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“One in the brain”: a Philosophical Exploration of *Miller's Crossing*

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Abstract

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This thesis critically explores *Miller’s Crossing* from a thematic, rather than technical, perspective. With an eye towards understanding the film’s broad philosophical meaning, this paper considers the action of the film to be an allegory of the human condition. Using this interpretive framework, this thesis explores the urban, political, and social dimensions of the setting, and thoroughly examines the film’s major characters. The character analysis purports to give insight into the characters’ “ways of being in the world”—that is, what they value and what drives them to act. It concludes with a meditation on the presence (or lack thereof) of moral virtue among the various characters, reflecting on how their respective moral sensibilities relate to their fates.

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For my brothers, Julien and Zach

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Plot Summary

1A) The action is set in an unspecified bustling town in the era of American Prohibition. Local gangster, **Johnny Caspar**, notorious for fixing boxing matches, complains to **Leo**, the town's undisputed gangster overlord, that his bookie, **Bernie Birnbaum**, is selling information about which way he is betting. Leo asks whether other bookies might be responsible. Caspar lays bets with only one other bookie, **Mink**, for whom Caspar's right-hand man, **Eddie Dane**, will vouch (Mink is referred to as Dane's "boy"). Caspar is confident that Bernie is selling the information, as he explains, "ethically, he's kind of shaky"¹. Caspar argues that Bernie is violating his *trust*, upon which functional, social human relationships are built.

Caspar wants to kill Bernie Birnbaum, but Leo informs Caspar that Bernie pays for Leo's protection. Caspar is indignant and reminds Leo that he "pays off to [Leo] like a greengrocer—a lot more than the *shmatte*." Caspar pays for protection because he owns a number of dive bars and casinos, and Leo is the only one between and the law. Leo says that Caspar will not be given special treatment—he is forbidden from killing Bernie. Caspar, furious, storms out of Leo's office.

1B) **Tom**, Leo's right-hand man, visibly disappointed by what Leo has just done remarks, "bad play, Leo". Leo comments on Tom's growing gambling debt to another bookie, **Lazarrere**. Leo offers to "square" Tom with Lazarrere, but Tom insists that he will handle it. Tom tells Leo that there is a different favor that Leo could do for him: "*Think about what protecting Bernie gets us. Think about what offending Caspar loses us.*" Leo replies, "Come on, Tommy, you know

¹ All quotes from *Miller's Crossing* referenced in this paper come from the film itself, not a published screenplay. (The screenplays initially consulted in the writing of this paper contained various inaccuracies.)

I don't like to think." Tom turns to the door to exit and replies, "Yeah. Well think about whether you should start."

2) Opening credits. A hat is, blown around by the wind in a forest.

3) We find Tom passed out on a sofa at Leo's club. He is awoken by the club's bartender, **Tony**, a friend of his. Tom realizes that his hat is missing, and Tony explains that Tom lost it last night in a game of cards. Tom, in an attempt to win money to pay off Lazarrere, ended up going deeper into debt, this time to Mink and **Verna**, Leo's lover, who has his hat. Tom lays *another* bet with Tony, who works for Lazarrere, before heading off to see Verna about his hat.

4) When Tom stops by Verna's apartment to get his hat, it is clear that the two of them are lovers. Verna refuses to let Tom in when he demands his hat: "is that all you came for?" But she lets him in when he says he needs a drink: "why didn't ya say so?"

5) Leo knocks on Tom's apartment door, apologizing for the late hour. Tom lets Leo in only after Leo asks to be let in. After a moment or two of uncomfortable silence, Tom asks Leo whether or not Leo has changed his position on the situation with Bernie Birnbaum. Leo dismisses the possibility outright. He then reveals that he is worried about Verna, who has gone missing. Tom gives Leo no indication that he was with Verna earlier. We learn that Verna is Bernie's sister. Tom says that Verna's relationship with Leo is a "grift" to provide protection for her brother. Leo uncomfortably tells Tom that he put a "tail" on Verna, **Rug Daniels**, who is also missing. At this point, Tom looks at Leo disapprovingly and waves away Leo's request for help with disgust. Tom asserts that Leo needs to rethink his relationship with Verna in light of her disappearance, and that he ought to reflect on whether or not she is "playing" him in order to support her brother. Also, Tom warns Leo that he should not go blow-for-blow with Caspar,

saying that he “has gotten too strong.” The scene closes as Leo insists that he’s still the boss in town.

5B) Tom returns to his bedroom, where we find Verna on the bed. She asks him if he put in a good word for her brother, Bernie. Tom says he didn’t, and that he told Leo to dump her.

6) In a dirty alleyway, we find the corpse of Rug Daniels.

7) Tom runs into Mink, Eddie Dane’s “boy” and Caspar’s bookie, at Leo’s club. They have an exchange in which Mink makes a serious push for Tom to throw his support behind Bernie. Tom questions him about whether Eddie Dane would like to see Mink’s advocacy for Bernie. Tom implies that Mink and Eddie Dane have a sexual relationship, and that Mink is complicating things by screwing around with Bernie. Mink becomes anxious, realizing that he has revealed a hidden love triangle to Tom, who walks upstairs to see Leo.

7B) In Leo’s office, we find Leo consulting with **O’Doole**, the chief of police, and the mayor. The topic of conversation is the murder of Rug Daniels, which Leo attributes to Caspar and his henchmen. Working off this assumption, Leo wants to retaliate by shutting down Caspar’s illegal establishments. Tom challenges Leo’s decision to take direct action against Caspar.

Leo argues that once Caspar had Rug Daniels murdered he had declared war, and that Leo cannot “lay down.” Tom, who acknowledges but does not challenge Leo’s assumption that Caspar had Rug killed, suggests that Leo committed the first offense. Leo defended Bernie, who had “broken the rules,” and that effectively punished Caspar, who has consistently played by the rules and who reasonably sought justice. Tom insinuates that Leo started this out of a love interest: “You *did* start it – you and Verna.” Leo will not budge. Tom departs, saying, “my opinion used to count for something around here.”

7C) Tom confronts Verna in the powder room and reproaches her for manipulating Leo to help her brother, telling her to leave him alone. The two of them get into a fight, but stare into each others eyes at the end of it.

8) Tom returns to his apartment to find Bernie Birnbaum. Noting Tom's gambling debt, Bernie offers him information on a fixed fight in exchange for Tom's support. Tom infers that Bernie received the tip from Mink, and tells Bernie he'll think about it.

9) Tom runs into Adolph, who works for Lazarrere, and lays yet another bet. Moments after, some of Caspar's henchmen come to pick Tom up.

10) Tom is escorted to Caspar's empty casino card room, where he finds Eddie Dane and Johnny Casper waiting for him. Caspar offers to put Tom square with Lazarrere, saying he wants "everybody to be friends," but that he would like Tom to give him Bernie Birnbaum in exchange. When Tom doesn't commit, saying he'll think it over, he makes a joke or two that sort of jab at Caspar's diction. Caspar walks off in a huff, as his henchmen approach Tom. Just then, the police storm in and raid Caspar's casino. At the scene, Tom learns from O'Doole that a small-caliber gun was used to kill Rug Daniels.

11) Tom goes to visit Verna, and calls a police officer to watch after Leo that evening. Tom accuses Verna of killing Rug Daniels. Verna denies the allegations, and she and Tom fight briefly, but end up making love.

12) We find henchmen breaking into Leo's home with the intention of killing him, but Leo heroically emerges unscathed, and kills all four of the would-be assassins.

13) The next day, Tom talks with Leo at his office and demands that Leo give Bernie Bernbaum up to Caspar, arguing that Caspar has become a serious force, and is hungry for blood. Tom tells Leo that Verna cannot be trusted, and that it is likely that *she* was the one who killed

Rug Daniels. Leo responds by saying that he intends to marry Verna, and that her word counts just as much as Tom's. Tom then reveals to Leo that he and Verna are carrying on in an affair. Leo, clearly distraught, attacks Tom and declares that their friendship and business relationship are over.

14) We find Tom back at his apartment easing his sore head. After Tom arranges a meeting with Caspar, Verna stops by, having just been dumped by Leo. The two make love and discuss Tom's dream about his hat blowing off. Tom gets valuable information out of Verna—Bernie Bernbaum's location.

15) Tom meets with Caspar, who is meeting with O'Doole and the mayor. At this time, the authorities have shifted sides, and now work for Caspar. Caspar offers Tom a job. Tom reveals Bernie's location. Caspar orders him to join his henchmen, Frankie and TicTac to go pick Bernie up.

16) We see Bernie Bernbaum shoved into Frankie and TicTac's car, having been beaten up. The car heads into the woods, a place called Miller's Crossing.

17) As the car pulls up, it is revealed that Caspar would like for Tom to prove his allegiance by killing Bernie. Bernie begs Tom to spare his life. In the end, Tom spares Bernie's life, but demands that Bernie leave town right away to never return. Bernie agrees and runs away.

18) When Tom gets back into town, he calls Mink and tells him that Caspar now thinks that Mink was in on the fix the whole time. Mink begins to freak out; Tom offers him a proposal: tell Caspar that *Eddie Dane* was involved in the fix, and Tom will see to it that Caspar goes easy on Mink.

19) Tom and Caspar discuss the fact that it appears as if Mink has skipped town. Caspar is suspicious that Mink left after Bernie was killed because he was worried he'd be implicated. Tom says that Bernie, moments before Tom killed him, claimed that he had been set up: Mink and Eddie Dane were the ones who sold the information about the fix.

20) Tom meets with Verna at a boxing gym and advises her to leave town. He tells her that Bernie is safe, but has fled. Very pleased, Verna exits, and as the camera zooms out, we find that Eddie Dane witnessed the exchange from afar.

21) Interluding scene where we witness police shooting up one of Leo's pubs.

22) Eddie Dane busts into Verna's apartment to pay her an unwelcome visit, and reveals to her that Tom killed Bernie. Some of Leo's gunmen come out of the woodworks and try to kill Eddie Dane, but he kills them. Verna manages to sneak out the window.

23) We find Tom in his apartment. Bernie Bernbaum is waiting for him. Bernie explains that Tom left him a big "play"—now Bernie has Tom under his thumb. Since Tom was supposed to have killed him, Bernie is able to use his continued existence against Tom. Bernie demands that Tom kill Johnny Caspar.

24) Tom heads to Leo's club, despite being unwelcome. When he returns, he heads straight to his friend, Tony, the barkeep. Tony informs Tom that there's betting action on the upcoming fight. A person who's never been one to gamble, Drop Johnson, recently placed a large wager on the underdog. Tom takes this to be Bernie's doing who had the inside scoop on the fight. The police break into the club, closing the scene.

25) As Tom walks along the sidewalk, Frankie and TicTac pull over and pick him up by force. Eddie Dane is in the car, and after his exchange with Verna, he suspects that Tom did *not* kill Bernie Bernbaum. They head to Miller's Crossing to find Bernie's corpse.

26) At Miller's Crossing, we find Tom, Dane, Frankie and TicTac walking along. Dane makes his intentions clear: "You do realize that if we don't find a corpse here, we'll leave a fresh one." Tom starts vomiting, which Dane takes as a cue that Tom is guilty. As Dane gets his pistol ready, Frankie and TicTac stumble upon a corpse with its face blown off—it is assumed by all to be Bernie's dead body—Tom is saved, for the moment.

27) Tom returns to town, and visits Drop Johnson. He notices Bernie's hat in his apartment. He advises Drop to tell Bernie that he must get in touch with Tom if wants anything further to happen.

28) Tom arrives at the mayor's office, where we find Caspar. Tom and Caspar speak, and Tom expresses his frustration at having to *prove* to Dane that he had killed Bernie. He hints that the whole spectacle is a power play to mask *Dane's* involvement in selling Caspar's information.

Caspar reveals to Tom that Dane tried to sell him on a double cross against him. Caspar becomes distraught, because he believes in Dane's loyalty, but is concerned by his behavior. Tom presents a compelling case that Dane was selling the information in cahoots with Mink. Tom departs, suggesting that Caspar think things over.

29) Following the message Tom left for Bernie at Drop's apartment, Bernie calls Tom. After establishing that Bernie, in fact, killed Mink and left his body in Miller's Crossing to cover things up, Tom tells Bernie that he plans to leave town right away, and that he wants \$2,000. If Bernie doesn't give it to him, Tom will leave a note for Caspar telling him that Bernie's still alive. He demands that Bernie stop by his apartment at 4:00 AM with the money.

30) Tom heads out of his apartment, and runs into Lazarrere's henchmen waiting for him in the hallway. They land a few punches on him to remind him about his debt.

31) Tom heads to Caspar's mansion, and delivers him some big news: Tom just spoke with *Mink*, who he says is actually in town, despite what the Dane has been saying all along. He tells Caspar that Mink will be at Tom's apartment at 4:00 this morning.

Seconds later, we find that Eddie Dane is in the room with Drop Johnson—the implication is that the Dane has figured it all out: he has determined that Tom left Bernie alive and killed Mink in exchange for information about the fix, and used Drop to place the bet so that he could end his debt problems. Dane so much as charges Tom with this on the spot, and starts choking him to death. Out of nowhere, Caspar comes up behind the Dane and kills him, declaring that Dane was double-crossing him all along! He promises the same fate is in store for Mink that night.

32) 3:30: Tom walks along the street, and Verna runs up to him and puts a gun to his chin. She asks Tom why he would kill Bernie and then lie about it. Tom says he did it all to protect Leo, which Verna finds hard to believe. Even still, she cannot bring herself to kill him.

33) Caspar's car pulls up to Tom's apartment building at 4:00 sharp. Caspar exits the car and heads up the stairs to Tom's place, with Tom walking behind him surreptitiously at a distance. We hear gunshots, and find that Johnny Caspar has been killed by Bernie Bernbaum. Tom is not surprised—he was expecting Bernie to be there early, “looking for blood.” Tom is friendly to Bernie, and makes it clear that the two of them are even. After taking Caspar's money, he asks Bernie for the gun, claiming that they can pin the whole thing on Eddie Dane. Bernie hands the gun over, and Tom reveals that Eddie Dane is dead—“it has to be you,” he says. Tom stands over Bernie as he begs for his life—this time, Tom puts one in his brain.

34) With Caspar's money, Tom calls Lazzare and squares himself. He also places money on that night's fight.

35) We see Tom at Leo's club. It is unclear whether he stopped by to say hello or was invited by Leo to come by. Leo is occupied, however, when Tom actually shows up. Leo expects to see Tom at Bernie's funeral.

36) Only three people show up to the funeral: Tom, Leo, and Verna. Verna is chilly towards Tom, and drives off early, leaving the two men to speak with one another. Leo reveals to Tom that Verna has asked Leo to marry her, and that he plans to do so. Leo also thanks Tom for helping him out this whole time. He wants to know, however, why Tom didn't clue him in on his plans. Tom starts to say that telling Leo about his plans would have complicated things, but then he cuts himself off, concluding, "there just wasn't any point." It is unclear whether or not Tom is *affirming* that he acted with Leo's interests in mind, or just deflecting Leo's comments.

Leo suddenly implores Tom to come work for him again, promising that things will go back to the way they were, and forgiving Tom for violating his trust. Tom coldly separates himself from Leo, and states, "I didn't ask for that and I don't want it." The two men stare at each other. "Goodbye, Leo," Tom says. Leo stands there, staring at Tom, as if waiting for something more. He eventually walks off, slowly into the distance. The camera zooms in on Tom, who stands alone as a tree waves behind him in the wind—Tom lowers his hat onto his head and stares into the distance.

1

The World of *Miller's Crossing*

Miller's Crossing offers a variety of characters whose actions and interactions make up a moral universe that the film critically explores. As we peer into the criminal network that makes up the drama, we are impelled to judge each character of import. Thus, in order to examine what is philosophically “at stake” in *Miller's Crossing*, we must first reflect on “the world of *Miller's Crossing*.” When we try to speak in a serious way about how people behave, we assume a shared understanding of the concrete, societal conditions that make such action, in a given time and place, intelligible. This is not to say that said conditions have a determinative force on the agent, thereby *compelling* some action, but simply that one needs to understand an action’s context in order to fully understand the action, which is a necessary step to rendering any sort of evaluative claim or judgment.

A serious examination of the world of *Miller's Crossing* will show that it is dreary, morally bankrupt, politically corrupt, and full of conniving, self-serving characters. Through exploring three dimensions of the film—the setting, the social world within, and the political world—we will find that *Miller's Crossing* unfolds in an urban arena that more closely resembles a Hobbesian state of nature than what would we normally associate with civil society.

The Urban Surroundings in Miller's Crossing

The bleakness of the society is reflected by the city itself. Described by the film’s title card as “[a]n Eastern city in the United States, toward the end of the 1920s,” the harsh city of *Miller's Crossing* remains unnamed throughout the duration of the film. Shot in New Orleans, which Ethan Coen described as “a depressed city”, the urban setting is gritty and austere². Aside

² Levy 38

from a couple of stark green painted doors that lead into Irish clubs and pubs, most of the urban landscape is gray or another dark, desaturated hue. There is often noise in the form of a machine's humming; even in the early morning, when we discover Rug Daniels' corpse in a dreary alleyway, we hear the steady whir of a turn-of-the-century automobile engine. There are two moments in the film when we overhear a violent, unintelligible racket in the form of argument between a man and a woman: this makes up the disturbing background sound when Tom reads about Rug Daniels's death and when he is visiting Drop Johnson. From the darkness of Tom's residence to the grotesque maroon stains on the hallway walls of Drop Johnson's building, there is a pronounced chilliness to the setting.

This effect is all the more amplified by the notably infrequent use of music in the film. Indeed, most of the music is some reiteration of Carter Burwell's slow, somber horn tune that plays in the opening credits. In fact, there are only two occasions when we hear upbeat music in the film; and both times, it is interrupted. The first is the period bee-bop-style jazz music playing in Verna's apartment when Tom visits to pick up his hat. In this scene, the music stops when the apartment door closes and continues only when Verna opens it a second time. The second time we hear upbeat music is during a gathering in Leo's Shenandoah Club. This setting provides the backdrop for Tom's fallout with Leo; when Leo begins to thrash Tom in the main ballroom, the music comes to a screeching halt.

There are two directorial features in the film that are especially effective in embedding the audience within the dramatic setting. Consider the nature of the camerawork throughout the film: essentially every shot is head-on, *directly* facing a character's person. The visual perspective is that of a casual observer; we feel as though we are in the room with the characters. There are even scenes when one person is seated and another is standing, and the camera moves

in on each such that we seem them at the same angle (that is, head-on). There are no “shots from above” in the film. In fact, the only time that the camera points down towards someone is when he is dead, being beaten, or begging for his life. For these reasons, we never get the sense that we are gazing down upon these actors. The second feature that effectively contextualizes us is the lack of narration. At no time do we receive any orienting commentary or perspective on the characters—we must watch (and judge) them for ourselves.

Perhaps the most unsettling element of the entire film is *Miller’s Crossing*, where gangsters go to kill their enemies by putting “one in the brain” and leave the bodies, or “stiffs”. The tall trees are leaf-bare, but the woods allow ample space for walking. “*Miller’s Crossing*,” synonymous with execution, is met with a grave face from Tom and outright hysteria from Bernie. Unconcerned with all the chaos that goes on within the confines of the city, its woodsy outskirts demarcate that place where men are, more than anything, mere animals.

The Social World in Miller’s Crossing

The characters we encounter in *Miller’s Crossing* are of the sort we associate with civilization’s underbelly. Set in the Prohibition era, Leo and Johnny Caspar determine *who* may serve and imbibe liquor and *where* it may happen. Lazarre, Mink, and Bernie Bernbaum are all bookies who feed off the culture of gambling that exists within the city. Lazarre appears to have a working relationship with Leo, as Tad, a bartender at Leo’s “Shenandoah Club”, handles Tom’s business on his behalf. Bernie and Mink do their bookmaking largely under Johnny Caspar. Mink has an intimate relationship with Eddie Dane (also known as “The Dane”), who serves as a lieutenant to Caspar. The Dane, who “go[es] way back” with Caspar, uses force on Caspar’s behalf, but also serves in an investigatory and advisory capacity. Leo’s main advisor is Tom, whose work is strictly advisory. Both Leo and Caspar also have hired “muscle” on staff:

Terry and Rug Daniels, and Frankie and Tic-Tac respectively, who play fairly minor roles in the film's action. In fact, the only person of consequence in the film not contextualized within this network of criminals is Verna, Bernie's sister and protector and the object of Leo and Tom's affection, interest for whom sparks the film's action. It is unsurprising, then, that in this dramatic setting of lawlessness, moral nullity, and criminality the only compulsion that exists is the self-born impulse to realize one's own advantage.

The characters speak of advancement in strictly relative terms; that is, in terms of advantage with respect to others rather than a more personal fulfillment or “*self*-realization.” Among the power players, Leo and Caspar, this is likely an effect of the need to be perceived as powerful if they are to maintain their respective empires. Even still, Tom, Bernie, Mink, Verna, and The Dane speak frequently in terms of “plays” and “angles”. This is especially true of Tom, whose principal activities seem to be detecting and then exploiting said angles. “Angles,” as Tom discusses them, emerge when a person has an interest in advancement and the opportunity to actualize their goals is available to them, which oftentimes involves stepping on another person's toes. When Tom speaks in these terms, he makes all sorts of assumptions regarding people's interests, motives, their awareness of the opportunity in front of them, and the likelihood that they act on their inclinations. Even if much of the conversation about angles revolves around power, one cannot discount the idea that the general lack of a shared, social moral sensibility leaves a “void of meaning” that the acquisition of status conceivably fills. (The same has been suggested, rightly or wrongly, about secular society more generally.)

Absent a collective moral compass, the world of *Miller's Crossing* is an arena wherein people can pursue their advantage unfettered by societal pressures. The lack of a robust moral structure is evident even in the everyday speech of the film's characters, essentially all of whom

are gangsters, bookies, corrupt politicians and police, or “muscle”. It is notable that the word “Jesus” is used very frequently in the film; but it is uttered exclusively to express disappointment or shock, as in the common phrase, “Jesus, Tom!” The everyday lingo comes out of Dashiell Hammett’s lexicon, which includes calling whiskey “paint” and women “twists,” or, worse yet, “frails”. Jews are called “*shmattes*,” “yids,” “Hebrews,” and “potato-eaters”. People greet one another with the expression “what’s the rumpus,” while the word “friend” is used often interchangeably with mere acquaintance. This looseness in speech (even if it is reflective of the Prohibition period) hints further at the moral vacuity of the dramatic setting.

The heated pursuit of self-interest in a lawless and amoral context leads to a toxic culture of aggression, wherein violence becomes typical. Over the course of the film, Tom is beaten up six times: the first beating comes from Verna; the next is from Tic-tac, on Caspar’s behalf; then from Leo, after Tom tells him about his affair with Verna; once from Terry, Leo’s mercenary, while delivering a message from Leo; then from Bernie, after Tom tried to sneak up on him; and lastly, from Lazarre’s henchmen, due to Tom’s growing gambling debt. The police partake in unnecessary violence, including the beating of Frankie, Johnny Caspar’s henchman, after breaking into Caspar’s club; this was comically justified as part of the “interrogat[ion]” process. In fact, the manner in which the police charge into establishments is over-the-top, as they topple over furniture and cause a rumpus in classic “Keystone Cops” fashion. In a later scene, while working for Caspar, the police destroy “Sons of Erin,” one of Leo’s clubs, alongside a number of gangsters, who are presumably Caspar’s underlings. In this scene, we watch as they toss a Molotov cocktail into the building, and proceed to fire machine guns out of turrets. At one point, a man escapes the burning building and waves his white kerchief in surrender—a gangster promptly shoots him dead, and the policemen let out a hearty laugh. Perhaps most telling of all is

a strangely amusing transitional scene: we observe a child, no older than five or six, staring blankly at a man who was murdered only hours earlier. Undaunted by the man's corpse, the young boy grabs the dead man's hairpiece, and scampers off, his dog trailing giddily after him.

The Political World in Miller's Crossing

The political powers at work in *Miller's Crossing* were not installed by means of a legitimate social or political process. This is made clear when Leo gathers the mayor and the police chief in his office to discuss the overthrow of Caspar's clubs and casinos. In this scene, Tom remarks that he voted for the mayor six times during the last election cycle; the mayor replies, "and that's not the record, either." Although the mayor and the chief of police hold office, they are governing forces in name and post only. In the scene alluded to above, when Tom implies to Leo that O'Doole (the chief of Police) and the Mayor might be displeased with the turbulence of an impending gangster war, the Mayor promptly rejoins, "Jesus, Tom, we do as we're told!" It is worth noting that both men are drinking liquor in this scene, in spite of the National Prohibition Act. Another telling moment comes during the first raid of Caspar's joints, as Tom encounters O'Doole, who is, as Tom predicted, displeased by the state of affairs. When O'Doole begins to express doubt as to how long Leo will be able to sustain this war, Tom puts him in his place by using O'Doole's police badge as friction to light a match for his cigarette, and then reminds him that he and Leo can find another flunky to fill in as Chief if need be. To this, O'Doole reflexively replies, "Jesus, Tom, I was just speculatin' about a hypothesis is all – I *know* I don't know nothin'!" In a later scene, after the mayor and the police have switched sides, we witness cops and gangsters (presumably Johnny Caspar's) fighting side-by-side during a shoot-up of one of Leo's clubs. In the succeeding scene, Caspar bosses the mayor around, as he demands that his two cousins (neither of whom speak English) be placed in meaningful

government positions. When the mayor resists, and references his past experience of putting Leo's people "on the pad," Caspar becomes enraged and kicks the mayor out of *his own office*. Very clearly, the city government and police are mere instruments of whichever mob boss is in power.

This provokes the question of what it means for a gangster to be "in power". Is political power a matter of influence, or appeal to the citizens? Does it boil down to money, or perhaps force? Tom provides us with an insight into this question when he tells Leo, "you run this town because people *think* you run it. When they stop thinking it, you stop running it." Power, then, is a matter of how the gangster is *perceived*. Perceived power is an effect of a confluence of conditions that would certainly include resources of capital and force, but it would also extend to a willingness to exercise these resources in a manner that would demonstrate an influential, or even coercive potential. In a word, a gangster's power is partially a function of his decisiveness and "*bravado*". To better understand this, recall that after would-be assassins stormed Leo's home, Tom told Leo that the attack made Leo "look weak," despite the fact that Leo expertly disposed of all the assassins with a Thomson machine gun. In other words, in terms of public perception, it did not matter that Leo killed his assailants. Rather the mere fact that there *were* assailants coming from Johnny Caspar's end made Leo look comparatively less powerful, because it made Caspar appear assuming and forceful. In this respect, political clout within the world of *Miller's Crossing* is markedly fluid.

The instrumentality of the police force and city government coupled with a political force whose authority is predicated entirely upon perceived power yields an unstable political system that lacks an underlying *ethos*. As many philosophers throughout history have noted, people tend to find their ethical life within their role in society; that is, they derive their morality largely from

the duties and responsibilities that emerge out of a stable, moral context and their place therein. People can also realize a shared morality prior to embracing a particular role, as societal customs and laws are frequently grounded in a coherent value system. Within these societal contexts, one can detect an underlying moral sensibility in the everyday goings-on. In *Miller's Crossing*, law merely has coercive force—it does not embody some moral structure, or provide ethical guidance in the form of principles, nor does it articulate values. In this way, there are laws in this world, but there is no “rule of law”. On the contrary, law and order are carried out at the whims of whichever political boss rules the day. In this barren context, ethical arguments such as the one articulated by Johnny Caspar in the opening scene are mere justificatory bases for acting as one desires. This point is perhaps best exemplified by the sheer *absurdity* of that scene: a gangster who fixes boxing matches argues with righteous indignation about “the breakdown of ethics” when the betting odds fall out less handsomely on his end. In this world, genuine morality is the exception.

2

Our Interest in the World of *Miller's Crossing*

Having outlined the general mood and character of the world explored in *Miller's Crossing*, we now must consider how and why that world is presented to viewers. The film acquaints us with characters who scheme, fight, and deceive in order to promote themselves in a unnamed corrupt city. But how should we, as an audience, interpret the drama that unfolds here?

One could argue that the world of *Miller's Crossing* ought to be taken just as it is presented—as an American city during the era of prohibition. On this view, the film simply depicts a particular period in American history; it does not endeavor to explore anything more abstract or ambitious. The trouble with this approach is that the *city itself* is not the focus of the film; in fact, the vast majority of the inhabitants whom we encounter throughout the action are criminals. If the film intended to explore the history of the prohibition-era American city it would not focus entirely on the underground criminal network. Moreover, there are moments during the film that effectively distance us from the belief that this could be an authentic representation of history. Consider, for instance, the manner in which the police break into the various establishments; they literally *burst* through the doors and pile in, completely destroying everything in their path, in “Keystone Kops” fashion. Another image that stands out as surreal is the involuntary dance-like reaction of Leo’s would-be assassin as he is filled with lead, aptly dubbed by the Coens, “the Thomson jitterbug”³. To be sure, there is more afoot among the criminals of *Miller's Crossing* than a representation of a particular time and place.

One might suggest that the world of *Miller's Crossing* ought to be considered in light of the gangster film genre. On this view, *Miller's Crossing* is first and foremost a “gangster film” of

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sorts, and the world depicted in the movie is simply the arena in which we witness mobster activity. There are two issues with this view. The first (and perhaps more obvious) is that the film lacks one of the most important qualities of gangster films: the problems that governing authorities pose for the mobsters, which boils down to enforcement of the law. This is such an important element of the gangster genre that it almost seems fundamental; after all, where there is no rule of law, there is no gangster. Consider, for example, some of the most celebrated films of the gangster genre, such as *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and, more recently, *The Departed*; the issue of skirting the law or “the feds” saturates the action all the way through. The second problem with this argument is that there seems to be more “at stake” in the action than simply following the competition between two mob bosses. In other words, while the film certainly features gangsters as its primary actors, its focus is not on gangster activity *per se* and for its own sake. Rather, the action explores broader themes such as loyalty, morality, and human nature *through* the gangster underworld of the corrupt city.

The broader themes mentioned above point to another possible approach to the world of *Miller's Crossing*, one that is at once more robust and holistic. The world of *Miller's Crossing* is an allegory. But how can one say such a thing with any confidence? And in the first place, what does it mean for a work to be allegorical? While there is no definitive, all-inclusive definition of allegory, we can find a rough characterization of what it means for a work to be allegorical⁴. The literary community, generally speaking, points to two “divided tendencies” found in allegorical works: the tendency to put forward a story whose elements evince a “fictional autonomy”, and the tendency for these same elements to imply *another* set of actions, conditions, or values found

⁴ Jon Whitman's entry on “Allegory” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*

in some other work, place, or in the realm of shared human experience⁵. *Miller's Crossing*, it seems, fulfills this definition. The film features a “fictional autonomy” insofar as it takes place in a 1920's American city during the Prohibition-era, but is not bound by the demands of historical accuracy. At the same time, the film's most important themes are not self-contained; rather, they are issues of universal human concern. To clarify, consider films whose action is primarily concerned with more narrow themes, from espionage and patriotism to alcohol addiction and fatherhood. In any one of these films, we could probably glean some lesson about human finitude, but none of them are principally concerned with the more basic conditions of the human experience the way *Miller's Crossing* is. In *Miller's Crossing*, we confront questions about the possibility of self-understanding; the impossibility of truly understanding others, and what this should mean for how we value our relationships; and the difficulty of determining how and why people act the way they do, and how this affects our conceptions of justice.

The idea of approaching the film as an allegory is that we should not consider the film as it is plainly presented. It is immediately obvious that the film is populated by gangsters and set in prohibition-era America, but this is not where the film starts and stops. Rather, we ought to consider these qualities of the film *as* qualities; the *film as a whole* probes to something deeper than depiction or genre. Consider that within the world of *Miller's Crossing* the characters are not constrained by the forces that normally shape or determine us: there is no coercive rule of law; no conventional morality that has a discernable effect on behavior; and lastly, as evidenced by the common language, there are no rules of propriety. Inasmuch as the film presents us with people living in this essentially unfettered way, it makes claims about people *as they really are*—about humanity at its pulpy core. On this view, the action of *Miller's Crossing* calls our attention

⁵ Ibid.

to certain conditions that are fundamental to the human experience. The moral problems that plague the lives of the gangsters of *Miller's Crossing* are not wholly foreign to us, despite the obvious differences between their world and ours; rather, they are disturbingly familiar. The world that these characters inhabit, however, is so markedly dystopian that we are impelled to confront these moral problems anew. This is to say we approach them in a different context that refocuses our attention, as it allows us to gaze more comfortably—that is, from a distance—upon the turbulence of our *shared condition* of uncertainty and confusion. Naturally, on these grounds, we render judgments about how the characters react to their world. In this way, we have an opportunity to peer into the human condition, and into ourselves.

For this reason, the way that the characters reside in this world counts for more than a mere coping mechanism. The ways they live betray their perspectives and values. When we watch them navigate the city, we assess them on a conscious or unconscious level. We may reflect on Tom's cunning behavior and think to ourselves, "well, he is clever, but what does he value?" At the same time, we need not reflect at all in order to find much of Caspar's behavior disturbing; we are simply repulsed. While the characters are there for us to evaluate in this general way, there are also certain moments when the camera is positioned such that the characters seem to be "on display" for our judgmental eyes. For example, consider Bernie Bernbaum's pleading for his life; also consider Caspar's sweaty, outraged face when Tom probes him about the Dane in the mayor's office; finally, recall Tom's steely gaze into the camera in the closing shot of the film. In each instant, the character is in the throes of a personal struggle, and we face them head-on.

3

A Look Into the Characters of *Miller's Crossing****The Value of Character Analysis***

Here we have touched upon an important philosophical idea: the notion that we can learn significant truths about humanity through witnessing human behavior in a context free of external restraint such as law or a shared, enforced morality. This claim demands some elaboration and consideration before we begin exploring, and judging, the characters.

Glaucon's argument in Book II of Plato's *Republic* centers on a story that is relevant to our inquiry. In this story, Gygius, a humble shepherd, happens upon a golden ring, which he decided to wear. Later on, when the shepherds gathered to meet with the king to discuss the status of his flock, Gygius fiddled with the ring and twisted its bezel towards his body. Doing so caused him to become completely invisible; when he turned the bezel in the opposite direction, he became visible again. After making this discovery, Gygius arranged to become one of the delegates to the king. When he made his way into the palace, "he seduced the king's wife and with her help assaulted and killed the king, and so took possession of the throne (II.360b)⁶." According to Glaucon, people will act immorally to promote themselves, if they have the opportunity to do so without penalty. For him, civil society structured around common morality and the rule of law is the result of a broad, social cost-benefit analysis:

[A]lthough it's a fact of nature that doing wrong is good and having wrong done to one is bad, nevertheless the disadvantages of having it done to one outweighs the benefits of doing it. Consequently, once people have experienced both ... they see that the disadvantages are unavoidable and the benefits are unattainable; so they decide to enter

⁶ Plato's *Republic*, as translated by Robin Waterfield in the Oxford World's Classic edition

into a contract with one another, guaranteeing that no wrong will be committed or received ... So that's the origin and nature of morality on this view: it is a compromise. Thus, Glaucon uses the story of Gygeis to bolster his argument that human beings are, at their core, primarily concerned with advancing themselves. Moreover, people behave in accord with morality only because the structure of society *compels* them to do so, insofar as it incentivizes moral acts and punishes immoral ones: “[M]orality is never freely chosen. People do wrong whenever they think they can, so they act morally only if they’re forced to, because they regard morality as something which isn’t good for one *personally* (II.360c; emphasis added).”⁷

If we receive Glaucon’s argument as a compelling one, then we would be warranted in supposing that a context that allows people to act free of external restraints gives us an insight into human nature. In this way, his argument provides something of a theoretical justification for the philosophical value of evaluating the characters of *Miller’s Crossing*. Within the film, the characters are determined to act so as to attain what they perceive as their advantage; and because of the way the world is structured, they are able to do so with no coercive moral or political forces acting against them. In the sense that they are freely acting on their core desires, we have much to learn from observing their actions.

The idea that we learn from reflecting on the character and actions of others is familiar to philosophy. Indeed, this has been the starting premise for virtue ethics theorists throughout history, from Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum. Consider also Plutarch’s archetypical *Parallel Lives*, which presents lengthy biographies of famous men—good and bad, courageous and cowardly—to explore character formation and to identify certain common moral commitments that correlate with virtue and honor. Plutarch claims that he wrote *Parallel Lives* for the

⁷ Ibid.

betterment of humanity, so that people could reflect on the lives of these men and thereafter mold themselves into persons of virtue⁸. As we follow Tom through the criminal underworld of the city, we encounter characters with competing interests, who act on different principles, in their efforts to realize their conflicting goals. They will be the subjects of our inquiry.

Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self*, puts forward a conception of human “selfhood” that is particularly enlightening for our exploration of the characters. For Taylor, we all reside in a “moral space,” wherein “questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and what is secondary⁹.” It is how we orient ourselves within moral space that defines who we are. Orienting ourselves involves making “commitments and identifications,” which “provide the frame or horizon within which [we] can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done¹⁰.” From this basis, one is able to “tak[e] a stand,” and thereby count as a moral agent¹¹. At this point, armed with a sense of what we value most deeply, we can rise to our ideals, or fall short; we can act on our most important principles, or sidestep them. Having outlined Taylor’s conception of identity, we now turn our gaze upon the characters of the film. It is important to keep in mind that Taylor’s conception of selfhood is about occupying *space*—he takes very seriously the conditions around an individual that may determine their values. For this reason it is necessary to keep in mind the broader context in which the characters reside: one that is hardly conducive to fostering moral sensibilities. What do the characters value? What, if any, are their

⁸ George Karamanolis’s entry on Plutarch, as found in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

⁹ Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* pp. 27-30

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

commitments? In a world devoid of the rule of law and conventional morality, what do they stand for? With Plutarch in mind, we might also ask: where do they end up? And why?

Bernie Bernbaum

Considering his significance to the plot, it is only appropriate that we first explore the character of Bernie Bernbaum. The question of whether Bernie should live or die is the point of contention between Leo and Johnny Caspar that sparks the power struggle that makes up the film's principal action. We hear a number of characters discussing Bernie prior to our directly encountering him: Johnny Caspar's accusations in the opening scene; Tom and Leo, when Leo visits Tom's apartment at four in the morning; Mink Larouie, pleading at the Shenandoah Club for Tom to support Bernie; and Verna, during her fight with Tom in the club's powder room. This raises a flag for us—Bernie is nothing if not *connected*. As we will find, his notoriety befits him. When we first meet Bernie he reveals his personal motto to Tom: “A guy can't have too many friends.”

As noted above, our first exposure to Bernie comes in the form of Caspar's charge that Bernie has been selling information on how Caspar bets. Later, Bernie effectively confirms this, with a grin: “Big payday Saturday, Tom. You could be in on it.” The second time Tom urges Leo not to protect Bernie, he refers to Bernie as a “grifter”. Later, Bernie refers to *himself* as a grifter at Miller's Crossing in the throes of begging for mercy: “I'm just a grifter! Huh, Tom? A nobody!” Hence, during the first two occasions in which Bernie Bernbaum is discussed in the film, some truth about his nature as a swindler is revealed. With a focus on making a quick buck, swindlers defraud others of their money. Making a living this way requires callousness and a boundlessly selfish disposition, both of which Bernie exhibits throughout the film.

Next, we meet Mink Larouie, a bookie who happens to be Eddie Dane's lover, who vouches for Bernie when he tracks down Tom at Leo's club. Mink's exchange with Tom is intriguing. In the first place, the sheer speed with which Mink speaks is astonishing, and his sentences are strung together in a mesmerizing knot:

I got not a thing to say. Listen, Bernie wants to see you. It's important. . . . He asked me to ask you to ask Leo to take care of him. You know, put in a good word with Leo. Leo listens to you. Not that Leo wouldn't help the *shmatte* anyway! A guy like Bernie? A square gee like the *shmatte*! A straight shooter like him?

The effect of this veritable web of fast-talking is that we get the impression that Mink is a swindler himself. This tells us something about the company Bernie keeps, as Mink says that he and Bernie are "amigos". Tom extrapolates from the exchange that there is a sexual relationship between the two men, as he tells Mink that he is "a fickle boy" (with both Bernie and Eddie Dane). Soon after Mink scrambles to Bernie's defense, we find Verna doing the same, when she tells Tom, "Yeah, sneer at him like everyone else. Just because he's different. People think he's a degenerate. People think he's scum. Well he's not." Here, Verna characterizes Bernie as misunderstood, emphasizing his "difference," which suggests to us that she could very well be referring to his homosexuality. This is seemingly confirmed when, during Bernie's first meeting with Tom, Bernie reveals the following: "She's even tried to teach me a thing or two about bed artistry. Can you believe that? My own sister! Some crackpot idea about saving me from my friends." Defending Bernie as a "decent guy," Verna does not address his alleged dishonest dealings with Caspar.

Mink and Verna's defenses of Bernie are curious indeed when we consider how Bernie treats them. Recall that when Tom asks Bernie how he knows about Caspar's next fixed fight

after his falling-out with Caspar, Bernie's face shows a humorless smile. Tom's next remark exposes Bernie's manipulation of Mink: "You must really have Mink jumping through hoops." Bernie's chilling reply is a reiteration of his beloved motto: "Like I say, you can't have too many." What is implied in this exchange is that Bernie is using his affair with Mink as leverage to obtain from him inside information about Caspar's betting. This puts Mink in an uncomfortable situation, as he is essentially subject to Bernie's whims, lest he wants Eddie Dane to know that he is sleeping with the enemy "sheeny." To be sure, Bernie's forceful insistence may be the reason why Mink confronts Tom in the first place.

Bernie's relationship with his sister, Verna, also seems abnormal. As noted earlier, Bernie alleges that Verna tried, physically, to impress heterosexuality upon him. Bernie is understandably resentful, as he says to Tom, "She's a sick twist, all right." When Tom replies, "she speaks highly of you", Bernie quips, with a vacant face, "yeah, well you stick by your family." There are two ways of interpreting this exchange, both of which cast Bernie in a deservingly negative light. This could be an instance of hypocrisy, which brings to light the emptiness of his words, as well as his disregard for family. On the other hand, it could be a cynical statement that rejects the import society places upon familial relations.

By this time, we have already conceived of Bernie as a conniving heel. When we first encounter Bernie onscreen, our mental image is affirmed. Seated after breaking into Tom's apartment, Bernie is dressed ostentatiously, adorned with a shawl, a pocket square, a fancy kerchief, and cufflinks. He is also armed with a knife, which he casually wipes down before departing Tom's apartment. What is perhaps most disturbing and most telling about Bernie is the way he speaks about friendship, or, better put, "friends". Bernie says, "[I'm a] [g]ood guy, lot of friends--that's the way it works ... I can help you with your debts if that would make us friends."

Bernie is not speaking loosely here: as far as friends go, their instrumental value to him seems to be Bernie's principal, if not sole, interest. With this in mind, consider the dialog between Verna and Tom during the scene when Verna stops him in the rain. Under the impression that Tom has already killed Bernie, Verna says, "Nobody cares, do they? His friends didn't really like him." Tom replies, "He didn't like his friends." Hence, for Bernie, friendships hold no intrinsic value and cannot be lasting, as they are always contingent upon his opportunity for profit.

Bernie's pleading for his life in the woods of Miller's Crossing is certainly enlightening as well. As Frankie and Tic-Tac drag him into and out of the car, Bernie begs the two henchmen to show him mercy. His pleading essentially consists of calling out their names and intermittently screaming "no" in a desperate, scratchy voice. But when he discovers that Tom is charged with the deed of killing him, Bernie resorts to a more measured, even reasonable sort of begging. He begins with an appeal to Tom's nature: "Tommy, you can't do this. You don't bump guys. You're not like those animals back there." When the camera points back to Tom, we find that he is solemnly marching forward, with his gun drawn. Bernie continues his pleading:

"It's not right, Tom. They can't make us do this. It's a wrong situation. They can't make us different people than we are. We're not muscle, Tom. I never killed anybody. I used a little information for a chisel, that's all. I couldn't help it, Tom, it's in my nature.

Somebody hands me an angle, I play it. I don't deserve to die for that! D'you think I do?

I'm just a grifter, huh, Tom? A nobody ...

Here, Bernie makes an interesting shift. Moments earlier, he emphasized the point that it is not in Tom's nature to kill somebody, but here Bernie begins to link himself to Tom. He starts speaking in terms of "we," thereby putting himself on Tom's level, which might make Tom more likely to

take his pleading seriously. With an eye towards establishing that this is, in fact, a “wrong situation,” Bernie argues that he is *compelled* by his nature to act as he does. He includes a point here to which Tom might be able to relate: “Somebody hands me an angle, I play it.” By speaking in these terms (i.e., “angles”), he is using Tom’s language, which hints at the possibility of a shared worldview. Hence, Bernie sees the world in terms of angles and advantages, and when he sees an opportunity to benefit himself, it is an effect of his nature that he *act* on that opportunity. When we consider that, implicit within Tom’s incessant talking about angles is the assumption that people act in accord with their angles, Bernie’s argument has some force. While Bernie says this in a desperate attempt at persuasion, there also seems to be more than a kernel of truth to this claim. Bernie *does* compulsively pursue short-range goals, towards no foreseeable end.

Continuing to make his Case to Tom, Bernie adds: “But I’ll tell you what, I never crossed a friend. Huh, Tom? Never killed anybody, never crossed a friend. Nor you, I’ll bet. We’re not like those animals! You can’t do this! You’re not like those animals. This is not us! This is some hop dream!” After working to establish that he and Tom have common ground, Bernie adds that he has never crossed anybody and that he has never killed anyone. In this way, Bernie casts himself as someone who acknowledges that there are inviolable moral rules, which he recognizes, and which he has never broken. Moreover, it suggests that killing someone, “anybody”, is morally unjustifiable. His pleading is successful, as Tom lets Bernie go with the demand that he never return to the city. It is fascinating to witness how Bernie shifts his efforts at manipulation, first from Frankie and Tic-tac to Tom, then from an appeal to Tom’s nature to the search for common ground. His cries bear a sophistication that suggests an alarmingly high degree of calculation, considering the circumstances.

Even after all we have heard and seen from Bernie, we cannot help but feel disturbed when we find him back in Tom's apartment (breaking in, again) so soon after the affair in the woods. In this scene, we observe the depths of Bernie's selfishness. Armed with a pistol, Bernie explains his conspicuous presence: "I was gonna leave. Honest, I was. But then I started thinking. If I stuck around, that would not be good for you. And then I started thinking that might not be bad for me." Met with silence from Tom, Bernie goes on, "I guess you didn't see the play you gave me. I mean, what am I gonna do? If I leave, I got nothing—no money, no friends, nothing. If I stay, I got you. Anyone finds out I'm alive, you're dead. So... I got you, Tommy." Bernie's choice of words is especially telling. The idea that Tom's sparing his life constitutes a "play," or an "angle" to Bernie betrays just how deeply self-serving he is, how completely enveloped he is in his world of scheming. Entirely lacking in moral fiber, Bernie's selfishness saturates his perspective in *every* context. This is evident to the extent that he remarks, "I mean, what am I gonna do," as if the idea of leaving town, and thereby upholding the wishes of the man who mercifully spared his life is an absurd proposition, simply because it is not in his immediate interest.

This exchange with Tom is all the more unsettling when we recall that after Tom spared his life, Bernie, still on his knees, says, "God bless you ... thank you... *you've done your share*," with the implication that he still has his share left to do (that is, to leave town for good). Hence, not only has Bernie rejected acting on the most basic level of moral reciprocity in favor of his self-interest, but also he has gone back on his word, and "crossed a friend." As the dialog progresses, we discover what was underlying his actions: pride. He says, "What's the matter? You got nothin' to crack wise about? Bernie ain't so funny anymore ... I guess I made kinda a fool of myself out there ... it's a painful memory. And I can't help remembering that you put the

finger on me, and you took me out there to whack me. I know, you didn't ... I know you didn't shoot me." Bernie, again, gives us pause at end of this scene, when he thwarts Tom's attempt on his life. After tripping Tom at the base of the stairway, Bernie says the following: "You make me laugh, Tommy ... what were you gonna do if you caught me? I'd just squirt a few and then you'd let me go again." This directly conflicts with Bernie's claims moments earlier: "it's a painful memory ... I guess I turned yella [yellow]". Once more, we are left to interpret his words. Did Bernie just say those things about pride and pain to make his inhumanly cold calculation more relatable? Or was his closing remark just a jab at Tom? Either way, Bernie proves himself to be a hollow man.

After some investigating, Tom discovers that Bernie has laid a bet on Caspar's fixed fight through Drop Johnson. He manages to speak with Bernie over the phone, and confirms that Bernie had killed Mink, and left his body in Miller's Crossing; as Bernie recounts: "I came back and he wasn't happy to see me. Can you beat that, Tom? All he could talk about was how he had to skip, and how much trouble he'd be in if anyone found me at his place ... and you know what a nervous boy he was. I figured, hell, you're a friend. Maybe you could use some insurance." The instant that he calculates that it may be advantageous for him to do so, Bernie kills his supposed "friend" and lover. By killing Mink, Bernie has heinously violated *both* of the supposedly inviolable moral rules that he put forward in the woods.

Thereafter, Tom, cunning as ever, arranges for Bernie to meet him at his apartment at four in the morning, where Bernie will ultimately kill Caspar. Immediately after Bernie kills Caspar, he and Tom have an intriguing exchange wherein Tom gains the upper hand, as he persuades Bernie to give him the smoking gun. Over the course of their talk, we find out that Mink killed Rug Daniels. Bernie recounts the story with a markedly casual air: "Yeah, yeah, you

know Mink—hysterical. Skin full of hop, head full of boogeymen. Comes home cryin’ one day, says he had to pop a guy, one of The Dane’s spies.” When Tom informs Bernie that Rug was actually spying on *Verna*, Bernie begins to *chuckle*, “Yeah. Funny, ain’t it? But you know, Mink was terrified the Dane would find out me and him were jungled up together.” Tom, with Bernie’s *modus operandi* in mind, suggests, “And I’ll bet you kept him plenty worried about that, to keep him under your thumb.” Bernie replies, in a cold tone, “yeah, so what.” Bernie’s blasé demeanor and chuckling when talking about murder and manipulation of his “friend” further highlight his callousness and brutality. We almost feel a sense of relief when Tom pulls the trigger, this time for the kill.

A self-described grifter, Bernie Bernbaum does not strive towards righteousness, nor does he adhere to a moral code. What is more, he abuses other people’s conceptions of virtue and friendship, as he dupes his “friends” into acting for his advantage by means of deception, manipulation, and coercion. While pleading to Tom for mercy in the woods, he declares in his own defense, “I never killed anybody, never crossed a friend.” Soon afterwards, he crosses Tom by returning to town, and kills Mink. He holds nothing to be sacred. Acting in his own interest is Bernie’s guiding, inviolable principle, so much so that he tells Tom that “playing angles” is his “nature.” After killing Caspar, Bernie finally seems content. In fact, he cannot contain himself from squealing with delight as Tom pulls cash out of Caspar’s wallet. To Bernie, there is nothing of value in moral virtue; there is nothing of value in human relationships. Seeing everything through the prism of advantage and leverage, he seeks joy in a dark, empty world—it is the only one he knows.

Johnny Caspar

In the film's opening scene, we observe Johnny Caspar, a pugnacious Italian mob-boss, as he builds a case against Bernie Bernbaum. With thoughts of revenge brewing inside his bald, polished head, Caspar argues that Bernie's (the *shmatte*'s) decision to sell information about his position in fixed fights constitutes a violation of trust. The argument he makes is a moral one: "Hell, Leo, I ain't embarrassed to use the word—I'm talkin' about ethics." In making his argument, he conveniently ignores the fact that fixed fights are inherently immoral from the point of view of those who are not "in the know" at the time they place their bets, inasmuch as legitimate sports betting is predicated upon a shared uncertainty among the bettors as to the outcome. Even still, Caspar takes for granted that his fixed fight is an entirely acceptable enterprise, which has been vitiated by his bookie's unconscionable actions: "It's a wrong situation. It's getting' so a businessman can't expect no return from a fixed fight. Now, if you can't trust a fix what *can* you trust? For a good return, you gotta go bettin' on chance, and then you're back with anarchy. *Right back inna' jungle*. On account of the breakdown of ethics." When Leo explains that Bernie has a contract of protection with him, and that he plans to enforce said protection, Caspar is incensed. Neglecting the principle of "contract" that he argued for just minutes earlier, Caspar asserts that he too pays Leo—"a lot more than the *shmatte*." Caspar ignores the fact that Bernbaum pays for protection from harm, while he pays for protection from the governing authorities.

We can glean an important insight from Caspar's exchange with Leo. Caspar's being so selective with respect to when he will either invoke or ignore moral principles suggests that his ethical arguments are mere justificatory platforms for satisfying his underlying desires and

pursuing his interests¹². In the end, Caspar does not care that Leo's argument about his contract with Bernie is perfectly reasonable; when Leo makes this point, Caspar becomes indignant. At bottom, Caspar cares about getting things *his way*. When Leo pushes back on him, Caspar reaches his boiling point: "You think I'm some guinea fresh off the boat, and you can kick me, but I'm too big for that now. I'm sick of takin' the strap from you, Leo. I'm sick of marching down to this goddamn office to kiss your Irish ass and *I'm sick of the high hat!*" By the time Caspar concludes this sentence his face is bright red, his head is coated with a layer of sweat, and his eyes are bulging out of his head—the paragon of rage. It takes Eddie Dane's placing his hand on Caspar's shoulder to bring him down to earth again. This is not the last we see of Caspar's rage. As the newly minted mob boss, Caspar, in the throes of frustration and uncertainty, knocks over a tray holding whiskey and glassware in the mayor's office in a fit of rage. The last time we witness an outburst of fury from Caspar is the most frightening: the brutal killing of his longtime friend and associate, Eddie Dane. First, Caspar swings a shovel blade directly into the Dane's face, causing him to bleed profusely; then, Caspar takes the shovel and beats him over the top of his head, sending him to the ground with a heavy thud. When the Dane starts to rise up, raising his head, Caspar puts a pistol to his head and swiftly pulls the trigger, screaming, "always put one inna' brain!" If we look into his eyes, Caspar appears downright possessed in this scene, and his screeching and the spatter of the Dane's blood on his face amplify the effect. Tom's reaction betrays his fear of the man. Drop's sublime screaming betrays his feelings of sheer terror and panic; it harkens back to man's primal state, the state of nature—*right back inna' jungle*.

¹² Bradley Herling, in his essay "Ethics, Heart, and Violence in Miller's Crossing" highlights this point.

Caspar is nothing if not a ruffian. He is quick to resort to force, deploying his minions to do his bloody bidding. Recall that soon after his meeting with Leo, he sends his henchmen out to bring Tom in for a meeting, in which he threatens Tom with violence unless he agrees to an alliance: “You should know that if you don’t do this thing, you won’t be in any shape to walk out of here.” After the police raid his club at Leo’s request, Caspar moves with haste, sending four assassins to Leo’s home. At Miller’s Crossing, Caspar’s flunky, Tic-Tac, perfunctorily instructs Tom how to execute Bernie, as if murder were standard operating procedure: “You know how to do this, right? You gotta remember to put one in his brain. Your first shot puts him down, then you put one in his brain. Then he’s dead, then we go home.” Perhaps Tic-Tac’s words reflect an attitude fostered by scores of murders committed in service to Caspar. For most, harming others is the last resort, if it is on the table at all. For Caspar, violence is his primary means of solving problems.

Perhaps a consequence of his temper, Caspar’s relationships with others are discomfiting, to say the least. The way he interacts with his son, Johnny Jr., is downright bizarre. In one scene, Caspar takes a penny out of his pocket and puts it in one of his hands. He then displays his two clenched fists, saying, “go ahead, which hand is the penny in?” When his son confidently points to Caspar’s right fist, Caspar advises him to choose again. When the boy sticks with his first choice, Caspar looks genuinely frustrated: “Okay, here ya go. Take the penny. Shiny new penny.” Immediately afterward, he tells his rotund wife to take the kid and wait in the car. In another scene, Johnny Jr. bursts into Caspar’s office during his father’s meeting with Tom, screaming: “poppa! Poppa! I got a prize from the sister! Poppa! Poppa! I got a prize from the sister!” Still facing Tom, Caspar holds his hand up to his son, to quiet him down. When the boy’s cheering persists, Caspar smacks him firmly on the side of his head, yelling, “Shut up! You take a

page out of this guy's book! A little less you talk and a little more you think!" Caspar then turns to Tom to say, "...kids. Ya gotta be firm." After continuing his conversation with Tom, Caspar holds his son close to his chest and says, "What's a matter? *Did somebody hit you?* What's a matter? *Aren't we friends anymore?*" Caspar's backwards attempt to soothe the child are more disturbing than they are reassuring.

The way Caspar speaks of friendship is also disconcerting. To Caspar, "friends is a mental state." Thus, friendship demands no emotional investment, no spiritual connection, and no shared conception of what is good—it is merely a state of mind. To be sure, any and all states of mind are transient and contingent upon circumstance. These scenes that shed light on how Caspar treats and thinks of those close to him intimate to us that Caspar is unstable, or possibly deranged.

Even beyond Caspar's posturing about ethics in the opening scene, the man appears to be concerned with moral virtue. Put better, he cares about upholding certain ethical principles within and overlaying his criminal enterprise. Hence, he cares about moral virtue *on his terms*, which is, implicitly, a contradiction in terms, as morality implicates all persons. For him, ethics are good because they make his campaign more sustainable (or perhaps more palatable to him), not necessarily because they are good in and of themselves. For instance, consider the two occasions during which Caspar affirms the value of honesty: "... but you're [Tom] honest, and that's something we can't get enough of *in this business* ... A question of ethics. Everything above board—*that's how I like it.*" His own fear of betrayal, of being double-crossed, is at root here. When he reflects on the possibility that Eddie Dane might be in cahoots with Mink against him, he remarks that his stomach starts "seizin' up"—this is literally a *gut*, instinctual reaction. A victim of Tom's cunning, Caspar's suspicions lead him to kill Eddie Dane, who was loyal to him

the whole time. He dies within an hour of allying himself with Tom, who was deceiving him all along. Foolishness abound, Caspar's claims about ethics are comical when we consider his actions.

A father who abuses his son, a politician who kicks the mayor out of his own office, and a gang boss who kills his loyal lieutenant, Johnny Caspar is a brute who is helplessly lost at sea. Caspar demands to be taken seriously; he is furious whenever he believes that he is being shown "the high hat". For all the empty theorizing about morality and his decrying fraud, all of his solutions hinge on force. He wants to solve his problem with Bernie by killing him; he resorts to the threat of violence against Tom in order to gain his assistance, or "friendship"; he sends his goons to kill Leo; he viciously murders Eddie Dane; and he *plans* to finish off Mink in Tom's apartment. Caspar is mindless muscle, wrought with anger and blind ambition.

Eddie Dane

Eddie Dane, known as "The Dane" throughout, is Caspar's right-hand man. In the opening scene, the Dane is suitably standing behind Caspar to his right, his boss's hat in hand. In this same scene, he reaches out his hand to grasp Caspar's right shoulder, taking his boss out of the throes of a fit of rage. Always clad in a trench coat, hat, and leather gloves, the Dane is tall and intimidating, his face worn and his eyes jet-black. The Dane is fiercely loyal to his boss and Mink, his lover. He assertively defends Mink against Tom's charges of conspiracy, and he attempts to avenge his lover's death when he strangles Tom in Caspar's chambers. The Dane's gaze exudes a seemingly ever-present suspicion of those around him. He is particularly suspicious of Tom, whom he unreservedly denounces in Caspar's presence, calling him "all wrong" and a "clown".

The Dane stands out as being attuned to the way the world works. In the context of the city, he is *right* to be suspicious; he has his finger on the pulse of the action. While Tom is plotting and working the angles, to Eddie Dane, these “angles” are plain as day. In fact, he comically mocks Tom’s scheming ways: “You’re so goddamn smart. Except you ain’t. I get you, smart guy. I know what you are. Straight as a corkscrew. Mr. Inside-outsky ... you think you’re so goddamn smart, you joined up with Johnny Caspar, you bumped Bernie Bernbaum. Up is down. Black is white.” As it turns out, The Dane was right about Tom: “I think you were straight with your frail (i.e., Verna) and queer with Johnny Caspar. And I think you’d sooner join a ladies’ league than gun a guy down.” In keeping with his suspicions, The Dane keeps his ear to the ground, as he follows Verna to her rendezvous with Tom, and trails Tom to his meeting with Drop. When we reflect on the body of evidence that he compiles, his theory about Tom’s conspiring with Bernie is not merely plausible or reasonable, but also compelling. As it turns out, The Dane is *smart*.

The Dane is more than willing to do violence to others. He beats his comrades, Frankie and Tic-Tac, when he discovers that they did not take the initiative and observe Tom’s execution of Bernie. He also clobbers Drop, a boxer, during his interrogation: “Give me a big guy every time. They crack easy.” More than this, he seems to take pleasure in doing violence. Recall the scene when Leo’s flunkies rush to Verna’s aid: the Dane shows no mercy to Leo’s henchman, even after the man divulges useful information to him. As he strangles Tom, he says, “Come here, bum. I’m gonna send you to a deep, dark place, and I’m *gonna have fun doing it* ... maybe when you’re dead I’ll cut your head off, put it on my mantle.” One of the most chilling images of the film is the shot of The Dane intimately placing his long-barreled revolver to his cheek, while promising to “track down” Verna. Rejoicing in violence, The Dane oozes sadism.

With this in mind, it is all the more striking that The Dane is so devoted to Caspar. After all, Caspar did not achieve his place at the top as a result of his intelligence and instinct, he did so because of his grit and strength, both of which The Dane clearly has in spades. If The Dane so wished, he could easily depose Caspar and assume control. But after trying to sell Caspar on double-crossing Tom and getting denied, he *still* faithfully dedicates his time and energy to protecting Caspar from Tom, only to get a bullet in his brain.

We should not, however, take The Dane's persistent pursuit of Tom as being *only* indicative of loyalty. The Dane could very well view Tom as a threat to his post as Caspar's lieutenant—a concern, it turns out, that he would be right to have. At a more basic level, The Dane envies Tom; this explains his constantly mocking Tom as a “smart guy.” Moreover, we have reason to believe that The Dane gets jealous, and acts on it. Consider the scene when Bernie shot Caspar: Bernie reveals that Mink was worried that Rug Daniels was “one of The Dane's spies.” It is likely that The Dane was driven to hound Tom by a confluence of these motives. For all the virtues we normally associate with loyalty, such as honesty and resolve, The Dane has a counteracting vice. Smart, sadistic and always suspicious, The Dane intently trails Tom until his bitter end—punching, strangling, and shooting all the way.

Verna

Verna, the film's only female character, is entangled in a love triangle with Leo and Tom, with Tom as the paramour. At the start of the film, it is clear that Verna has a genuine romantic interest in Tom, while her relationship with Leo is aimed at providing security for her brother: “He's [Bernie] my brother and I don't want him to get hurt. If Leo wants to help him out, I'll

step out with him, show him a good time in return. There's no harm in that ... I'll do what I have to for Bernie." Despite Tom's urging that she "quit spinning Leo in circles and pointing him where to go," Verna persists in her relationship with Leo. She apparently does a good job of wooing Leo, as he falls head over heels for her. Of course, at the end of the film, *she* ironically asks *Leo's* hand in marriage.

Verna proves to be someone who can fend for herself in a prohibition-era world of criminals where, as a woman, the odds are stacked against her. She knows how to get what she wants out of Leo and she does not let Tom intimidate her, much less stop her. We first discover her moxie when it is revealed that she won Tom's hat in a late night game of cards. Furthermore, in the memorable scene set in the Shenandoah club's powder room, she coolly greets a drunken Tom with a clever line: "go home and dry out." In that same scene, she extricates herself from Tom's tight grip, and punches him square in the face, sending him reeling backwards. Along these same lines, Verna totes a pistol in her change bag, which she skillfully whips out when The Dane breaks into her home, commanding him, "you *get* out of here!" But perhaps the truest display of Verna's independence is found in the final scene, when she departs her brother's funeral by herself—taking Leo's chauffeured car—and leaving Tom and Leo to walk back alone.

Verna is notable for her generally optimistic outlook, particularly when compared to Tom. Soon after things had gone sour between Tom and Leo, Verna suggests to Tom, "You and Leo might still be able to patch things up ... you never know. He's got a big heart." When Tom asserts that he and Leo are through on *his* terms, Verna suggests, in a hopeful tone, that they skip town together: "Then why don't we just pick up and leave town. There's nothing keeping you here. I know there's nothing keeping me ... we could take him [Bernie] with us." Tom's sardonic reply captures the difference in outlook between the two of them: "You, me and Bernie. Where

would we go, Verna? Niagra Falls?” Later on, Verna makes a push for Tom to express his feelings for her, seeking his commitment a second time. Tom seduces her, effectively deflecting the issue. In a later scene, when Tom tells Verna about his dream in which his hat blows off in the woods, Verna cuts him off, suggesting, “And you chased it, right? You ran and ran and finally, you caught up to it and picked it up, but it wasn’t a hat anymore. It had changed into something else—something wonderful.” Again, Tom’s reply shows the contrast in their perspectives: “No. It stayed a hat. And no, I didn’t chase it... nothing more foolish than a man chasing his hat.” Here, Verna says something that reflects her broader hopefulness about the possibility of making a complete life *out of what one has*, so long as one is willing to *pursue it*. Tom, on the other hand, remains cold and objective: this *is* his lot in life and striving is pointless, as he would only end up in the same place as when he started.

Verna’s hopefulness is shot down, however, when she comes to the conclusion that Tom betrayed her trust by killing her brother. At this time, she confronts Tom on the street and puts a gun to his chest. She wants to understand what motivated Tom to betray her: “I want to know *why*.” When Tom gives her his answer—that he gave up Bernie to protect Leo—his eyes dart back and forth in an unusual manner. Frustrated, Verna claims, “I don’t understand. I don’t care. I don’t care what reasons you had, or you *thought* you had.” Faced with the challenge of how to respond to Tom, Verna realizes there is nothing that she can say to him. After all, she concludes that he has “no heart.” She braces herself for the kill, lifting the gun and pushing it under his chin, pointing upwards. But as she gazes into Tom’s eyes, she is unable to pull the trigger. After she pulls the gun away, letting out a soft cry, Tom speaks to her softly, “...it isn’t easy, is it, Verna?” Even though Tom has left her with *nothing*, Verna cannot bring herself to kill him. Her closure comes in the final scene, when she dismissively tells Tom to “drop dead.” She walks off

into the dark, rainy distance. Her icy demeanor at Bernie's funeral intimates a pain more profound than grief.

In conversation with Leo, Tom calls Verna, "a grifter". To be sure, Tom has personal reasons for saying such a thing. He objects to Verna's manipulation of Leo in an effort to protect her despicable brother. At the same time, as thoughtful viewers, we cannot help but take issue with that characterization. By dint of her time and place, Verna, as a woman, is essentially compelled to "hitch her wagon" to a man, a provider. This unfortunate reality limits her capacity to act as a moral agent, as her welfare—and hence her actions—is more dependent on the actions of others. At a crossroads in her life, Verna tries to keep and balance a number of commitments: to Tom out of love, to Leo out of a desire for protection and stability, and to Bernie, as his sister. Verna is surely guilty of trying her best (and doing what she must) to build and maintain a complete life for herself in a cold, indifferent world. In so doing, she shows herself to be patient, devoted, and courageous. These are not traits we normally associate with petty swindlers.

Leo

When we first meet Leo he is seated behind his grand, polished oak desk looking intently into Johnny Caspar's frenzied eyes. Leo appears regal as he sits erect, yet leaning back in his chair, telling a frantic Caspar that his reasoning is clear "as mud." When Caspar insists, by again making reference to his character, that Bernie is selling him out, Leo gets right to the point: "So you want to kill him." When The Dane confirms this, Leo looks to Tom, his lieutenant, who gives no response. Leo tells the two men that Bernie pays for protection, implying that this is where the matter ends. Caspar explains that he is not asking for *permission*, but is rather telling Leo "as a courtesy" that he is going to act. Leo responds firmly, "And I'm telling you as a courtesy, you'll have trouble. You came here to see if I'd kick if you killed Bernie. Well, there's

your answer ... so take your flunky and dangle” Caspar furiously bombards Leo, “I’m sick of taking the strap from you, Leo. I’m sick of marching into this goddamn office to kiss your Irish ass! And I’m sick of the high hat!” As Caspar departs, Leo asserts in the same steady tone, “Johnny. You’re exactly as big as I let you be and no bigger and don’t forget it, *ever*.”

In the same scene, we learn just as much about Leo from his succeeding conversation with Tom. Letting his guard down, Leo chuckles as the door closes behind Caspar and the Dane. He looks to Tom and coolly remarks, “Twist a pig’s ear, watch him squeal.” When Tom blankly informs Leo that he made a “bad play” by upsetting Caspar, Leo cannot help but deflect the comment, “Who got up the wrong side, huh?” Leo insinuates that Tom’s disapproval is just an expression of his frustration caused by his indebtedness to his bookie, Lazarre. Leo, smiling warmly, insists that he can “put it right” for Tom: “Call me a big-hearted slob, but I’m gonna square it for you, yeah ... I think I’ll do that this very same night. Looking at you moping around takes away all my... what do you call it? Joy de veever?” When Tom corrects him on his French, and insists that he will handle the debt himself, Leo playfully replies, “to hell with you.” The scene concludes when Tom asks Leo to think about the costs of protecting Bernie. Leo’s reply is telling, as he grins from ear to ear: “Oh come on, Tommy, you know I don’t like to think.”

The opening scene reveals a lot about Leo’s character and perspective. He exudes a great deal of confidence, speaking calmly and easily; his posture is erect, yet relaxed. We get the sense from his composure in his dealings with Caspar that Leo is a man who has been battled-tested, and triumphed. In keeping with his claim that he doesn’t like to think, Leo sees affairs such as these strictly in black and white. This is evidenced by the way in which he puts Caspar in his place: “You pay off for protection, just like everyone else. Far as I know—and what I *don’t know* in this town *ain’t worth knowin’*—the cops haven’t closed any of your dives and the O.A. hasn’t

touched any of your rackets. You haven't bought any license to kill bookies, and today I ain't selling any. So take your flunky and dangle." His lack of concern about Caspar's growing power and influence can be interpreted as a sign of complacency (which is, of course, the way Tom sees it). As Leo says in a later scene, "I reckon I can still trade body blows with any man in this town"—in his eyes, this gives him license to act on his desires. When Tom tells Leo he has made a mistake, Leo wants to hear nothing of it. Leo is more concerned with Tom's burgeoning debt. In sharp contrast to his demeanor in Caspar's presence, when Leo is alone with Tom he oozes with warmth. Leo's interests seem to lie in maintaining power, and in finding happiness for himself and his friends, including Tom and Verna. For Leo, life is as simple as this: "You do anything to help your friends, just like you do anything to kick your enemies." This self-given principle encompasses his broader moral approach. We find that, even under immense pressure, he lives by it.

The next time we encounter Leo, he is standing outside Tom's apartment at four in the morning, asking to be let in. On guard, he spends time beating around the bush; he apologizes twice about the hour of his visit, assures Tom that he had tried to reach him earlier on that evening, and comments on the quality of Tom's whiskey. It is only after Tom breaks an uneasy silence and asks Leo whether he has considered giving up Bernie Bernbaum that Leo opens up: "Can't do it, Tom. Can't do it. That's sort of why I'm, uh—Tommy, I don't know where Verna is." Leo is visibly embarrassed to have lost track of Verna, especially after having put "a tail" on her. In this scene, Tom tells Leo that Verna is using him in order to protect her brother: "She sees the angle, which is you, she plays it. She's a *grifter*, just like her brother." Leo tells Tom to stop it, remarking, "I don't like to hear my friends run down, even by other friends." Leo admits that Tom "know[s] all the angles," but adds that he could be "wrong about this," as he doesn't know

“what’s in Verna’s heart.” Yet *again* deflecting Tom’s concerns, Leo appears confident that he is not the object of Verna’s manipulation. At the same time, he cannot hide his uneasiness over not knowing her whereabouts in the early morning. Leo looks tense; he is unwilling to speak first, he keeps his jacket and gloves on, and he lets out a heavy sigh or two. He explains that he is *especially* “worried now, with the way things are between me and Caspar.” Tom takes this as an opportunity to argue that Leo should not be confronting Caspar, explaining that Caspar’s “gotten too strong.” Leo confidently claims that he can square off with anybody in town, adding the qualifier, “except you, Tom.” When Tom quips back, “and Verna,” Leo is taken aback at first, but eventually smiles warmly, taking it in stride: “Okay, give me the needle. I am a sap. I deserve it.” As he leaves, he thanks Tom for the drink. Returning to his convivial self again, he has a bit of a bounce in his step. Here, we see that Leo has an almost indomitable spirit about him, as he mentally cancels out anxieties from within and without, and harnesses what he finds good—in this instance, a glass of whiskey and a smile with his pal. Nothing changes between the moment that he enters Tom’s apartment and the time of his departure, but Leo finds consolation, somehow, in the company of his friend. For Leo, his spirit emerges out of a perspective that renders a hard, complex world more bearable through simplification. This may lead him *through* hard situations, but it may also lead him *into* them. For us, this provokes the question of whether Leo’s insouciance could potentially lead him into danger.

Leo is bubbly when we see him next. Verna has turned up, which has put him in good spirits. Even still, he has a score to settle. Rug Daniels, the “tail” he dispatched to follow Verna, has been shot dead, and Leo has assumed that this was Caspar’s doing. The plan now, he says, is to “jump on the guinea hard with both feet.” Leo is downright giddy about the opportunity to take down Caspar’s bars and clubs. While Tom, the chief, and the mayor morosely drink their

whiskey, Leo cheerfully sits among them with a bottle of soda pop in hand—the contrast is stark. Leo does not realize that his decision to go to war over Bernie Bernbaum may cost him control, despite Tom’s pointing out that “they [O’Doole and the mayor] don’t look too happy about it”. Emphasizing the point that Caspar’s supposed killing of Rug constitutes a declaration of war, Leo makes this a matter of rising to the occasion: “The day I back down from a fight, Caspar’s welcome to the rackets, this town, and my place at the table.” Tom contests Leo’s characterization, arguing that it was Leo who started the war when he decided to stick his neck out for Bernie. During the exchange, the mayor uncomfortably rises to his feet and offers to leave, but Leo, who is visibly rattled, yells: “Sit down, Dale! We’re all friends here!” Tom departs, lamenting, “well, it’s your call. My opinion used to count for something around here. But it’s always yours to take or leave.” Leo, distraught, yells after him: “Aw, come on, Tommy, it’s not like that!” When the door shuts behind Tom, Leo slams his fist to his chair yelling, “goddamn it!” He turns to the chief and the mayor, embarrassed, and explains, “God damn kid’s just like a twist.” In his reaction, Leo shows us how much he has invested emotionally in his relationship with Tom, his advisor. Here, when he and Tom are having a disagreement over a course of action, Leo lets his feelings bubble to the surface. Moreover, in this scene, Leo appears weak before the police chief and mayor: he seems out of touch with their concerns, his lieutenant undermines him in front of them, and he allows himself to get visibly flustered at a time when it is crucial that he be collected.

If we get the idea that Leo is not battle-ready from the scene discussed above, we are dispelled of it soon after. Leo masterfully defends himself against Casper’s assassins, gunning down the first of them with his pistol, and the rest with a Thompson submachine gun, which he takes from the deceased. The Coen brothers tapped their creative license in this scene, as Leo’s

Thompson seems to have unlimited ammunition, giving the effect that he is an absolutely unstoppable force. As we look up at Leo at scene's end, we find that he has not broken a sweat and that he has resumed smoking his cigar. The scene effectively reinforces Leo's status as an alpha male by placing him "under fire" in a context that showcases his strength.

In the next scene, Tom meets with Leo, who is unable to get in touch with the police chief and mayor. Tom suggests that the two of them might be jumping ship and teaming up with Caspar. This is not wholly unreasonable in light of the most recent meeting they had with Leo, which was likely disquieting. Leo, sounding undaunted, dismisses the possibility: "They wouldn't dare!" He has, however, assembled a team of mercenaries, so he has surely prepared himself for this possibility. When Tom presses the issue, pointing out that the squad car that he ordered sent to Leo's house for protection never showed up, Leo plays it off, dodging the issue: "Mother hen, huh?" Tom presses forward, arguing that Leo ought to give up Bernie and wait for Caspar to show a weakness. Leo leans back in his chair, puts his feet up on his desk, and cocks his head away from Tom and towards his glass of whiskey. Speaking slowly yet still unsteadily, Leo reveals his plans to marry Verna. Tom, in a last-ditch effort to cause Leo to reconsider, claims that Verna is sleeping around: "I don't ask much and I don't ask often. Trust me on this." Leo hesitates, having just said moments earlier that he trusts Verna as much as he trusts Tom. Tom stakes his friendship on his word, saying, "Trust me on this or to hell with you." Leo, aroused, looks intently at Tom, and says, "you don't mean that." What follows is Tom's strained confession of his affair with Verna. Upon hearing this, Leo is first incredulous, taking it as a joke. When it registers that Tom is serious, Leo grows distraught, and lets out a soft cry. He rises to his feet and turns his back on Tom, looking out the window as a horse trots by outside. When Tom is halfway through the hallway after exiting the office, Leo catches up with him and lands a

punch to his head. He continues to thrash Tom with his bare fists from the upstairs of the club all the way down to the bar. When Tad, the barkeep interjects, promising to kick Tom out, Leo loudly declares, “Yeah, do that. It’s the kiss-off. If I never seen him again, it’ll be soon enough.” Leo exclaims, in a charged fashion, his desire for closure. He thereby exposes his emotional connection to Tom, but renounces their friendship from this day forward. We find, however, that in time, Leo’s heart wears heavy on him.

After the kiss-off with Tom and the break-up with Verna, Leo has enough on his plate in dealing with the police, who are now allied with Caspar. They have been raiding his clubs, including the Shenandoah and the Sons of Erin. Even still, Leo dispatches some of his men to look out for Verna. We learn this in the scene in which The Dane storms into her apartment: Leo’s gunmen break out of the woodwork and try to defend her, to no avail. Leo also sends out multiple cars of his men to track down Tom, only to send the following message: “Message from Leo. Leo says, if you’re smart you’ll sit this one out—*not that he cares one way or the other*. Leo says if you’re on the wrong side you take your chances, like anybody else. Leo says he gives no special favors. That’s all.” Of course, Leo’s going so far as to watch out for Verna and to warn Tom to stay out of the hostilities shows that he *does* care, even after the two of them had betrayed him. This is an exhibition of Leo’s unflagging commitment to the principle he set forth earlier: even under strain, he is doing what he must to help his friends. Or perhaps Leo himself said it best when he called himself a “big-hearted slob”.

The day after Tom kills Bernie, he stops by Leo’s office, but Leo is too busy chewing out O’Doole and the mayor to meet with Tom. The next day, the two meet at the Bernie’s funeral. The tension is palpable as Leo tells Tom about his plans to marry Verna. Leo includes an unnecessary detail here: that Verna *asked him* to marry. Perhaps he does so out of pride, to show

that while he did not ask for her hand in marriage after what she had done to him, he was big enough to look beyond her past mistakes. After Tom offers a flat, perfunctory congratulations, Leo is unable to contain himself: “Hell, Tom! Why didn’t you tell me what you were up to?! I thought you’d really gone over! Not that I didn’t deserve it... but you could have told me.” Implicitly, Leo posits that idea that Tom was acting in his, Leo’s, interest all along. Although Tom does not directly affirm that to be the case, Leo persists as if it were true: “I guess you know I’m grateful.” Once again, Tom responds neutrally, saying, “no need.” Still trying to receive some kind of confirmation that Tom was acting on his behalf, Leo asks, knocking into Tom playfully, “I guess you picked that fight with me just to tuck yourself in with Caspar.” *Again*, Tom does not commit, replying, “I dunno. Do you always know why you do things, Leo?” Leo, looking puzzled, smiles and says “Sure I do ... it was a smart play.” Finally, he comes to a stop, and grabs Tom’s arm, his voice excited:

“Jesus, Tom! I’d give anything if you’d come work for me again! I know I’ve made some bonehead plays. I know I can be pig-headed but, damn it, so can you! I need your help, and things can be like they were. I know it. I just *know* it! As for you and Verna—well, I understand; you’re both young, and—damn it, Tom, I forgive you!”

Tom speaks in a markedly sharp tone of voice: “I didn’t ask for that, and I don’t want it.” Leo looks distraught. Tom’s face softening, he says, “goodbye, Leo.” Leo just stands and stares at him, slowly stiffening his upper lip. Finally, after several seconds, he walks away. Walking alone, he puts his hat on his head and steps into the wooded distance.

As his name might suggest, Leo is a man who acts with resolve and power. If the city is a jungle, Leo is its king. Nonetheless, he has a warmth about him that radiates from his smile. He cares deeply for Tom; his trying to settle Tom’s debts, his looking out for Tom during the

conflict, and pleading in the final scene confirm as much. At the cemetery, Leo cancels out the memory of Tom's efforts at *avoiding* conflict with Leo, of Tom's desire to get Leo to abandon Verna *without* revealing his affair, in favor of the happy thought that it was all one big "play" on Tom's part to help him. While Leo is sort of child-like in this way, and while he actively seeks to avoid addressing some of his problems, there is nevertheless something ineffable about him that inspires confidence. His exhibition of strength and courage against his assassins was something of an omen for his ultimate victory over Caspar. But at the same time his astonishingly natural action in that scene encapsulated that intangible heroic quality, that indomitable spirit about him. We are left with the sense that Leo will persevere without Tom—he strides on, intently marching forward, as Tom leans against a tree.

Tom

His eyes facing Leo's path, Tom stares outward, his hat pulled down low on his head. His expression, for the first time, hints at feelings of uncertainty. Tom is now alone. How did he get here? Why did he choose to turn down Leo's offer to rejoin him? Where does he go from here? These are the questions that are provoked by the closing shot of the film. We will now seek to settle these questions.

In order to understand Tom, it is necessary that we make reference to all sorts of other actors in the criminal network of the city. Consider how frequently we had to refer to *his* actions over the course of our inquiry into the other characters. To be sure, the film's action unfolds around him. Above all else, Tom is a manipulator; and his advisory roles for both Leo and Caspar put him in prime position to determine the course of events. In spite of the fact (if not *because* of the fact) that we follow Tom throughout, it seems impossible to determine his motives or goals at any given point in time. Gabriel Byrne, who plays Tom, says that Tom

“operate[s] from the outside.¹³” Byrne could very well be on to something—at no time can we truly get in Tom’s head. We do find, however, that he looks at the world around him and acts on the basis of what he sees, rather than by some self-given set of principles. Tom always seems to operate in the following manner: he examines the landscape in front of him; considers the various “angles” at work among the other characters; recognizes his place in the web of actors, in order to determine how he can influence events; and finally, he acts with an eye towards furthering himself. Almost all of his aforementioned “action” however, amounts to the manipulation of others, whether it is Caspar, Verna, or Mink. This heuristic seems to account for his actions fairly well. The only exceptions that come to mind are the two instances in which Tom must decide Bernie’s fate—truly extenuating circumstances. In this way, Tom does is reactive rather than proactive. He does not *lead*; he *responds*.

The point is that we *cannot know* what drives Tom simply from examining his manipulative efforts (besides, apparently, advancement in the city). Recall that he gives no indication in the final scene that he was, indeed, acting out of concern for Leo’s interests; in fact, he claims to be unsure of why he acted the way he did. We *can be sure*, however, that Tom is thoroughly invested in understanding the criminal network around him, and acting on his knowledge. Any time he argues for a given course of action, his justification always makes reference to some sort of advantage to be gained *with respect to others*. When Leo brings up friendship at Tom’s apartment, arguing that the best course of action is to always do right by one’s friends, Tom sharply asserts: “Wrong, Leo. You do things for a reason.” At bottom, none of Tom’s “reasons” rest on justifications related to friendship, love, or even principle—concerns of this sort do not register with him. When Verna brings up the possibility that Leo might forgive

¹³ *Miller’s Crossing* DVD Special Features: Interview with Gabriel Byrne

him, Tom says the following: “We’re quits as far as I’m concerned, never mind him. And if Leo did want me back *he’s an even bigger sap than I thought.*” For Tom, forgiving a long-time friend for his misdeeds is not a sign of a good nature; to him, it indicates weakness or foolishness.

Along similar lines, when Leo dispatches his men in order to warn Tom to stay out of hostilities, Tom says the following to Terry, Leo’s aide: “Tell Leo he’s not God on the throne. He’s just a cheap political boss *with more hair tonic than brains.*” Here, Tom exposes his lack of regard for acting on the basis of friendship. The way he acts towards Verna exhibits his unwillingness to act on the basis of mutual affection, or love.

When Verna presents the possibility of skipping town together, Tom has an opportunity to extricate himself from his limbo within the criminal underworld and from his burgeoning debt to Lazarre. Rather than take this possibility seriously, Tom promptly rejects it: “You, me, and Bernie. Where would we go, Verna? Niagra Falls?” Here, Tom deflects the issue, and thereby foregoes an opportunity to make a meaningful commitment. In a later scene, when Tom addresses Verna about the Rug Daniels shooting, she confronts Tom about his feeling for her: “Why can’t you admit it? ... [Admit] you don’t like me seeing Leo ‘cause you’re jealous. Admit that you’ve got a heart, even though it may be small and feeble, and you can’t remember the last time you used it.” But instead of engaging her in a meaningful way, he plays it off, saying, “If I’d known we were gonna cast our feelings into words, I’d have memorized the Song of Solomon.” Moments later, he suggests that two of them “get stinko,” always a prelude to sex. In so doing, he delivers enough levity to the conversation to dispose of the tension, and puts off the matter of addressing what is at stake between the two of them.

The way Tom treats Leo and Verna suggests that he views these relationships as temporary. Perhaps an even more telling indication of how Tom views interpersonal

relationships comes from a distinctive phrase that he utters twice: “Nobody knows anybody. Not that well.” What is more, he says this in two very peculiar contexts. In the first instance, he says it to Verna, after she insists that she did not kill Rug Daniels, as she says, “You think I murdered someone? Come on, Tom. You know me a little.” The second time, Tom is responding to Johnny Caspar’s insistence that The Dane would not cross him for money, as he says, “Why would Eddie cross me like that? Money? Okay, everybody likes money, but somehow it just don’t seem like him. And I know The Dane.” In both instances, Tom contends that one cannot know even the *most basic things* about people to whom one is close, such as whether they would be willing to do truly egregious things (such as murder or betrayal) in order to get what they want. In Tom’s eyes, trusting others, even dear friends, is a fool’s play—it is every man for himself.

Simply put, this is because Tom operates in a mind frame that takes material advantage as its starting premise in the calculation of values. He foregoes the opportunity to leave the city with Verna in favor of remaining in the city. The city, and the criminal network within it, is Tom’s home. In order to better understand Tom, we must look beyond his acts of manipulation, which are all iterations of the same act of finding angles and strategizing accordingly. After all, Tom has not fostered a set of freestanding values by which he lives. He derives his power, and with it, his sense of worth, not from his personal virtues, but from his capacity to impact the course of events as a lieutenant to Leo and then Caspar. In this way, Gabriel Byrne is right to say that Tom “operates from the outside,” as he takes his value from his relationship to the world around him. For these reasons we can be confident that what people say about Tom, about his status in the city, is of vital importance to him.

When Tom is no longer working for Leo, he is in limbo, and thereby exposed. Accordingly, he arranges to meet with Johnny Caspar. In Caspar’s office, he finds the police

chief and the mayor, who have apparently switched sides. After Tom greets them, the mayor remarks, “Tom’s a big booster. Always has been.” This is not exactly complimentary to Tom, as it labels him as a man who props *other* men up. By adding that Tom “always has been” a booster, the mayor implies that *this is who Tom is*—this is his identity. In the same scene, after Tom sits down Caspar begins to discuss how Tom could be useful to him, calling him a “smart kid”. He also classifies Tom as follows: “The man who walks behind the man, who whispers in his ear.” In effect, Caspar puts forward the most unflattering characterization of an advisor conceivable. As Caspar says these things, Tom listens, but he does not look him in the eye. The Dane, too, has some choice words for Tom. In the scene discussed above, he calls Tom a “kaputnik” and “Little Miss Punching Bag,” referencing his incident with Leo the night before. The word “kaputnik” is particularly damning, as it implies that, without Leo, Tom is ruined. The idea here is that Tom’s welfare and his value in the city was predicated upon Leo’s friendship. In a later scene, when The Dane has pulled Tom off the street in order to bring him to Miller’s Crossing, The Dane says the following: “You’re so goddamn smart. Except you ain’t ... Like a goddamn Bolshevik, picking up his orders from Yegg Central.” Reflecting on the unlikelihood that Tom actually killed Bernie, he adds the following: “I think you’d sooner join a ladies’ league than gun a guy down.” As The Dane assails him, Tom looks in the opposite direction, his face pale and his eyes glassy. Perhaps Tom does not want to do The Dane the dignity of looking him in the eye. Or perhaps he does not want to face the possibility that he has been figured out, in more ways than one.

With these characterizations and their importance to Tom in mind, let us now re-examine Tom from a different perspective. Rather than looking at his macro-actions, such as his attempts at manipulation, let us look at how he conducts himself at the *unconscious* and *unconcerned*

levels. In other words, we will look at certain details of Tom's behavior, through the prism of the characterizations discussed above, to see if we can glean any new insights.

First, let us consider Tom's body language, particularly in the presence of his boss, Leo. In the first scene of the film, Tom seats himself on the far side of Leo's couch. He spreads his arms out wide, taking up more than half of the couch's length. He crosses one leg over the other, with the bottom of his shoe facing Leo. His jacket is draped over the near side of the couch, with his hat on top of it. The next time Tom is in Leo's office, the police chief and the mayor are seated opposite Leo. Rather than sitting on the couch or pulling up a chair from the back of the room, Tom sits on Leo's desk, posing as a sort of buffer between the men. The last time he finds himself in Leo's office, Tom is in the process of telling Leo that he may be losing his grip on the chief and the mayor. In this scene, Tom sits in a chair opposite Leo's desk and props his foot up against it. In the first case, Tom stretches wide, commanding a *lot* of space. In the second case, he sits atop Leo's desk, which in and of itself is noteworthy. In so doing, he places himself physically above the other men in the room. In the last case, he does something that is universally recognized as a sign of disrespect.

If we can glean anything from body language, it is safe to say that Tom betrays feelings of superiority towards his boss, or at the very least, a strong desire to be taken seriously. With respect to other unconscious behavior, when Tom is engaged in conversation with Leo, we get the sense from his tone that Tom is talking *at* him. For instance, he will say things such "Wrong, Leo", and "Here's the smart play, Leo". It is clear that Tom believes that while Leo has the brawn and the iron jaw, Tom is the brains of the operation. Even still, he is number two, the right-hand man. His unconscious behavior indicates to us that it chafes on him.

Now let us reflect on how Tom acts around other figures of authority. This time, we will zoom out a bit from body language, to consider how he conducts himself in a more general sense. Having looked at how he behaves at an unconscious level, we will now examine his behavior around others when there is nothing significant at stake. To that end, let us consider the way Tom treats O'Doole, the police chief when they speak one-on-one. The first time, Tom is still allied with Leo, and the police are in the process of raiding one of Caspar's casinos. Walking up to the chief, he offers him a drink out of a whiskey bottle that he took from the club. When the chief declines, Tom lifts the bottle up and says, "To Volstead," before taking a sip and tossing it to the floor. After Tom gets some information about the murder of Rug Daniels, the chief goes off on a tangent about the absurdity of Leo's decision to start a conflict over Bernie Bernbaum. At this point, Tom, as Leo's lieutenant, takes it upon himself to put O'Doole in his place. When O'Doole suggests that Leo will not be able to maintain influence with this sort of campaign, Tom *removes the match from the chief's mouth and flicks it up against his badge* to light it. Taking a drag from his cigarette, Tom leans in close to O'Doole, and shoves his finger into the man's chest as he says, "Once Leo decides, that's that. And if that sticks going down, there are plenty of coppers I know who wouldn't mind being chief and could swallow it clean!" The second time the two meet, Tom is less overtly disrespectful: he simply hands O'Doole his empty glass of whiskey as he walks off. When Caspar is having a dispute with the mayor over the city's placing Caspar's relatives into nepotistic positions, Tom forcefully says the following to the mayor: "You can do whatever the hell Caspar tells you. I don't remember all this double-talk when Leo gave you an order ... Stop whimperin' and do as you're told!"

It is often revealing to see how a person acts when they are not under pressure to meet certain expectations, or to achieve particular goals. Tom acts disrespectfully towards two persons

who have power by dint of their willingness to submit to the terms of the mob bosses, when *his* influence is entirely dependent upon the power of Leo and Caspar respectively. He also carries himself in a sort of “alpha” way during his initial meeting with Bernie—recall that he lets his telephone ring for a painfully long time before answering it. In the cases discussed above, Tom displays a desire to be recognized as powerful.

On the basis of our evaluation of Tom to this point, it would seem reasonable that, in an effort to realize a heightened position for himself in the city, he would elect to become an independent agent. All indications are that he has the desire to prove to himself that he can prosper outside of the shadows of another man. To be sure, his actions towards the film’s end cohere with this theory: his killing the one man who cheated him; his paying off his debt to Lazarre; his placing yet another bet (this time, on a fixed fight); and his rejecting Leo’s offer to reunite. It is important to highlight the importance of his killing Bernie, despite there being no identifiable “angle”. After having been beaten six different times and after being told that he is “more likely to join a ladies’ league than gun a guy down”, Tom is able to relieve himself of the psychological burden of weakness by killing his enemy. Tom can plainly see that the two men who have achieved ultimate power, Leo and Caspar, are willing and able to shed blood; so he does the same. In the end, Tom stands alone.

We cannot help but wonder where Tom will go from here. His parting exchange with Leo impels us to reflect on the differences between the two men. Where Leo was warm and willing to forgive, Tom was cold and distant. Where Leo laid out his thoughts and feelings about recent events, Tom remained shrewdly quiet. Where Leo freely admitted his faults and shortcomings, Tom clenched up. Even more basic than this, where Leo *spoke to* Tom, Tom exclusively *replied to* Leo. In an act of humility and self-honesty, Leo is big enough to admit that he “*need[s]*” Tom,

which is likely true. The fact that Leo can acknowledge and admit such a thing is good in itself, but it also suggests that he will be able to plan accordingly after Tom rejects his plea to reunite. Tom seems to believe, on the other hand, that he needs no one. Gabriel Byrne affirms this view of Tom, as he says, “his downfall at the end is because he naively believes that he can control everything around him, when in fact, that is not possible, on any level¹⁴.” Of course, controlling everything is impossible for anyone, as a fact of our condition, but Byrne is touching on something deeper here when he adds, “*on any level.*” Tom is unable to exert great influence without the benefit of a *position* of power. All of the power that Tom had was, indeed, predicated upon his advisory role to a given presiding mob boss. Tom lacks direction as an individual insofar as he has made no meaningful commitments, despite many opportunities to do so. People grow strong and principled through making commitments. The things we hold sacred are what give our lives meaning. They provide us with the nucleus upon which we can develop ourselves; they are the foundations of the vantage points from which we take in experience. Without commitments, we are hollow. Tom seems unwilling or unable to invest himself in others. For this reason, he has lost everything.

¹⁴ *Miller's Crossing* DVD Special Features: Interview with Gabriel Byrne

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Final Thoughts

At the film's end, three of the six characters we discussed had been killed. Bernie Bernbaum, Johnny Caspar, and Eddie Dane all end up with bullets in their brains. All three of them were violent, ruthless, and borderline insane. Bernie was a compulsive swindler, who could never bring himself to look beyond his next grift. Caspar was a hypocritical thug who found himself overwhelmed when he took charge of the city. And The Dane was his sadistic lieutenant, who plumbed the depths of cruelty, driven by envy and a confluence of covetous emotions. All three went headstrong into the fray, each one to his demise.

This leaves us with Verna, Leo, and Tom, the attendees at Bernie's funeral. Each of them is pictured in a closing shot that befits him or her. In her parting shot, Verna is seen taking the limousine, on her way out of Miller's Crossing: she has someone take her someplace. Verna strived for a complete life of security, love, and family. In the end, she settled for security by "hitching her wagon" to Leo. In effect, this was a choice that *was made for her*, by dint of women's place in society at the time. Leo departs by turning away from Tom and making his way down the road leading out of Miller's Crossing. Moving slowly at first with his hat in hand, Leo, in time, puts his hat on and strides forth, the open road before him. Realizing that he has lost his friend for good, Leo takes a few seconds to recover. He eventually pushes onward. The trees at his sides, Leo's path is clear: he will no doubt return to the city, where he will reassume his throne. Tom makes his way over to a tree. He leans against it, tucking his left shoulder into the bark. He, too, puts his hat on. Looking after Leo, he pulls it down slowly, as if to say goodbye. Supported by a tree that stands out from the forest in the background, Tom looks

isolated. After fixing his hat, he stands perfectly still and looks out, watching Leo march on. For the first time, Tom is more likely *feeling* than *thinking*. The look in his eyes betrays uncertainty.

It is noteworthy that Leo is the only one whose final shot seems affirmative, even if he does have a long journey back into town. Keeping in mind that Verna's moral agency is significantly curtailed by her surrounding conditions, we might say Leo is perhaps the only major *actor* in the film who is morally praiseworthy. At the start of the film, Leo offers to cover Tom's gambling debt, saying that Tom's glumness takes away his "joy de veever." He looks past Verna's faults and mistakes, and chooses to accept her hand in marriage. He lovingly forgives Tom for betraying his trust. Unlike the others, who are reactive to their surroundings, Leo is proactive. Unlike Caspar, who is affectively *over-determined* and cannot contain his emotions, Leo is affectively *oriented* by a non-cognitive ethics grounded in his gut-level commitments to those he holds dear. Leo sees his friends as having intrinsic value, where the others seem to view friends as either strictly instrumentally valuable (i.e., Bernie, Caspar, Tom), or perhaps somewhere in between (Verna, The Dane). The only one in the film to ever propound a moral precept, Leo *makes meaning for himself*, where the others are altogether too concerned with *finding meaning from the outside* in a morally bankrupt world. Along similar lines, perhaps out of ingenuousness, Leo makes an effort to harness what is good, even when he finds himself in a "wrong situation." He is the only one who does not take his cues from without, but rather generates them from within.

Hence, in the same vein in which in which the Old Testament proclaims that "Noah was *in his generations* a man righteous and whole-hearted¹⁵," one could argue that Leo is a good man in *this city*. That is to say that Leo might not be the paragon of virtue in *absolute* terms, but that

¹⁵See Mechon-Mamre translation of the Hebrew (Genesis 6:9); emphasis added

he stands out, in his time and place, as a good person. Contrast Leo's smile, which exudes sincere warmth, with Tom's steely gaze, or Verna's direct stare. Beyond identifiable acts of generosity, selflessness, and forgiveness, Leo possesses an ineffable good-naturedness, which all of the other characters lack.

Juxtaposed besides Leo and his big heart, Tom is hollow. Tom channels *all* of his thought and energy into navigating the city's power structure. This is the sole prism through which he sees the world. In the same way that it does not occur to Bernie to uphold his promise to Tom to leave town once he realizes an advantage to remaining, Tom is dumbfounded by the thought that Leo, his friend, would forgive him. While Tom possesses the intelligence necessary to be called brilliant, he is *unwise*. Wisdom comes from investing ourselves in the world around us, and learning from our experience. In order to realize ourselves as moral agents—to foster values and develop character—we must make commitments to ourselves and to others¹⁶. Tom does not, or *cannot*, do so. In so many words, he is soulless¹⁷.

When we reflect on the range of characters in *Miller's Crossing*, it is striking that so many of them act selfishly. After all, we have established that the film is an allegory for the broader human experience. Thus, the implication is that most people are selfish. But is the moral universe that the Coen present adequate? Or do they ignore, or better put *exclude*, certain ways of being the world?

The Coens definitely ignore or exclude certain ways of life. They do not depict the lives of any of the city's inhabitants who are *not* tied to the criminal enterprise. We do not observe the

¹⁶ Taylor 27

¹⁷ Note: John Turtorro, in an interview about *Miller's Crossing*, says as follows: "In a simple way it's [the film] about a person who loses their soul. That's what I think the movie's about ... and at the end, he's [Tom is] very much alone." Turtorro's interview, as with Byrne's, is featured on the DVD in the "Special Features" section.

lives of the postman, or the local innkeeper. These people *may* live humble, quiet lives centered on family and friends. If the film were indeed allegorical, however, this would not matter to the Coens, as the problems that plague the gangsters exist for these folks as well. For the Coens, depicting criminals is fruitful insofar as their *prima facie* difference allows us as viewers to have much needed distance, as we look upon the difficulties that trouble all of us. That being said, the Coens have ignored a way of life that many among us find deep satisfaction in: the religious life. While religious people may confront the same problems as everyone else, they deal with them profoundly *differently*, as God is their recourse. This exclusion, unlike the issue of the un-contextualized citizens, creates a problem for the Coens. Their moral universe is inadequate insofar as it fails to present the religious life for our examination¹⁸.

The broader project of depicting people in a lawless society devoid of conventional morality has its shortcomings, as well. As we gleaned from Glaucon's argument in *The Republic*, there *is* value to observing unrestrained human behavior. At the same time, however, many people in day-to-day life find meaning for themselves *in* conventional morality, and *through* partaking in civil society. With a structured society in place, people are able to channel their energies in more healthy ways, which fosters respect among others (or, at least, tolerance). As a result, in a civil society governed by law and morality, people have the security and opportunity to invest themselves in endeavors *beyond* the pursuit of their immediate interests. So while a society of laws and morals inhibits *absolute* freedom, it does so in order to afford citizens with opportunities to grow and flourish. In this way, the freedom humans have in civil society is enabling and thereby *constructive*. If we are principally concerned with understanding humanity

¹⁸ The Coens address the religious life in their most recent picture, "A Serious Man".

in a holistic way, the depiction of a lawless society will give us some insights about human motivation, but it cannot tell the whole story.

Despite its imperfections, *Miller's Crossing* certainly raises scores of important questions about the human condition and morality. The characters in the film, with their slick hair, big hats, and occasional madness, struggle with the same problems we face today and will face tomorrow. While *Miller's Crossing* may never be commemorated in a cinematic hall of fame, and while it may never be taught in classrooms alongside the likes of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is and will remain a film worthy of exploration and, as a consequence, celebration.

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