

What's Wrong with this Picture? Teaching Ethics through Film to Wyoming High School Students

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Abstract: We regularly teach for the Wyoming High School Institute (“HSI”), a three-week college experience for rising high school juniors. The purpose of HSI is to introduce pre-college students to subjects not regularly taught in the secondary school curriculum. In our course, we introduce moral philosophy through the use of feature films. More narrowly, we challenge the students to examine moral reasoning through analysis of the moral reasoning of characters in these films. Our pedagogical approach is based in the methods of Socrates and in the technique of “scaffolding.” We attempt to show how our approach can be incorporated into any pre-college philosophy classroom.

1. Introduction

For the past several summers, we have taught an ethics course for talented Wyoming high school students. The State of Wyoming and the University of Wyoming sponsor an annual High School Institute (“HSI”). HSI is a three-week residential college enrichment program providing rising high school juniors with the opportunity for an educational experience and for an introduction to college life.¹ The HSI experience includes not only an introduction to courses one might expect to attend in college but also the experience of living away from one’s parents and siblings for an extended period of time.² HSI is taught by faculty and staff who are affiliated with the university and willing to undertake the responsibility of introducing high school students to subjects such as philosophy, which are not a part of the regular Wyoming high school curriculum.

Our course is an introduction to ethics, and approached through the use of film. To be a bit more precise, we take our topic to be that of moral reasoning and the films we choose reflect that fact. We have looked to films that present moral problems of some sort, and films that show characters who display their moral reasoning to some degree. We have chosen films in which, while the moral problem of the plot is certainly present, the focus of the films is more on the characters and their decision making. This allows us to use these characters to exhibit aspects of moral reasoning such as theoretical commitments, motivating factors, and aspects of character.³

The aim of this paper is to explain how we approach teaching this course and describe how characters in feature films exemplify forms of moral reasoning and decision-making. First, we will explore some pedagogical and philosophical issues connected to the employment of film in the pre-college classroom. Part of this discussion will focus on the benefits of using films in this sort of context. We will also explore some specific pedagogical techniques we have successfully employed, such as the methods of Socrates and a technique that has come to be known as “scaffolding.” In §§3 and 4, respectively, we discuss in detail our use of two films, *Three Days of the Condor* and *Unforgiven*. In each case, the film’s characters, rather than the plot line, are the focus of the class’s attention and analytic efforts. After a brief introduction to the plots of the films, we detail our use of specific characters and scenes in such a way as to yield a view of the moral reasoning exhibited in the films. We intend this level of detail to display our actual use of the techniques introduced in the previous section (§2). We conclude with some reflective remarks on the use of Socrates’s method and scaffolding and how effective they have been in our approach to the HSI classroom.

2. *Philosophical and Pedagogical Issues*

Teaching ethics to pre-college students can be a challenge. One challenge is that students seem somewhat underprepared to discuss issues of ethics, and most have not had to deal with such issues in their own lives. In order to bridge this gap, and to engage the students’ interest, we introduce high school students to moral philosophy through film.⁴ Although they possess a host of intuitions in response to common thought experiments, they often lack the skill of determining which aspects of the case are philosophically relevant and which ones are not. They are oftentimes distracted and choose to alter the cases presented or resort to defending some naive form of relativism. Rather than developing the students’ analytical and argumentative skills via the use of thought experiments, we use films to explore the relevant

issues. While the use of film may introduce a variety of complexities that thought experiments do not, the films offer the benefit of concretizing the issues in a way not easily replicable by thought experiments. Thus, we believe there are many benefits of showing films to explore philosophical themes and issues, and it is a departure from a more orthodox way of comprehending philosophical problems by using thought experiments.

Employing film to teach philosophy is not new. There are lots of resources available to philosophy instructors regarding the use of popular film in the classroom.⁵ For example, Fumerton and Jeske write:

[W]e think that [our] book will so captivate the imagination of the philosophically uninitiated that it may find an audience in high schools. As it is, a number of high schools already experiment with philosophy as an elective. The availability of a text like this might make the option even more attractive. . . . We recently co-taught a summer course in which we put together scenes from many of the films we outline in our table of contents. It was the most successful introductory course we have ever taught. In particular, we have never seen students so animated in discussion. Even those students who were clearly by nature shy quickly became active participants. (Fumerton and Jeske 2010: xiii)

Fumerton and Jeske, unfortunately, say nothing more than that about their approach to the classes, failing to provide any tips on how to include film within a course designed either for the summer semester or the regular fall and spring term.

Besides introductory volumes, the *Popular Culture* book series by Open Court Press and Wiley-Blackwell could be considered valuable resources for philosophy instructors. Interestingly, although the editors of each volume gesture at how film could be employed in the classroom, the main concern is not to show instructors how to use the material appearing in the volume but to argue that there are philosophically relevant themes in film (i.e., television shows and movies). For example, in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, Charles Griswold has argued that people living within the matrix, though happy, are not necessarily better off than those who know that those living in the matrix are not living in the real world.⁶ An argument such as that presented by Griswold seems to be manipulable into philosophical discussion for the classroom. What we have attempted to do is strip the issues explored in such articles of some of their complexities in order to introduce the high school student to moral theorizing and how it applies to practical moral problems. In our own way, we have devised here an approach that has worked for us in teaching introductory philosophy through film to talented high school students. Ours is not the only way one might approach such a class but it is a start.

In teaching this course, our aim is to use Socrates as a model.⁷ By using Socrates as a model, we have in mind a question-and-answer format where we typically ask questions of the students, the students provide one or more answers to the proposed question, and we calibrate our discussion accordingly. We begin with asking broad questions of the students and eliciting responses. For example, “why did character x do y ?” We then ask more refined questions in response to the students’ revised or refined answers. For example, “what reason does x have for choosing to do y ?” and “is x ’s reason for doing y a good reason?” In this way, we allow the students to gain ownership of the discussion, by offering and then clarifying and refining those answers, while we maintain some control of the discussion via the questions that we ask.

This approach is augmented by a teaching technique known as “scaffolding.” We understand scaffolding as a process designed to develop student autonomy in completing the task to be accomplished. According to Lipscomb, Swanson, and West:

In the process of scaffolding, the teacher helps the student master a task or concept that the student is initially unable to grasp independently. The teacher offers assistance with only those skills that are beyond the student’s capability. Of great importance is allowing the student to complete as much of the task as possible, unassisted. The teacher only attempts to help the student with tasks that are just beyond his current capability. Student errors are expected, but, with teacher feedback and prompting, the student is able to achieve the task or goal. When the student takes responsibility for or masters the task, the teacher begins the process of “fading,” or the gradual removal of the scaffolding, which allows the student to work independently.⁸

In our course, this involves beginning with films that have characters that are relatively straightforward to analyze, and gradually “ratcheting up” the complexities of the characters and plots. We often begin with modeling the sort of analysis we expect, and then asking the students as a group to analyze on their own, with decreasing amounts of guidance from us.

We now turn to explaining in some detail how we employ two of the films that have been successfully used in this context, namely *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), starring Robert Redford and Faye Dunaway, and *Unforgiven* (1992), starring Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman, and Gene Hackman. In each of the following sections, we will discuss particular scenes and characters of the films, and illustrate how these impact our classroom discussion of moral reasoning. These discussions are intended to demonstrate the use of scaffolding and the Socratic model we are employing. The content of the following sections represents the features and structure of the lesson plans we implement in any given summer term. While we do not have any rigid and explicit lesson plans that we follow to the letter, we let the discussion progress

organically according to student responses to the film, as well as what questions they might have during or after the film.

3. *Three Days of the Condor* (1975)

In *Three Days of the Condor* (hereafter “*Condor*”), Joe Turner (Redford) is a Central Intelligence Agency (“CIA”) researcher in New York City whose job it is to read books and look for relevant information. In his research, he unwittingly discovers information capable of exposing a plot designed to control oil production. When certain of his superiors realize he has stumbled across this information, Turner’s entire section is killed, except for Turner himself, who is literally “out to lunch.” Upon his return, Turner finds his colleagues murdered and tries to make contact with the CIA to “bring him in” to safety. However, he soon learns that shadowy elements within the CIA are responsible for the deaths of his colleagues. He suddenly doesn’t know whom to trust. Whereas threats to the CIA typically come from sources outside “the company,” Turner is able to expose a conspiracy within the CIA to other legitimate elements of the CIA. The conspirator mastermind and CIA Director of Operations, Leonard Atwood, has plans to control world-wide oil production. However, Turner’s knowledge of this conspiracy threatens to be a political embarrassment to the CIA, and thus he still feels threatened by even the legitimate elements of the CIA. The film ends when Turner gives his story to the *New York Times* in an attempt to protect himself.

In discussing this film, despite students raising concerns over plot points and supporting characters, they tend to focus primarily on three characters. One is Joe Turner. The others are Higgins (Cliff Robertson), who is Deputy Director for the CIA, and Joubert (Max von Sydow), who is an assassin directly responsible for the deaths of Turner’s colleagues. Each of these characters engages in ethical decision making that derives from certain positions in ethical theory and each is motivated in certain ways and by certain considerations. By asking the students questions, such as “why does Higgins make the choices he makes?” we begin to lead students through the process of analyzing the motivations and beliefs of these characters. Thus, by examining how and why these characters act and choose in the ways they do, we can illustrate various facets of moral reasoning with concrete examples from the film.

We typically begin with asking about Higgins because his moral reasoning is relatively straightforward, in contrast to other characters. One scene in particular reveals Higgins’s moral reasoning. Higgins is not initially aware of the conspiracy plans Turner exposes. When the plans have been exposed, Higgins recognizes that if they became

generally known, it would be an embarrassment to the CIA. Nonetheless, though not a party to the conspiracy, he is willing to defend the plans themselves and their existence. We ask the students to consider how this is borne out in a climactic scene with Turner:

Turner: Do we have plans?

Higgins: No. Absolutely not. We have games. That's all. We play games. "What if?" "How many men?" "What would it take?" "Is there a cheaper way of destabilizing the regime?" That's what we're paid to do.

So, Higgins is pointing out that the plans are merely hypothetical; a running through of different scenarios. It was revealed that the plans, in this case, were really going to be implemented by the renegade elements in the CIA, which is why the legitimate elements needed to stop it.

Turner then asks why they need to engage in these "games."

Higgins: It's simple economics, Turner. There's no argument. Oil now, 10 or 15 years it'll be food, or plutonium. Maybe sooner than that. What do you think the people will want us to do then?

Turner: Ask them!

Higgins: Now? Huh-uh. Ask them when they're running out. When it's cold at home and the engines stop and people who aren't used to hunger go hungry. They won't want us to ask. They'll want us to get it for them.

Thus, for Higgins, the need to engage in the activities of the CIA is economic, in the sense of asking whether the benefit outweighs the cost.

So, we ask what this exchange reveals about Higgins's motivations for his actions. Students typically recognize that Higgins sees it as his job to make sure the people of the United States get what they need, when they need it. If providing for the people results in the deaths of Turner's colleagues, or even Turner himself, Higgins sees the result as sufficient justification for the actions required to yield that result. For Higgins, the morally right course of action is one focused on the cost-benefit analysis. Students begin to see Higgins as making sure his fellow citizens get what they need and want, and so the end justifies the means, even if the means include espionage and murder. Higgins's style of moral reasoning is a relatively clear example of act utilitarianism, and we take this opportunity to introduce students to this philosophical term of art.

Utilitarianism, according to John Stuart Mill, is the view that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."⁹ This sort of utilitarianism dictates that moral agents calculate the results of their actions looking to the likely consequences of those actions. When asked to compare this theoretical view to Higgins, the students notice that his decisions require that he make a calculation of the likely consequences of global economics on United States citizens, especially with regard

to things such as hunger, heat, and the consumption of fossil fuels. He calculates that there may come a time when these resources will become scarce, and that it will be the government's job to provide them. So, Higgins reasons, any action that will enable the government to do this job is morally justified and calculates that keeping the conspiracy under wraps will lead to more happiness and benefit for everyone in the long run.

We then ask the students to evaluate this sort of moral reasoning. While they find this style of moral reasoning attractive in the abstract, when they see Higgins using it to justify some of the distasteful actions of the CIA, they are turned off. This provides an opportunity for us to consider criticisms of utilitarianism.

At this juncture, we ask students whether they can come up with a counterexample that might be used to challenge this consequentialist way of thinking. The students initially struggle a bit with this task. The idea is to develop a situation in which Higgins's style of moral reasoning is used to come to a clearly morally repugnant conclusion. The initial attempts by the students try to retell the story in a way that avoids the necessary conclusion, or so that the moral choice does not have to be made at all.¹⁰ We try to show how such responses miss the point of developing a counterexample by working through their proposals and showing in detail how their counterexamples fail to achieve their purpose. The point, of course, is to juxtapose the reasoning with the conclusion actually reached. When the students recognize this, they are able to develop more sophisticated counterexamples which do achieve their purpose. With their input, then, we use this opportunity to model the sort of example wanted, and develop a counterexample with the desired features. For instance, here is a counterexample developed by the class: Suppose we take the class on a spelunking expedition. While exploring the cave, it collapses and the entire class is trapped with no way out. All will die if nothing is done. So, we decide to choose one of the students to climb to a point in the cave where we believe some light is shining through. We believe it is the only possible escape route. So, with a conveniently discovered stick of dynamite, we send the student to blast loose the rocks that block our escape, acknowledging that the student who does this will not survive. Clearly, the utilitarian calculation shows that it is better to kill one person rather than let the entire class die, but the students agree that it is morally repugnant to assign one of the students to this task, whether they are willing or not.

So, our discussion of the moral reasoning of Higgins in the film allows us to consider a number of questions surrounding utilitarian moral reasoning, and allows us to introduce utilitarianism in a way made concrete by this prominent character in the film. By starting with Higgins, students begin by analyzing what they typically find

is the simplest form of moral reasoning in the film. Thus, they begin developing their own skills at analysis and criticism with this less complex character before they tackle more difficult ones. In addition, by increasing their confidence with this case, students are more apt to venture farther on their own, with less direction from the instructors.

The next character we consider is Joubert, who is also a relatively straightforward character to analyze. Joubert is an assassin. Joubert is initially charged with eliminating Turner and his colleagues when Turner begins to expose the plot created by the rogue elements of the CIA. As Turner discovers this, he believes that Joubert is continuing to track him in order to eliminate him too. While this is true for the majority of the film, a certain scene brings Joubert's true position into focus. Turner manages to expose that the rogue elements in the CIA are being led by Leonard Atwood, a high ranking Deputy Director of the CIA. Turner sneaks into Atwood's home to confront him, and Joubert appears. Turner thinks Joubert is after him, but it turns out he is not. Joubert assassinates Atwood.

Turner: But, he's with the Company. Why would they want him killed?

Joubert: I don't interest myself in "why?" I think more often in terms of "when?" . . . sometimes "where?" And always "how much?"

It is then revealed that Joubert's contract on Turner and his colleagues was with Atwood, and since Atwood is dead, the contract is no longer in effect, and Joubert has no further interest in killing Turner.

After leaving the scene, Turner and Joubert continue their conversation. Joubert suggests that Turner should leave the US, as he is a loose end and embarrassment to the CIA, and they might still want to have him eliminated. Turner asks Joubert what he would suggest, and Joubert goes on a brief digression about his own occupation.

Joubert: The fact is: What I do is not a bad occupation. There is never a Depression. Someone is always willing to pay.

Turner: I would find it tiring.

Joubert: No. It is quite restful. Almost peaceful. No need to believe in either side, or any side. There is no cause. There is only yourself. And the belief is in your precision.

We then ask the students how this exchange might reveal Joubert's motivation for his actions. The usual response is that Joubert is not necessarily a selfish person, who acts only insofar as his own interests are served by others; rather, students view him as acting in his own self-interest. He actively pursues what interests him, regardless of whether anyone else helps him or not. So, this exchange reveals Joubert to be a kind of egoist, another philosophical technical term. His interest is simply in his being paid for what he does. He has no issues about whether what he does is right, or whether his victim might or might

not deserve to be killed. He has no motive other than to be paid well for his work, which he is very good at. Joubert's egoism gives us the opportunity to explain to students the difference between psychological and ethical egoism, and the vacuity of psychological egoism. We ask the students to consider the example of someone they believe acts only altruistically, such as Mother Theresa, and to shape her motivating reasons to be consistent with her acting out of her own self-interest. So, for example, the students suggest that she might be acting in the way she does only to make herself feel good about herself, or "to get into heaven." The students, then, begin to wonder whether anyone could truly be said to act for the interests of others if psychological egoism is true.

When asked to consider Turner's position, the students find him a little harder to categorize. They notice that he does not seem to clearly fit the models of either Joubert (the egoist) or Higgins (the utilitarian). While he is clearly upset and frightened by the deaths of his colleagues, he is also committed to searching for the truth behind these recent events. He clearly feels he cannot trust many of those around him. In the very beginning of the film, he displays a certain interest in the truth.¹¹ This is revealed quite clearly in an exchange with his superior, Dr. Lappe:

Lappe: Mr. Turner, I wonder if you're entirely happy here.

Turner: Within obvious limits, yes sir.

Lappe: Obvious limits?

Turner: I'd rather write . . . and . . . well it bothers me that I can't tell people what I do.

Lappe: Why is it taking you so long to accept that?

Turner: I actually trust a few people. It's a problem.

In this brief exchange, we see what bothers Turner most. One: Turner believes some people are trustworthy and that these close friends would not tell others about what he does for the CIA. Two: Turner trusts himself to choose those friends that are the most trustworthy. This contrasts with Lappe (and perhaps the view of "the company" too) that we cannot even trust ourselves to find people in the world who are worthy of our trust, even if that means we deceive our closest friends.

Of course, after his section is hit, Turner's trust in his superiors fades even more. Through a variety of plot twists, Turner discovers that his own discovery of the plot within the CIA puts him in danger, and he engages in a variety of maneuvers that culminate in releasing his story to the *New York Times* and the exchange with Higgins discussed above.

Students have a relatively easy time understanding and articulating the positions and style of moral reasoning displayed by Joubert and Higgins. Given that they tackle them first, it lines them up for con-

sidering Turner, a morally complex character. The students are quick to point out that Turner is the hero of the film because he attempts to expose a covert operation within the highly secretive CIA that could potentially ruin the United States' positive image both abroad and at home, but they have difficulty articulating his moral reasoning because his truth-telling could put himself, as well as the people of the country, in serious jeopardy. When we ask students to describe Turner's motivations, they have difficulty in seeing how he fits into the sort of patterns exemplified by Higgins and Joubert.

Turner's position and reasoning do not neatly fit into any classical theoretical paradigm. One way that we help the students to articulate Turner's moral reasoning is to refocus them on the notion of *values*. We ask, "What does Turner value?" and "What is important to Turner?" In looking back to Higgins and Joubert, it is easy to see what they value. Higgins values doing his job to provide for the citizens of the US. Joubert values getting paid for doing his job, and being able to enjoy his life. Turner has values that seem, at first at least, more nebulous. Turner values truth, honesty, and trust. This is made evident in his exchange with Lappe. There are certain people in Turner's life that he trusts, and, because of his job with the CIA, he cannot be open and honest with them. Turner sees this as a problem, a negative feature of his life and work.

Thus, with this notion in view, namely that Turner values truth and honesty, the students are better able to understand Turner's moral reasoning. We ask the students to consider the aims of Turner's choices. They quickly see that his choices are directed at increasing the amount of truth and honesty in his life, and even in the life of others. This is brought out quite clearly in his exchange with Higgins at the end of the film. When Higgins asks, "What do you think the people will want us to do then?" Turner replies, "Ask them!" When this is pointed out, the students are then able to see that Turner wants openness and honesty.

Throughout *Condor*, the students begin to develop their skills at analysis and criticism. Thus, the film itself provides the opportunity to guide the students via scaffolding by helping them work from the simpler examples of Higgins and Joubert to the more complex example of Turner. Additionally, as our discussions continue, the students start to show an increasing degree of autonomy in manipulating and applying relevant moral concepts.

4. *Unforgiven* (1992)

If we compare this film with *Condor*, we see that *Unforgiven* is a greater challenge to the students' ability to analyze the film's characters. In this section, our approach is to examine the moral reasoning of

the characters of *Unforgiven* and how students used what they learned from *Condor* to assess them. Like *Condor*, it is the film's characters in *Unforgiven* that exemplify distinct approaches to morally loaded issues. But there's a ratcheting up of the difficulty in determining how the characters are going about confronting these issues. So, the scaffolding applies not only at the level of character development within each film but also in the sequence of the films we show in the class.

Unforgiven is the story of three outlaws, William Munny (Clint Eastwood), Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), and The Schofield Kid, who seek out and eventually kill two cowboys for having "cut up" a prostitute in the town of Big Whisky, Wyoming. The cowboys' untimely demise might have been avoided if the sheriff, "Little Bill" Daggett (Gene Hackman), had punished them more severely. But, because he merely fined them, the Greeley's Tavern prostitutes offer a bounty for anyone who kills the two cowboys. Munny, Logan, and the Schofield Kid take up the hunt for the cowboys. After they kill one cowboy, Logan has a change of heart and leaves the other two to finish off the second. When Munny and the Schofield Kid collect the reward money from the prostitutes, they discover that Logan has been captured, tortured, and killed by Little Bill. The film ends when Munny confronts and kills Little Bill.

Just as in the case of *Condor*, the film invites us to analyze the model of moral decision making the two main characters, Will Munny and Little Bill, exemplify. While students consider Turner the hero of *Condor*, when asked, they are not sure who the hero is of *Unforgiven*. They expect the sheriff, Little Bill, and his deputies to be good, but students discover that they are, in fact, ruthless, harming others without thinking through the consequences of their action. As opposed to the sheriff, the outlaws are reluctant to engage in violence, understanding that doing so is a serious matter not to be undertaken lightly. We begin by asking the students what they believe motivates Little Bill, why he does what he does, and they generally see that protecting the town and its citizens seems to be his operative principle in determining what he ought to do. His viciousness comes out later in a scene with English Bob, a gunslinger who has arrived in Big Whisky seeking the bounty. There is a notice forbidding firearms that Bob either misses or ignores. When Little Bill discovers that Bob is armed, he proceeds to beat him severely, in a very public manner. Even though Bob has done nothing more severe than violate this ordinance, Little Bill punishes him to a degree that seems excessive. When beating Bob nearly to death, beyond what seems deserved, Little Bill is clearly a villain. Little Bill makes a speech as he is beating Bob:

Little Bill: I guess you think I'm kicking you, Bob. But it ain't so. What I'm doing is talking, you hear? I'm talking to all those villains down there in

Kansas. I'm talking to all those villains in Missouri. And all those villains down there in Cheyenne. And what I'm saying is there ain't no whore's gold. And if there was, how they wouldn't want to come looking for it anyhow.

We ask students to consider the juxtaposition of Little Bill's actions before and after meeting Bob and then to evaluate his reasons for acting the way he does. They see Little Bill's malicious assault on Bob as an abuse of power. Students oftentimes speak of Little Bill as the "bully" who feels entitled to assault anyone that he perceives to constitute any kind of threat. Since Bob violated the ordinance, Little Bill believes it permissible to beat him senseless. Seeing this pattern of actions by Little Bill is crucial to the students' understanding of his moral reasoning.

At this point, it often occurs that the students, on their own, recall an earlier discussion we had concerning Higgins in *Condor* and apply it to Little Bill. This is of course one of the goals of the scaffolding method, to get the students to autonomously use the skills we have been developing. They see that Higgins, too, is focused on a goal that the students find worthwhile, yet engages in actions that seem morally unjustified, or are at least questionable, with regard to meeting that goal. While quite committed to the safety and security of Big Whisky, Little Bill is willing to justify *any* means to achieve this aim.

Little Bill's commitment to preserving the security of Big Whisky borders upon abuse of power—certainly, so it is pointed out by the students, much more so than Higgins—when Munny, Logan, and the Schofield Kid enter Greeley's Tavern looking for more information about the fugitive cowboys. Munny, because he has become ill, stays in the bar where Little Bill and his deputies find him after hearing a report that the three men had guns. Little Bill arrives, and upon finding a weapon on Munny and despite his clearly infirm condition, beats Munny severely. Little Bill is acting preemptively to promote the security and safety of the town, and doing so by enacting severe penalties on anyone who appears a threat.

The students agree that protecting the town is a positive and worthwhile goal or end of Little Bill's actions, but find his means of achieving it morally problematic. They describe him as "mean" and "vicious," when describing his methods to go about promoting the safety and security of Big Whisky. Despite this keen focus on promoting the welfare of Big Whisky's inhabitants, Little Bill is inclined to make certain mistakes.

Most important, perhaps, is his mistake with regard to his treatment and estimation of Munny. This miscalculation is most vivid in the ending sequence of the film. Little Sue, the prostitute who delivers the reward money to Munny and the Schofield Kid after they have shot

both cowboys, explains that Logan had confessed upon being captured by Little Bill about Munny's true identity and past indiscretions:

He said how you was really William Munny out of Missouri . . . and Little Bill said, "Same William Munny that dynamited the Rock Island and Pacific in '69 killin' women and children an' all?" And Ned says you done a lot worse than that, said you was more cold blooded than William Bonney and how if he hurt Ned again you was gonna come an' kill him like you killed a U.S. Marshall in '70.

During this exchange, Munny finds out about the torture and killing of Logan. Learning this comes as a great shock to him. The viewer sees a change come over him when he picks up a bottle of whiskey and takes a long pull. It is at this point that students see Munny transform from empathic retributivist to vengeful murderer. When asked about this scene, the students are able to recognize that Munny must get drunk to overcome his reluctance to kill, especially in a vengeful fit of rage, and that this colossal shift in his character is a crucial moment both in the film and in their own estimation of his moral reasoning.

Munny returns to Big Whisky, and discovers the body of his friend, Logan, propped up outside the tavern. He then confronts Little Bill and his deputies in Greeley's Tavern. Munny shoots Little Bill and kills a few of his deputies in a gunfight. Little Bill is severely wounded and tries to react. Munny stops him, and the following exchange occurs:

Little Bill: I don't deserve this . . . to die like this. I was building a house.

Munny: Deserve's got nothin' to do with it. [*aims gun*]

Little Bill Daggett: I'll see you in hell, William Munny.

Will Munny: Yeah. [*fires*]

The students point out that, in this exchange, which is perhaps the culminating moment of the film, Munny has given up on the question of whether he can justify his actions. He knows that he cannot. He knows that what he is doing is wrong, yet does it anyway. It is only at this point that Munny becomes "evil." He has been transformed from a frail, struggling pig farmer with whom they easily sympathize to a ruthless murderer the students cannot even recognize.

This sudden transformation is quite jarring for the students. We have discovered that when they begin analyzing the moral decision making of Munny, the students find more clarity by beginning discussion with the ending of *Unforgiven* where he is the ruthless murderer. It is here where we really see the students' approach to analysis become more sophisticated than their approach to *Condor*. They have begun to master a way to interpret the characters' moral reasoning by confronting difficult, complex parts of the story first, followed by the parts of the story that seem incompatible with these complexities.¹²

After addressing Munny, the ruthless killer, students go in search of Munny, the empathic retributivist. They look no further than the discussion of Munny's late wife, Claudia, who had "straightened [him] up, cleared [him] of drinkin' whiskey and all." The students believe that Claudia had been a positive influence upon Munny, but, after her untimely death, he became merely a struggling Kansas hog farmer. Students believe Munny's first reason for killing the two cowboys seems to be that he needs money to provide a good life for his children. In this way, Munny is not entirely unlike Little Bill, in that he looks to the worth of the goal of his actions to justify the means to achieving it.

Students also think that Munny seems to have agreed to kill the cowboys because he has some empathy for the disfigured prostitute, Delilah. She and Munny share "scars," both psychological and physical. Because of his identification with the prostitute, students see that his second reason for taking up the Schofield Kid's invitation is to seek retribution for the hurt they have caused Delilah. Because he has these reasons, we believe that Munny's days of gratuitous violence are well behind him; he needs really good reasons to kill.

We have observed that students, though they mostly agree on what to make of Little Bill and his moral reasoning, given the overlapping similarities between him and Higgins from *Condor*, remain divided about their assessment of Munny's moral decision making. Whereas some students sum up Munny as the empathic retributivist whose past continues to haunt him, a not too insignificant number of students find Munny's moral reasoning reprehensible—i.e., he's *just* a cold-blooded, ruthless killer.

As with Socrates so long ago, the point of asking the students the questions we ask is not necessarily to find a predetermined answer that everyone does or must agree upon, or even to find an answer at all, but to examine our beliefs about the sorts of moral issues confronted in films such as *Condor* and *Unforgiven* in such a way as to bring greater clarity and refinement to those beliefs. We try to allow for a classroom in which disagreement, while perhaps not exactly comfortable, is at least tolerable, in the hope that the students can better see why and how they might disagree.

This section and the last has attempted to show how we provide for students the scaffolding necessary for them to analyze films and moral issues they may raise on their own. We have, to put it in one former student's words, "ruined [their] ability to watch movies without thinking so hard." Now that we have spent some time delving into how we guide students through an analysis of the film and its characters, in the next section, we will describe in a more general way how students' learning about moral reasoning evolves in our classroom. In addition we conclude with some remarks about method.

5. Conclusion

We have found that the use of films to examine moral reasoning has some distinct benefits. The use of film and discussion of the characters of the film allows the students to identify with the characters and has a very strong concretizing effect. By seeing moral reasoning in the context of a story and being exercised by the characters makes the reasoning real for them and provides a context and format with which our students are familiar. The result is that the students take ownership of discussion and analysis of the issues at play. In addition, by having the context of the film be a fixed point, students are less inclined to try to change the parameters of the situation under discussion than they might be otherwise.¹³

By combining scaffolding techniques with the methods of Socrates described in §2 we are able to achieve important instructional goals. First we demonstrate to students the sorts of analysis we intend for them to perform after they have become more familiar with philosophical techniques. Part of this demonstration is explaining how analysis works and the goals we hope to achieve. We ask the students to participate in the process, from the very beginning, by asking them directed questions. We engage in conversation about their answers, which serves to verify and clarify their understanding, both of the analysis itself and the methods used to reach it. We are all along asking students questions and making use of their responses and providing clues to help with analysis. We see that by a regular increase in the sophistication of the students' ability to analyze the characters in film, and by increasing the complexity of the films themselves, we see a significant increase in the students' ability to engage in moral reasoning as well as to analyze the moral reasoning of others. Our hope is that the students can integrate these skills into their lives outside of the classroom, whether or not they decide to pursue the study of philosophy in the future.

We intend our approach to mirror that of Plato's *Meno*.¹⁴ In that dialogue, Socrates and Meno are engaged in a search for virtue. In the process, Socrates questions a slave-boy in such a way as to take the slave-boy through a process in which he does not know the answer to a geometry problem, and yet thinks he does know, through a stage where the slave-boy recognizes that he does not know what he thought he did, and finally to a point at which real progress is made and the slave-boy begins to know the answer to the problem. All the while, Socrates comments to Meno about the stages of the process, in a way that shows that what happens with the slave-boy is itself a model of the inquiry Socrates and Meno are engaged in.

We attempt to accomplish something parallel with our students and show them how the issues might apply to their own lives, by examining the moral reasoning of the characters in the various films

we watch. Most of our students begin by thinking that they have a pretty good grip on moral questions, and on what they believe is right and wrong. However, by watching these morally complex films and by our asking the students questions such as “why did character x do y ?” “what reason does x have for choosing y ?” and “is x ’s reason for doing y a good reason?” the students are shaken in their confidence. Seeing that even characters they are morally repulsed by may well have plausible reasons for their actions, such as Joubert in *Condor* or Little Bill in *Unforgiven*, they come to see that perhaps they do not know what they think they know. As Socrates says at *Meno* 86b, “We will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know.” At that point they are able to see more clearly the complexities of the moral decision making of the characters, and in turn can often see how these complexities may apply to their own lives.

We hope that this discussion may provide a point of departure for other instructors hoping to raise issues involving moral reasoning in their own classrooms. By using films that go beyond the usual canon of the “philosophical,” we find that students can engage with issues of moral reasoning in a fruitful way. In any case, we have attempted to provide a discussion of the manner in which we have used such films successfully.

Notes

We are grateful for the generous financial support we have received for our teaching the High School Institute from the University of Wyoming, the University of Wyoming Honors College, and the State of Wyoming. We are especially indebted to the help we have received over the years we have taught the course from Duncan Harris, Rene Sanchez, Susan Vialpando, and, most of all, the vibrant students who have been a part of our HSI classes. We would like to thank Jennifer Colter, Susanna Goodin, and Tiffany Ulatowski, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their guidance in the preparation of this manuscript.

1. Our course meets for four days a week for a duration of three weeks. The students are in class for 135 minutes at a time. We have found that 16-year-olds have difficulty focusing on any one task for that amount of time, so we divide discussions in the following way. On day one, we begin with approximately one hour of discussion, in which we introduce such concepts as argument, reasoning, and evidence. We emphasize that any opinion can be expressed, but that the students must be willing to back up those opinions with argument and/or evidence. We follow the discussion with a short break. We then begin with the first movie. We watch approximately half of the film, stopping it with ten to fifteen minutes left in the period, in order to highlight some of the issues raised by the film, and we instruct students to think about and discuss those issues before our next meeting (i.e., homework). We then start the next meeting by finishing the film. We then take a short break, and conclude with discussion for the remainder of that meeting period. We repeat this cycle for six iterations throughout the three-week period.

2. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that HSI is different from regular high school and college curricula because there is no formal assessment of the students. Despite the lack of grades, we have found students remain engaged throughout the course of the three-week period and do show, through careful prodding, a grasp of the material. We will not address the debate over whether pre-college students ought to be formally assessed for their performance in a course like ours or how pre-college students ought to be assessed for their work.

3. Some of the films we have employed include *The Molly Maguires* (1970), *Class Action* (1992), *Soylent Green* (1972), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1968), and *The Dark Knight* (2005). In addition, this course also gives us the opportunity to show films that the students have never encountered.

4. In *Introduction to Philosophy through Film*, Richard Fumerton and Diane Jeske have claimed that using film in the classroom is more beneficial than using thought experiments. They write,

[T]hought experiments have been an indispensable tool in the evaluation of philosophical theories . . . [b]ut we have found that our students sometimes find the philosopher's use of hypothetical situations incomplete, remote, and artificial. For many students, these descriptions lack a kind of context, detail, vivacity, intimacy, and realism that would make it easier to test "intuitions" about what we would or wouldn't say in describing the situation. More and more frequently we have found ourselves appealing to various films in order to breathe life into the less colorful philosophical appeals to possibilities. We have seen students get excited about old philosophical controversies when they can relate them to movies in which they have become completely engrossed and which they have already often discussed with friends. (Fumerton and Jeske 2010, xiii)

We do not want to involve ourselves in the debate over the efficacy of using film over thought experiments because we believe that a well-prepared instructor who is adept at introducing thought experiments is just as likely to be able to draw out students' intuitions via the use of film, but we have used films because of reasons such as those mentioned by Fumerton and Jeske.

5. For example, we recommend interested instructors see Fumerton and Jeske's *Introduction to Philosophy through Film* or parts of Nichols, Smith, and Miller's *Introduction to Philosophy through Science Fiction*.

6. Griswold, "Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?," pp. 126–37.

7. See especially *Meno* 82b–86d, where Socrates engages in an examination with a slave.

8. Lipscomb, Swanson, and West, "Scaffolding." Retrieved August 30, 2012, from <http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/>. The term "scaffolding" was first used by Bruner (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1978) and is based on Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978).

9. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, II 2.

10. In this way, there are overlapping similarities between pre-college teenagers and undergraduates. In an introductory philosophy course, undergraduates tend to want to change the parameters of a thought experiment to contend with the problem it raises. Think here of when one introduces traditional bystander trolley problems. The solution an undergraduate might present in response is: "well, the five people could just get off the track," or "the trolley conductor could wake up in time to stop the runaway train." Each of these responses are an avoidance tactic the student might employ when faced with a

difficult moral thought experiment. Pre-college teens use a similar, though perhaps less sophisticated, approach.

11. Given Turner's interest in truth-telling, we have an opportunity to discuss deontological approaches to moral theory. Consider, for example, Immanuel Kant (1996), "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy."

12. By this point of the course, typically in the third and final week, our asking of questions has become practically *pro forma*, as the students have developed quite a bit of autonomy in the discussion. For our part as instructors, this is very much one of our goals, and with the precocious students typical of our program, we are able to "fade" from the discussion to a great degree, and manage it quite lightly.

13. See the brief discussion of this in note 11 above.

14. To our knowledge, this affinity between Plato's *Meno* and the technique of scaffolding has not been previously explored in the literature. We acknowledge that our discussion is but a first step in exploring this relationship, and we look forward to hearing what others might say about the connection between Plato's *Meno* and scaffolding.

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