casino manager is watching the shift bosses, I'm watching the casino manager, and the eye in the sky is watching us all."

Nicky, who has been sent to Vegas by the mob bosses to make sure nobody interferes with Ace and the casino scam, sees Vegas as a place ripe for exploitation. "I saw it as untouched," he tells us, with bookies, pimps, and drug dealers to shake down and no one to run to for protection. "So I started getting everybody in line. Best of all, for the first time in my life, I figured out a way not to lose." As Ace tells us, Nicky "had tipsters all over town, bellmen, valet parkers, pit bosses, secretaries, and the whole lot—all got a piece of the score." Nicky begins to accumulate a substantial stash of his own, without the Midwest mob's knowledge, of course, because they think that he is there to keep an eye on Ace. In Nicky's moral universe: "You gotta know that a guy who helps you steal, even if you take care of him real well, I mean, he's gonna steal a little extra for himself. Makes sense, don't it?"

Not least of all, there is Ginger, a fixer and user with her own ambition and greed. Ace unlocks her trunk of hustler's tricks for us even as he finds himself falling in love with her. "Who wouldn't want Ginger?" he asks rhetorically, going on to observe, apparently without irony: "She was one of the best known, best-liked, and most respected hustlers in town." Ginger "knew how to take care of people, and that's what Vegas is all about. It's kickback city." She paid off the valet parkers "because they took care of the security guards who took care of the metro cops who let her operate."

## ***Casino* and Egoism**

The ethical dimension of *Casino* is ambiguous because of the prominence within the noir tradition of alternative strands of thought—particularly its nihilism, amorality, and egoism. From *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) and *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) to *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert

Aldrich, 1955) and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), all three positions have been dramatized by a preoccupation with the conflict, not to mention the repudiation, of moral values. Because nihilism, amorality, and egoism are associated with the displacement of conventional morality, they may appear to be similar in outlook. But there are differences between them, and these differences matter. For example, nihilists insist that there are no objective values to ground moral judgments about what we ought to do or how we ought to live, and amoralists express indifference about such judgments. But egoists are moral realists: the justificational supremacy of self-interest reflects an objective moral reality. It may turn out that egoism is not the one true moral theory, but at least egoists believe that there *is* moral truth, whereas nihilists dismiss the idea of moral truth altogether, and amoralists deny that it is important.

By *egoism*, I mean the view that self-interest is the criterion of one's overriding value. But what counts as self-interest? Philosophers typically use *self-interest* in a generic sense to refer to happiness, well-being, flourishing, or, as I shall say, what makes one's life go best for one. On one view, what would be best for one and make one's life go as well as possible is what would give one the most pleasure; on another view, what would be best for one is what would best fulfill one's desires over the course of one's life; and, on a third view, what would be best for one might include such objective goods as knowledge, the development of one's abilities, liberty, and so on. We will not know very much about what egoism is in the absence of a fuller account of this notion of making one's own life go best.<sup>4</sup> However, I will not try to provide a detailed account of this notion. Instead, I want to show how certain problems with friendship arise in *Casino* and how they might be dealt with if egoism is assumed to have such a basis.

Many philosophers have argued that egoism has implications that appear to be in sharp conflict with some of our most firmly held beliefs about friendship, and a large part of the controversy between egoism and its critics concerns the most appropriate response to these implications. Some philosophers have argued that egoism itself incorporates constraints on self-interested actions harmful to others. In this way, they hope to remove the objection that egoism is unable to make sense of our moral thought about the value of friends and our responsibilities to them.<sup>5</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, these attempts fail because, in my view, they badly distort egoism in a misguided attempt to accommodate our nonegoist beliefs about our moral obligations and our responsibilities to our friends.<sup>6</sup> By way of contrast, a philosopher such as Jesse Kalin does not make this type of concession. Kalin is willing to say that each person should "pursue his own self-interest even to the harming of others when necessary" and concludes that this does not weaken egoism's appeal as a normative guide to action.<sup>7</sup> Construed in this way, egoism requires us to be disposed to take advantage of anyone, even a friend, if doing so is in our own self-interest. If this is the case, then, far from being a sound moral outlook, egoism is antagonistic to morality.

The relationship between Ace and Nicky takes on moral significance as an illustration of a type of egoist friendship. Nicky uses Ace for his entrée into Las Vegas social life and, more important than for Nicky, for access to the network of activities surrounding the operation of the Tangiers. He is determined to make his own life go as well as possible, and Ace is an instrumentality to be used toward that end—and pretty clearly *only* an instrumentality. As the film opens, Nicky is heard to lament: "It should have been perfect. I mean, he had *me*, Nicky Santoro, his best friend, watching his ass." This will serve as our leitmotif, for *Casino* gives us a graphic illustration of some of the behavioral and motivational forces surrounding a typical form of egoist friendship (if that is not an oxymoron).

Perhaps because friendship is so central to a happy life, every moral theory must include some account of its value. Yet egoism is often thought to be deficient in this respect. The principal objection is that egoism is unable to make sense of the moral value of friendship because it conceives of friendship

as being only instrumentally valuable—that is, valuable as a means to one’s own ends—and not valuable as ends in themselves, that is, as persons whose ends have no less value than one’s own. Consequently, egoist thought and practice are widely believed to be inimical to friendship. Taking *Casino*’s depiction of egoist friendship as a point of departure, I argue that the pathologies displayed to such dramatic effect in the film follow from a common type of egoism that I shall call *maximizing* egoism. I shall suggest some egoist alternatives to maximizing egoism that support relationships we would recognize as friendships, though perhaps of an attenuated type. Clarifying the central contentions of egoism and following out egoism’s normative implications for friendships of various types will lead to a better understanding of *Casino* and a more fulfilling experience when we watch it.

## Egoists and Their Friends

In order to develop our understanding of egoist friendship in *Casino*, let us ask whether Nicky (or an egoist) can have grounds for *exempting* his or her friends from interest-maximizing calculations. (By *friends* I mean those to whom the egoist stands in special relations we may call *friendships* without begging the question. I discuss below whether and in what sense these relations *are* friendships.) Nicky can make exceptions of Ace and his other friends (his crew, e.g.) when he is calculating how to use others to his own advantage, the case for the possibility of egoist friendship will be greatly strengthened, even if, in the end, the way Nicky would be disposed to use those who are *not* his friends would remain unchanged.

The egoist’s rationale for exempting friends from egoist interest-maximizing calculations is similar to the one that utilitarians, for example, use to extend the utilitarian justification further than one might have expected so that it embraces special cases, for example, loyalty to friends, partiality to spouses, parents, and children, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> Utilitarians try to show how they can exempt spouses, parents, and children from calculations that might compromise their special status if they were treated impartially. They give arguments for exempting parents, spouses, and children from the application of the utilitarian principle that people should be considered on a par, morally speaking, with each other. Utilitarians might argue that, because our parents, spouses, children, and friends have expectations of special treatment from us, such special treatment has greater utility than treating each as simply one among many, that the institutions of marriage and the family are socially beneficial and actions directed toward their maintenance are desirable, and that any steps toward the formation of cooperation, reliance, and trust between the parties to such relationships would be good. In these ways utilitarians would argue that it is justifiable to exempt those who stand in special relations to us from the treatment that we might initially expect, given utilitarianism.

Similarly, egoists might argue that they are justified in exempting those standing in special relations to *them* from treatment that, at first blush, we might expect from them. Rather than interfering, egoists would cooperate with their friends; instead of confronting, they would compromise; in place of duplicity and manipulation, they would offer candor and sympathetic understanding—as long as the price was not unjustifiably high. This qualification is, of course, central. The question, What’s in it for *me*? would come easily to Nicky’s lips, and, indeed, for him it is decisive. Once his friendship with Ace begins to create burdens that outweigh the (perceived) benefits to him, Nicky starts to alter things so that the relationship does not have this result. We see this, for example, in the way in which Nicky starts to skirt the edges of respectability once Ace has helped him establish his bona fides.

There may be other ways in which egoists can justify the exemption of their friends from interest-



maximizing calculations, but I mention this one because I believe that it establishes the initial plausibility of the idea that egoists do not need to be disposed to take advantage of their friends without having to modify egoism so drastically that the resulting view could not plausibly be said to count as an egoist view at all. From this, we might conclude that egoists are fully capable of friendships in which they show a genuine concern for others. And, if this is the case, it might be argued that the satisfactions derivable from friendships are no less available to someone like Nicky than they are to nonegoists. Still, I have done no more than try to establish the initial plausibility of this idea. I next explore an obstacle that stands in the way of giving the idea more than merely initial plausibility.

## Levels of Friendship

A distinction between kinds or levels of friendship is often used to support the claim that an egoist like Nicky cannot have the *relevant* kind of friendship. This type of criticism may be the most plausible one against someone like Nicky, who, it seems clear, has a severely limited grasp of, and commitment to, Ace. Consider, for example, how Nicky uses Ace and exploits him even to the extent of having sex with his wife.

Lawrence A. Blum argues: “There are many different levels of friendship, levels which are understood in moral terms of how fully one cares for the other.” Blum concedes that “even a selfish person can wish another well” and “can be very attached to another person, e.g., a spouse or friend” though Blum also says that “such a friendship could not be a friendship of the most morally excellent kind.” According to Blum: “Caring in the full sense . . . is incompatible with selfishness.” But, leaving aside this questionable equation of self-interest with selfishness, does invoking kinds or levels of friendship amount to anything more than a contestable *claim* that some relationships, states, or experiences are more valuable than others? In order to succeed as an objection to egoism, such a claim would have to be *justified*, and Blum’s altruistic account clearly begs the question against someone like Nicky, who might well ask why he should seek that deeper kind of friendship, which, according to Blum, “involves a high level of development and expression of the altruistic emotions of sympathy, concern, and care—a deep caring for and identification with the good of another from whom one knows oneself clearly to be other.”<sup>9</sup>

Nicky would not believe that he *ought* to seek the kind of friendship in which Ace’s good has the highest normative priority. Given his view that self-interest is the criterion of his overriding values, Nicky’s highest priority is making his *own* life go best. This means, of course, that his friendship with Ace cannot be a friendship of the most morally excellent kind. But why should this matter to Nicky? It would not faze him unless this type of friendship mattered most *to him*, and it is clear that it does not. After all, Nicky will argue that the absence of morally excellent friendships is not a loss to him since he does not miss them. The argument Blum offers would not work against Nicky unless it could be established that the absence of morally excellent friendships in Nicky’s life actually harms Nicky—that is, makes him worse off, whatever Nicky may think—and Blum has not shown the absence of such friendships to be harmful.

The level of caring that Nicky *can* have for Ace does not amount to true friendship, as *friendship* defined by Blum. But this incapacity for true friendship does not have the significance Blum thinks it does. For it is relatively certain that, whatever demands friendship may make of us, there are limits. Friendship rarely demands commitment to another’s welfare regardless of personal cost. In fact, it is unlikely that our friends would even ask us to make such significant self-sacrifices for their sake, and

any alleged general incompatibility between friendship and self-interest is untenable. Now, if it is unlikely that we will often be in situations where friendship requires us to make significant self-sacrifices, it will be in our overall self-interest to have friends—even if doing so increases the likelihood that we will, thereby, be disposed to bear some burdens that we would not have if we had no friends. The relatively certain benefits of friendship will simply outweigh its unlikely burdens.

The fact that Nicky seems unwilling to comply with even this quite modest constraint on his behavior says more about the conditions of his acceptance of egoism than it does about egoism itself. What it shows is that, in evaluating egoism as a moral theory, we should distinguish between the *true* conditions of the theory and the conditions of its *application* by specific persons.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Nicky might claim that egoism is the one true theory yet not act as though he accepts the theory is not a refutation of egoism as an account of morally justificatory reasons.

## Egoism and Psychological Dispositions

It seems implausible to maintain that no one could *ever* advance his genuine self-interest at the expense of a friend. Could there *never* be cases where what is best for oneself would be worse for one's friend? When your friend with the kidney condition needs one of your healthy kidneys, is it obvious that what is better for you (to keep both your healthy kidneys) is *not* worse for your friend? Consider the situation of Elliot, Lee, and Hannah in Woody Allen's 1986 film *Hannah and Her Sisters*.<sup>11</sup> Hannah (Mia Farrow) is married to Elliot (Michael Caine), who believes that he has discovered the woman of his dreams in his sister-in-law Lee (Barbara Hershey). Their affair involves the deception and betrayal of Hannah, someone they both love and are disposed to act favorably toward. As Ian Jarvie notes, this is a "love that works partly with the help of lies and concealment." Is it so obvious that what is worse for Hannah (not to be deceived and betrayed by her friends) is *not* better for Elliot and Lee (to take a chance at a far greater happiness than they might otherwise experience)? Are we even convinced that there can *never* be cases of short-term, guilt-free enjoyment that involve the temporary departure from the virtues of veracity and fidelity? I do not believe that we can rule out these possibilities if by *possibility* we mean what is consistently imaginable. Given the contingencies of human belief, desire, and preference ranking, such outcomes must be counted as genuine possibilities, and a theory that denied this could do so only at the cost of arbitrariness. In *Casino*, such cases are shown to arise when Nicky exploits opportunities to extort people with whom his friendship with Ace puts him in contact, such as employees at the Tangiers to whom Nicky lends money at exorbitant interest rates. If this is correct, then a situation *could* arise in which an egoist could make things go best for himself at the expense of his friend, and he would be disposed to act accordingly. For I take it that, if self-interest is the criterion of his overriding value, he would be disposed to act at his friend's expense.

But is this a psychological possibility? Is not Aristotle correct in observing that to live a life of virtue is to act in accordance with the right rule on all occasions?<sup>13</sup> The virtues are acquired by exercising them: if a person acts habitually in accordance with the dictates of the right rule, then he will do so also on occasions when his actions involve the possibility of self-sacrifice. Surely, Nicky could not possess the virtue of friendship and at the same time be disposed to take advantage of his best friend, Ace, when that would be in his self-interest. Following this Aristotelian line, Laurence Thomas has argued: "A person who shifts from being favorably disposed towards a person to being disposed to exploit that person every time he realizes that he can get away with it, cannot be one with a healthy personality." If this is true, then: "A person with a healthy personality cannot move from one



to the other just like that.”<sup>14</sup>

But this claim rests on a misunderstanding of the grounds of the *exceptions* that Nicky can make exercising his dispositions. On the basis of this misunderstanding, Thomas and other philosophers have drawn dubious conclusions about what is and is not possible for a person with a healthy personality to be disposed to do. Egoism requires the exercise of dispositions that have as their principled rationale making one's own life go as well as possible. But the successful practice of egoism permits one to *restrict the exercise* of one's dispositions. Even if one were to concede that egoists would be disposed to deceive and betray people, this does not entail that such practices would be carried over into their every relationship. For example, organized crime figures can be disposed to use violence as an intimidation strategy yet be doting parents, as we have been shown from *The Godfather* to *The Sopranos*. In several scenes, in fact, Nicky is shown doting over his son, Nicholas Jr., as young Nicky is a source of great pride to him. The mobster as doting parent may have been overdone, but we have not been given reason to think it is impossible for an egoist to restrict the exercise of his dispositions so that his life may go as well as possible. As Nicky recognizes, cooperation, loyalty, and friendship can be pressed into the service of self-interest, even if he is prepared to deceive the very friend who has enabled him to set up his criminal enterprise. Of course Nicky will not be disposed to make the shift from being disposed to be loyal to Ace to being disposed to take advantage of him just like that or “at the drop of a hat.”<sup>15</sup> A commitment to a partner, whether in commerce or crime, will often be closely linked to other projects and possibilities, and a wise egoist will not jeopardize these at the drop of a hat. Egoists will not constantly be assessing their commitments and friendships in terms of egoistic utilities that arise on the fly or terminating them every time it appears that some other set of arrangements might maximize their personal expected utility.

## The Pervasiveness of Egoism

Perhaps the problem all along has been one that *Casino* illustrates with tremendous force and vivacity. Nicky's egoism implies the all-consuming aim of making his own life go as well as possible, which, as we have seen, undermines his commitment to Ace. The problem with the egoist's overriding commitment to himself, writes William H. Wilcox, “is that the practical effects of this particular commitment are so pervasive that little room is left for a concern for another's well-being to have much practical effect.”<sup>16</sup>

This criticism assumes that egoists' commitments to, or concern for, their friends depend for their practical significance entirely on their weight in a calculation of purely personal interest-maximizing considerations. Against this, I have argued that, given the circumstances in which egoists are most likely to find themselves, caring and concern for, rather than taking advantage of, friends would be more conducive to life's going well for them. It would be unusual if it were not almost always the case that the interests of our friends were either among or compatible with our most important interests. And, since egoism does not require any particular way to go about realizing our aims, egoists might find their concerns for and commitments to their friends arising quite independently of their place in the calculation of personal interest-maximizing considerations. Such egoists would do many things for their friends that are not incompatible with living an egoist way of life. They could consistently care about their friends without compromising their overriding commitment to themselves.

However, the egoist who argues this way, writes Wilcox,

overlooks a further distinction between being *committed* to something for its own sake and ~~*merely caring about*~~ something for its own sake (as an end). I care about the welfare of (probably) any stranger for its own sake. . . . But I am not *committed* to the well-being of any stranger; there are quickly reached limits to the effort I would be willing to make to save the life of a distant stranger. An undeceived egoist's attitude toward his "friends" would have to be much like my attitude to any stranger. But this attitude falls far short of any that has a place in friendship.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Wilcox concludes that the egoist's overriding commitment to his own self-interest would be incompatible with friendship. But Wilcox implies a false alternative, as though strangers and friends were the only possibilities. He overlooks the fact that personal relations can be realized and combined with great complexity and variety in a person's life. This complex pattern of discriminations in personal relations can range from *acquaintance* to *friend* to *good friend* to *best friend* and might explain Nicky's greater emotional distance from a mere acquaintance (to say nothing of a stranger) than from Ace, a man he calls his dear friend.

## Maximizing and Satisficing Egoism

But, rather than leave the controversy here, let us ask why Wilcox believes that the easily reached limits to the efforts one would be willing to make for the sake of a stranger would apply to the egoist's friends. My suspicion is that the disposition to instrumental behavior that Wilcox identifies with the egoist's attitude toward his friend—and that we are shown so graphically in connection with both Nicky and Ginger—is an expression of what he takes to be a more fundamental egoist imperative: *maximize* his overall good. It is common to link egoism with the view that one must do all and only those acts that maximize personal expected utility. According to this view, it is the egoist's overriding commitment to promote his or her own good *to any extent* at the expense of another *to any extent*. This is, of course, incompatible with friendship and many of the commitments we normally think people have toward each other.

This way of thinking about egoism conflates the *justificatory role of self-interest* with *maximizing strategy*. Once the connection between these two notions is broken, one is free to think about egoism in a way more consonant with the commitments that friends are normally thought to have toward each other. Such an account provides a framework for understanding how friendship can be valuable for its own sake even if it is not the sole overriding value. The satisfactions constituted by the feeling and involvement associated with deep friendship can, then, be seen as a manifestation of the commitment to making one's life go well, or at least well enough.

We can unlink the overriding commitment to our own self-interest from the requirement to *maximize* by rethinking egoism in terms of a strategy of *satisficing*, one that works well even if it is not the single *best* strategy. We would then, in the egoist view, have the needed flexibility. After all, in actual life one can rarely, if ever, identify the best outcome or course of action, and the attempt to do so often smothers spontaneity, whereas satisficing gives it scope, adding zest and freshness to living.<sup>19</sup> The egoist asks how he or she can make life go well for himself or herself, and this may involve *not* maximizing. For he or she may know that life will go better (or at least well enough) when he or she does not engage in calculations of personal utility in every situation, spending less time *calculating* about how to make things go as well as possible for himself or herself *in order that* things may go well. And, as seems clear from the case of friendship, we can avoid many of the unwanted

practical implications of egoism if we reject maximizing in favor of satisficing.

To some, this proposal may sound heretical. The very notion of a satisficing egoist—one who aims at making his or her life *good enough*, even if it falls short of the *best possible* life—will strike some as absurd. After all, is it not the very point of the egoist to make life go *as well as possible* for himself or herself? If so, then satisficing egoism cannot be a genuine form of egoism at all, and the case is closed. But this brisk dismissal of satisficing egoism conflates the legitimate point that no position could be egoist that denied that chains of normative justificatory reasoning must terminate in self-interest, with the dubious claim that egoists cannot consistently aim at any outcome *except* making life go *as well as possible* (and not merely good enough) for themselves. While egoists rightly insist that self-interest is the criterion of overriding value, there is no reason why this requires maximizing. To say that it does is simply to beg the question of the legitimacy of satisficing egoism.<sup>20</sup>

## Nicky and His Friends

*Casino* illustrates how egoism adds an individualistic emphasis to both moral theory and moral phenomena, including friendship, and one of the great merits of the film is to so powerfully illustrate the spectacle of unconstrained egoist excess. Much of the egoist emphasis in ethics can be traced to Nietzsche, who, with other philosophers, endorsed an ethics of individuality, will, authenticity, and dominance. But there is a danger of overdoing this emphasis, as, arguably, various critics of Enlightenment conceptions of moral rationality and agency, from the existentialists to the postmodernists, have done. While Nicky devotes his time in Las Vegas to activities that are designed to make him feared and wealthy, it is clear that he pays the price for this endeavor in an ignoble life and a horrific death. Of course, we should not interpret this end as nothing more than the price one must pay for doing business as a maximizing egoist. The fact that Nicky is portrayed as a psychopath makes it easier to equate his flouting of moral norms and his extremely violent behavior with egoism.<sup>21</sup> Nicky indulges his pervasive vices (gambling, drug taking, adultery, violence) while his self-deceptions pile up. His impulses toward self-assertion result, instead, in self-destruction.

Nevertheless, one can see how this outcome is an implication of Nicky's maximizing egoism. Nicky's disposition to take advantage of his friend Ace is exercised in a highly competitive subculture where access to the tangible rewards of life is limited and treachery and backstabbing are widespread. Recognizing in himself the capacity not only for equivocation and keeping things close to the vest but also for some of the more spectacular forms of treachery, Nicky will have no trouble imagining that his friends have similar dispositions. In this respect, the situation is far worse than the one that faces the satisficing egoist, for he at least could come to understand that his instrumental attitude toward his friends was interfering with securing the benefits of true friendship. He could, therefore, take steps to view his friendships in a less instrumental way, in the hope that this would make his life go better. But this adjustment in Nicky's *own* outlook and behavior would not help unless it led to an alteration in *others* of the disposition to treat *him* instrumentally, and he can hardly be certain of that. Insofar as having a healthy personality involves the absence of protracted anxiety, inner conflict, or chronic depression, is it not obvious that these conditions would be present in Nicky, who is disposed to act unfavorably toward the very same friends whom he must be disposed to regard as potentially dangerous adversaries to be watched or preempted? And, as *Casino* shows most graphically, it remains only for the mob bosses, eager to tie up loose ends and cover their tracks, to order the means of Nicky's death.

Given the widespread criticisms of egoism as a moral theory, it may appear to be foolish to argue that it best accounts for the kind of friendship dramatized in *Casino*. In one respect, of course, I agree

this since I agree that egoism—even satisficing egoism—is not entirely congruent with all our beliefs about the value of friendship. It is important to remember, however, that what I have tried to do is to elucidate a type of egoism that Nicky’s friendship in *Casino* presupposes, not establish that everything in that presupposition is itself defensible.

## Notes

I am grateful to Mark T. Conard for his very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay and to Michael Almeida, Christeen Clemens, Edward James, and Aeon J. Skoble for valuable discussions of the topics with which it deals.

1. David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, expanded and updated ed. (New York: Knopf, 2004), 810.
2. Nicholas Pileggi, *Casino: Love and Honor in Las Vegas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
3. I discuss Kubrick’s film in “The Big Score: Fate, Morality, and Meaningful Life in *The Killing*,” in *The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick*, ed. Jerold J. Abrams (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).
4. For the three views, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 3–4.
5. This type of approach to egoism is found in Edward W. Regis Jr., “Ethical Egoism and Moral Responsibility,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 50–62.
6. I defend this account at length in “Is Egoism Morally Defensible?” *Philosophia* 18, nos. 2–3 (1988): 191–209.
7. Jesse Kalin, “In Defense of Egoism,” in *Morality and Rational Self-Interest*, ed. David P. Gauthier (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 75.
8. I am indebted here to the discussion of utilitarianism in Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 106–12.
9. Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 73, 72, 73, 70.
10. See Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” in *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, ed. Samuel Scheffler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 115. Railton’s concern is with act consequentialism, and his valuable farranging discussion has influenced me throughout this essay.
11. I am grateful to Christeen Clemens for suggesting this example.
12. Ian Jarvie, “Arguing Interpretations: The Pragmatic Optimism of Woody Allen,” in *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, ed. Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 55.
13. Aristotle discusses this idea in bks. 8–9 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*.
14. Laurence Thomas, “Ethical Egoism and Psychological Dispositions,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17 (1980): 77.
15. Thomas writes that the egoist’s disposition to take advantage of anyone when he has good reason to believe this would be in his self-interest and the disposition to act favorably toward his friends are “polar dispositions” and that “a person can no more shift between these two dispositions at the drop of a hat than can a person exhibit those traits that are fully characteristic of both the virtue of honesty and the vice of mendacity upon demand” (ibid.).
16. William H. Wilcox, “Egoists, Consequentialists, and Their Friends,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16 (1987): 79. Wilcox’s essay is a reply to Railton’s “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality.”
17. Wilcox, “Egoists, Consequentialists, and Their Friends,” 79.
18. Ibid.
19. For a summary of a number of objections to maximizing strategies, see James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 356 n. 33. Griffin himself by no means favors satisficing over maximizing.
20. Mark T. Conard registers an important source of dissatisfaction with my account of satisficing egoism. He argues that, in having friends and giving up some of what is in one’s best interest (whatever that might be), one is, thereby, implicitly affirming that having friends is *better* than having those other things, that it leads to one’s having a better life or, perhaps, even the best life possible. Thus, one is not actually settling for a life that is good enough but, rather, maximizing. I believe that a satisficing egoist would say that the *best* possible life would be to have all the benefits of friendship without having to make any of the sacrifices. Since that is not feasible (though it is not logically impossible), satisficing is a distinct and preferable policy.
21. I explore the topic of morality and psychopaths in “Why Be Moral? Amoralism and Psychopathy in *Strangers on a Train*,” in *Hitchcock and Philosophy*, ed. David Baggett and William Drumin (Chicago: Open Court, 2007).



# God's Lonely Man

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## *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 our protagonist, 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 City that others are afraid of, he is disgusted by what he sees: "All the animals come out at night. . . . Sicily is a 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 that a cleansing rain, he muses: "One of these days a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets."

*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 unhinged 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 an armed robbery, and *adventurous 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 virtuous 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. This 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 it can hardly take it.” When he becomes disillusioned with Palantine, Travis assumes responsibility for 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 against the city. 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 else 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 “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 of Palantine, 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 and its 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 Paul 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 standard 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 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 alienated and isolated generally: “Loneliness has followed me my whole life, everywhere. In bars, in car 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 epistemologic 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.



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