

WHITE NIGHTS OF THE SOUL:  
CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *INSOMNIA* &  
THE RENEWAL OF MORAL REFLECTION IN FILM<sup>1</sup>

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*"In this Light, how can you hide?  
You are not transparent enough  
while brightness breathes from every side.  
Look into yourself: here is your Friend,  
a single spark, yet Luminosity."*

—Pope John Paul II, "Shores of Silence"<sup>2</sup>

*"I said . . . to Eve[ning], 'Be soon'"*

—Francis Thompson, "Hound of Heaven"<sup>3</sup>

*"Insomnia is constituted by the consciousness that it will never finish—that is, that there is no longer any way of withdrawing from the vigilance to which one is held...The present is welded to the past, is entirely the heritage of the past: it renews nothing. It is always the same present or the same past that endures...*

*"...this immortality from which one cannot escape...a vigilance without recourse to sleep. That is to say, a vigilance without refuge in unconsciousness, without the possibility of withdrawing into sleep as into a private domain. "*

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, "Shores of Silence," in *Collected Poems*, translated by Jerzy Peterkiewicz (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven," in *I Fled Him Down the Nights and Down the Days*, with commentary and notes by John Quinn, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970).

## 1. Introduction

Today, most of what is called popular culture is part of our civilizational problem, not its solution. Still, renewing the civilization requires reaching people where they are, and we often spend much of our time, especially that we most prize, splashing about in television series, magazines, lowbrow websites, and motion pictures featuring Hollywood stars. Professor Fox-Genovese reminds us that, in *Art and Scholasticism*, Jacques Maritain advanced two damning statements of proportion: Literature is to Art as Vanity is to Moral Life and Poetry is to Art as Grace is to Moral Life.<sup>5</sup> If that is correct, then surely motion pictures must rank beneath literary fiction. Perhaps it is then perverse to scrutinize, in search of moral insight, an American-made feature film with familiar American movie stars (though a British director). Nonetheless, that is what this analysis seeks to do. We shall not claim that Christopher Nolan's work in his movie *Insomnia* constitutes artistry.<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag famously wrestled with the question whether photography amounted to an art form, which surely leaves cinema even more in doubt. Even if there have been artists, even geniuses, of this most influential and impressive of media, Nolan has not produced a body of work that warrants his inclusion in that Pantheon. Still, Nolan displays fine film craftsmanship in this work, which also revolves around central moral questions. His movie depicts and perhaps affords glimpses of the operation of that Grace of which Maritain spoke.

The title of this piece makes reference to St. John of the Cross's poem "Dark Night [of the Soul]," which, in his commentary on the poem, the mystic describes as a night of "purgative contemplation"

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, translated by R. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Address to the American Maritain Association meeting: "The Renewal of Civilization," Atlanta, October 2004.

<sup>6</sup> *Insomnia*, released by Warner Home Video in 2002, directed by Christopher Nolan, written by Hilary Seitz, cinematography by Wally Pfister, edited by Dody Dorn, and music by David Julyan. Featuring performances by Al Pacino (as Dormer), Robin Williams (as Finch), Hilary Swank (as Burr), and Maura Tierney (as Clement).

following a voluntary discipline of self-denial.<sup>7</sup> His travel, and travail through this passage, “horrible and awful to the spirit,” is guided by an inner luminosity. “This light,” the saint writes, “grounded me More surely than the light of noonday/To the place where he (well I knew who!) was awaiting me/A place where no one appeared.”<sup>8</sup> In our reflections, we do well to remember that such illumination must first penetrate the soul from without before it can serve as a lamp within. The article’s title also invokes Dostoevsky’s 1848 story “White Nights,” set in St. Petersburg, subtitled “A Tale of Love from the Reminiscences of a Dreamer.” For Dostoevsky’s lonely dreamer, the nights are bright with wonders and promise. Its narrator rhapsodizes:

It was a marvelous night. The sort of night one only experiences when one is young. The sky was so bright, and there were so many stars that, gazing upward, one couldn’t help wondering how so many whimsical, wicked people could live under such a sky. This too is a question that would occur only to the young, the very young; but may God make you wonder like that as often as possible. Now, mentioning whimsical, angry people makes me think how well I behaved that day.”

Recall, also, the story’s last section, “The Morning”, which begins “My nights were over. It was the morning after. The weather was bad. It was raining. The rain beat a gloomy tattoo against my window...Objects swam before my eyes. Fever was sneaking along my limbs.” The tale ends this way: “So may the sky lie cloudless above you and your smile be bright and carefree; be blessed for the moment of bliss and happiness you gave to another heart, a lonely and grateful one. My God, a moment of bliss. Why, isn’t that enough for a whole

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<sup>7</sup> *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, pp. 1578-80. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 5th Ed., edited by Elizabeth Knowles (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, corrected 2001, s.v. “Misquotations,” p. 521), the phrase “. . . of the soul” was added in an English translation of St. John’s “Noche Oscura” by David Lewis in his 1864 edition, *Complete Works [of John of the Cross]*.

<sup>8</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, translated by Edgar Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1959, 1990), p. 34

lifetime?"<sup>9</sup> Can a moment of bliss given to another redeem a life, redeem it from its corruption? How does a life, how does a person, turn from good behavior to bad, and can a life suddenly reversed in this way really be thus redeemed? Is it still the same life? Can the same living human being perdure through such change? It is with such questions of morality and identity that this analysis engages through a reflection on Nolan's movie.

## 2. The Film and Its Background

Directed by Christopher Nolan, *Insomnia* was made in 2002, after his student film *Following* and his 2001 breakthrough hit, *Memento*. *Memento* attracted considerable attention on its release and, I think, is interesting chiefly for its complex, fractured narrative structure, running generally in reverse (like the stage and film versions of Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*) so that many episodes come as a surprise to the viewer, as they do for the protagonist (Leonard Shelby), who suffers from short-term memory loss. We understand them through a context supplied later, dramatizing for us our dependence on memory even as Shelby insists that memory is unreliable and no substitute for what he calls "facts." (The history of empiricism should remind us that there is no intelligible experience or knowledge without memory.) As a film, *Memento* is a triumph of form, but the substance of its ideas seems to this author thin and murky stuff.<sup>10</sup>

Nolan's *Insomnia* is an English-language remake of Erik Skjoldbaerg's Norwegian film of the same name, released five years earlier (1997).<sup>11</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, "White Nights," in *Notes From Underground, White Nights, [Etc.]*, translated by A. R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet/ New American Library/ Penguin, 1980), pp. 7, 61.

<sup>10</sup> For an approach to that film that is more sympathetic and finds it more serious intellectually, see Michael Baur, "We All Need Mirrors to Remind Us Who We Are: Inherited Meaning and Inherited Selves in 'Memento,'" in *Movies and the Meaning of Life*, edited by Kimberly Blessing and Paul Tudico (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), pp. 94-110. Later in the article, I briefly discuss one part of Baur's interpretation.

<sup>11</sup> *Insomnia* (Norway), released by the Criterion Collection in 1997, directed by Erik Skjoldbaerg, and written by Nikolaj Frobenius and E. Skjoldbaerg. Featuring Stellan Skarsgaard's performance as Jonas Engstrom.

the Norwegian film, a Swedish police detective, in trouble because of a scandal where he was found in bed with a crime suspect during a police raid, goes to Norway to help solve a teenage girl's murder. Stressed by his professional humiliation, blinded by the northern fog, and disoriented by the long daytime, this detective (named Jonas Engstrom and played by Stellan Skarsgaard) accidentally kills another policeman—his Swedish partner, Erik Vik—as they close in on the murderer. Engstrom is thoroughly corrupt, groping a teenager whom he interrogates, toying with a woman detective, trying to seduce his hotel's desk clerk before she aborts the tryst. Most grievously, the killer, a crime novelist named Jon Holt, has seen Engstrom kill Vik and, to buy the man's silence, Engstrom plants evidence to frame the young girl's boyfriend for her murder. In the end, things take a different turn and Holt, who considers himself a sort of *doppelganger* to Engstrom, a kindred soul also trying to avoid punishment for an unpremeditated killing, dies. The woman detective, Hagen, gives Engstrom an incriminating cartridge-casing as he prepares to leave for home, sealing the concealment of his involvement in the policeman's death.

Nolan and his collaborators make some obvious changes, scripting the policemen as two L.A. cops, Will Dormer (played by Al Pacino) and his partner, Hap Eckhart. The two are under investigation back home and they travel to Alaska to assist in a local murder investigation. Nolan trades white and grey, museum-walled, Scandinavian-modern, urban apartment settings for rustic inns and cabins. The woman detective, Ellie Burr (played by Hilary Swank), is now an eager novice, excited to work on a big case, and avid to learn from and thrilled to work with a famous big-city detective. More important for our purposes here, the remake involves some relatively small but consequential changes in the plot and characters (in both the dramatic and moral senses of the latter term).

Where Engstrom eventually cooperates in Holt's plan to frame the dead girl's boyfriend for her murder, Dormer resists Finch's, even putting a gun to his head at one point. In his bleary-eyed, guilt-ridden condition, however, unsure even about his behavior in mistakenly shooting Hap, the detective is out-manuevered by the clever and resourceful writer. Near the film's end, Will packs to return to L.A. in defeat, having failed to build a case against Finch and resigned to the latter's seemingly unavoidable frame-up of Randy, the boyfriend in the

American version. Dormer's conscience is also disquieted by the way in which the latter failure works to his own benefit, insuring that the threatening truth will be concealed and Finch will not implicate him in Hap's killing. Dormer tarries in Alaska only because he learns that his one-time protégé, the now suspicious and disillusioned Alaska detective Burr, has gone alone to Finch's cabin to recover evidence from him. Dormer, who alone knows Finch's murderous side, apprehends the young woman's danger. After a prolonged struggle against Finch, involving blades, blunt instruments, and guns, the detectives are alone, with Dormer mortally wounded.<sup>12</sup> Here Burr, like the woman detective in the original film, offers to discard evidence that implicates the visitor in the partner's killing. Unlike Engstrom, however, Dormer demurs, warning her against thus "los[ing] her way." These changes elevate the film's screenplay and narrative into the moral drama that is the primary concern of this analysis. I will try to show how, in fighting for Burr and against Finch, Will Dormer is struggling with and for his own self, the two characters representing different aspects of his past, possible futures, and versions of his identity.

Surprisingly, in a film touched by Hollywood, the relationship between Dormer and Burr remains one of admiration, requited by amused indulgence, not romantic passion or sexual opportunism. Nolan also adds, even more surprising in the switch from Europe to America, a layered moral complexity—the protagonist now benefits from the other policeman's death and has more than one reason, not all of them narrowly selfish, to feel relieved at this outcome, unexpected but not wholly regretted and only ambiguously unintended. Similarly, where the murderer Holt had vaguely invoked mathematics, perhaps intending a self-interested cost/benefit analysis to justify his and the Swedish policeman's trading cover-ups, now the "mathematics"

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<sup>12</sup> This final episode delivers a special jolt because its brutal and sudden violence shocks in a film that, to this point, has dwelt more on violence's mournful aftermath than its graphic depiction.

mentioned by Finch, the American film's murderer, is explicitly a utilitarian calculus.<sup>13</sup>

Hilary Seitz, the remake's screenwriter, maintains in an interview that her version of the story plays in thirds: in the first, we think it a "fish-out-of-water" story about L.A. cops in Alaska; in the second, we think it's a "cover-up" story about a cop who's killed his partner; in the last, we think it's an "unholy-alliance" story about collusion between a murdering cop and a cop-admiring murderer.

### 3. Existential Themes: Identity and Two Personified Models

Nolan's *Insomnia* explores significant questions about the conditions of human existence and personal character. We will briefly discuss three main themes. First, there is a recurring return to the theme of identity, especially moral identity--that is, who one is--in a way that has implications for how one should act and react. The film engages this theme both directly, in the characters' talk about who they are, and also indirectly, and more dramatically, by presenting us (and the protagonist) with two characters who identify with him in different ways. These characters represent two aspects of his past, and also two future paths between which he must choose in the narrative's central drama. Second, in Nolan's hands, this matter of identity goes beyond the merely psychological found in, for example, Erik Erikson's 'identity crisis'. It also concerns evaluation, namely how good one is both *at* and *in* being what she is. In this case, the focus is on what distinguishes a good cop from a bad cop. Third and more deeply, this debate points towards the fundamental question of what makes our actions, and ourselves, to be moral and immoral, acceptable and regrettable, virtuous and vicious. Identity transforms role-assessment into moral assessment for such a person as Dormer, because his being a policeman is the role most salient in his self-image and self-conception. It is the self-description with which he most deeply identifies, the one that is most meaningful to him and that he sees as a (or even as *the*) principal

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<sup>13</sup> Holt to Engstrom, contrasting devising a fictional murder and committing a real one: "When you've put all the pieces together, the account balances. Nothing is missing. You have complete control. Complete control. . . . It's all just mathematics. But it's impossible to calculate such a thing. You realize that afterwards."

source of meaning in his life.<sup>14</sup> Because of this, it also places at the center of his moral consciousness the traits of character that make someone good or bad in such a role.<sup>15</sup> Below, we shall see how this serves as an implicit rebuke and alternative to the utilitarianism and nihilism with which Finch seeks first to confuse, and then to seduce, Dormer into rationalizing his wrongdoing, into seeing things as the murderer sees them.

Interpreting Nolan's earlier movie, *Memento*, philosopher Michael Baur draws on the thought of Martin Heidegger: "Even though we are always thrown into the world with a past that defines who we are and what is meaningful for us, we are nevertheless also free to transform the meaning of the past by projecting ourselves into the future. [Quoting Heidegger's *Being and Time*:] 'Our lives are always a process of taking over who we have been in the service of who we will be.'" This analysis argues that something similar is afoot in *Insomnia*, taking the form in the film of a tug-of-war within Dormer between two modes of being, each one rooted in past incidents in his life, justified by its own moral vision, and embodied in a different character offering him divergent possible futures.<sup>16</sup>

Finch insists to Dormer on first meeting him, aboard a ferry, "I'm not who you think I am" (chapter 20).<sup>17</sup> Later encounters reveal that

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the importance of this in moral and political thought of the modernist epoch, see Charles Taylor's treatment, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> When, in the classic 1961 film *The Hustler*, George C. Scott's thuggish Bert tells Paul Newman's Fast Eddie that he (Eddie) has talent and was beaten by "character," he means a single-minded determination to win. We can agree, while allowing that it is *bad* character to which such success is owed.

<sup>16</sup> Baur, "We all Need Mirrors," p. 107. Baur thinks both that the film teaches that each of us is successively constituted by a variety of short-lived 'selves' and that this is correct. I will not here enter the interpretive issue, but think the imputed position plainly incoherent in raising but excluding any answer to the question who it is that is so constituted. Who is she herself? Here, I work with a more common-sense conception of identity and oneself.

<sup>17</sup> The DVD version of the film divides its action into discrete "chapters" (in preference to the more customary terminology of 'scenes'). This literary idiom, while affected, does serve to underscore what I judge to be the



Dormer does indeed have a stereotyped image of the killer as he brushes aside Finch's talk about the special circumstances in which he came to slay Kay, the young woman whose death has brought the L.A. detective to Alaska. Dormer tells the cop-admiring author and murderer that he no more intrigues the detective than does a clogged toilet fascinate the plumber: "you're my job." It will turn out that things are not so simple, but we should postpone that a little, for the more compelling question of identity is not concerning Finch but about who Dormer himself is. Admitting to the inn-keeper, Rachel, his feelings at the time about planting evidence a few years earlier to ensure the conviction of a child-murderer he thought a jury would otherwise acquit, Dormer says even then he knew, "This was gonna catch up with me. I don't do things like that" (chapter 27). This confession is accompanied by a flashback to an image of Dormer staring mournfully into space as he rubs incriminating blood into the clothing of the child-murderer Wayne Dobbs.

In a revealing sequence deleted from the film's theatrical version, Dormer and Rachel talk in a bar after he has found her emptying Hap's hotel room just after he mistakenly shot him. Dormer tells her that he and Hap had been partners for five years. Dormer says in his work he frequently deals with people who have "lost someone." Dormer finds that their feelings are often ambiguous, more complicated than expected, and discloses that he himself felt "embarrassed" as a boy over his brother's death in a fire.<sup>18</sup> In this conversation, still early in the murder investigation, Dormer tells Rachel that he'll stay in Nightmute as long as it takes "to find this guy," adding, "Not long." Perhaps it is himself whom Dormer has lost and now needs to find, though he does not yet fully realize it.

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exceptional literacy, esp. moral literacy, of its screenplay. References herein to numbered chapters are to the DVD version of the film, except where otherwise noted.

<sup>18</sup> In the DVD's commentary, Nolan describes this as the only time till the last sequences where Dormer is fully honest with someone. He suggests that it was omitted in the theatrical version in part because the scene would come too early in the character's development for such straightforwardness, and perhaps also too early for Dormer to be so clear and accurate in his vision of himself.

I think that Dormer's character embodies a version of what is called the ethics of identity or, in the terminology of philosopher Charles Taylor, the 'ethics of authenticity'—better yet, the ethics of integrity. Though unaware of his project, Dormer strives toward a Kierkegaardian "purity of heart": a state of harmony, concord, and consistency across his general resolution of will, preferences, particular choices, actions, as well as his backward-looking attitudes (that is, an ability to look back over his choices and reactions with neither shame nor guilt). However, the possibility of people whose character is as corrupt as that of Finch should remind us that this inner consonance is not morally sufficient; there must also be harmony with natural human compassion for *each* person, not simply for *all* persons or for some such abstraction as 'humanity'.

In addition to these more direct (though not always explicit) invocations of identity in Seitz's screenplay (or, at least, in the movie's dialogue, since actor's improvisation may have played some role), Nolan's film also poses the problems of Dormer's identity indirectly and more dramatically by presenting him and the viewer with two additional characters, each of whom offers a model of the detective himself in some portion of his past and a possible future. These characters pose Dormer's, and the film's, central choice: between twin doppelgangers who illuminate contrasting aspects of the detective's distant and more recent past conduct.

The murderer, Finch, identifies himself as the L.A. detective's "new partner," beginning with the message he leaves for Dormer in their first personal contact, which also introduces his character to the viewer. Indeed, several times and in slightly different terms, he alleges a "partner[ship]" between himself and Dormer. Finch, a novelist of murder mysteries, reveals that as a younger man he tried to become a policeman. Now, he too applies procedures of professional inquiry to solve murders, though only those of his own fictional invention. He also sees himself as like Dormer in trying to understand criminals' minds, to get inside those forms of mentality, try them on, and work them through. Moreover, Finch thinks that this has given him psychological insights that extend beyond forensic psychology. There is now a deeper similarity, which Finch deems a bond. In his desperation and confusion, exacerbated by his sleeplessness, Dormer tries to pin Hap's killing on Kay's murderer (who turns out to be Finch).

Just so, Finch plans to frame Kay's abusive (but not homicidal) teenage boyfriend Randy for her murder. Most important, Finch thinks his crossing from fictional killings to real has both given him insight into what he now considers the artificial, even illusory, character of the moral difference between right and wrong, and also enables him to perceive the deeper affinity between those who commit crimes, even murders, and those who do not. On these bases, in his conversations with Dormer, Finch insists that he and Will share a similar situation, secret, and awareness, constituting a "partner[ship]" between them.

The L.A. detective fights against such involvement with Finch and repudiates any similarity between them. "Don't talk to me about us," he bluntly rebukes the writer. Alaska police investigator Ellie Burr embodies another alter ego for Dormer, representing a different aspect of him, this time a central and defining part of his more distant past as a police professional, where Finch reflects Dormer's more recent turn to planting evidence and framing a suspect. Burr has studied Dormer's cases in her academy training and wants to be more like him. She is his admirer, a fan, almost palpably delighted with this unexpected opportunity to work alongside, study, and learn from one of her professional heroes. In a different terminology, she might be called Dormer's *protégé* (protected one). Even though it is himself whom he jeopardizes, Will admonishes the novice to put more care into investigating the circumstances of Hap's death before filing her report on it. It is in fact Dormer's final and fateful choice to shield her from Finch, rather than Finch from her, that seals his fate and secures him a kind of redemption (chapter 30).

Like Dormer, Finch also had a young female admirer, Kay Connell, who relished his writing. Where neither Dormer nor Burr shows sexual attraction, Finch tells Dormer that he became sexually aroused while comforting Kay after an argument with her boyfriend and describes how he slapped her, first to "teach her a lesson" after she laughed at his arousal (presumably, erection) and then to silence her screams, finally killing her. He was unable to cope with her quick transition from the inferior's admiration to the superior's derision at a moment he describes as one of his own "vulnerab[ility]." Detective Burr, similarly, becomes disillusioned with Dormer, catching him in lies about what she realizes were his efforts to cover up some of the facts about Hap's death, and even questioning whether it was an accident. Dormer must

decide whether to try to protect her and again become worthy of her respect. Here, the philosophically-minded viewer may glimpse an insight central to Kant's moral theory but that Aristotle and his followers seem to have missed. Moral deliberation and action do not arise to identify means to one's own happiness, but arise from concern lest we be unworthy of happiness. Both these men have killed and know what it is like, but Finch simply assumes that he and Dormer have experienced the same emotional reactions and have drawn a similar conclusion.

#### 4. The characters' characters: What makes 'good cops' good?

Identity especially matters in moral assessment because someone's moral virtues, vices, and responsibilities are ones she has as this or that person, as being a parent, or citizen, or friend, or partner, or fellow, etc., and so to situate a person is to talk about what and therein who she is. Plainly, for Will Dormer, it is his status, his identity, as a policeman in which he is most deeply invested.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the question: "What does it take to be a good policeman" or as it is sometimes put, a "real cop?" is central for him. This question becomes a stand-in for a larger inquiry into the grounds of ethical assessment and the nature of virtue: what makes some conduct to be good conduct? What makes some among us good people? In what does being a good person consist? It is Ellie Burr and Walter Finch, I think, who personify in their lives, and in their encounters with Dormer, two ways of answering this question.

The day of their arrival in Alaska, Dormer allows, in conversation with Hap about the L.A. police internal examination, that, although he thinks himself a good cop, together the partners have committed misdeeds that the investigation will likely uncover. In a more hostile phone conversation after Hap's death, Dormer snarls to the Internal Affairs investigator Warfield that officers like Warfield and his fellows in I.A. "suck the marrow out of real cops." At this point, Dormer is still desperately and confusedly casting about for a way out of his dilemma. Later, as he proceeds with his cover-up of the truth about Hap's killing, the film provides a graphic illustration of the depths to which Dormer

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<sup>19</sup> The detective shares his life with no spouse or children.

has sunk. He fires a bullet from Finch's gun into a dead dog he comes across in a filthy alley, planning to retrieve the bullet and switch it for the one with which he mistakenly shot Hap as the two visiting detectives pursued the fleeing Finch in fog-shrouded woods. Here we see how Dormer has descended from the white gloves he used in (what we learn was) an earlier episode of planting evidence to frame a guilty man he thought would otherwise go free to the bloody hands (though encased this time in translucent gloves) he gets recovering the bullet from the dog's slimy corpse.

Like the Darwinian bird who is his namesake, Finch is the one who has adapted to survive. It comes as little surprise that, for him, the good way to live is one that manifests successful strategies for survival. This is the implicit nature of the "partner[ship]" he offers Will. Finch will enable him to survive with his career and reputation intact if Dormer cooperates in Finch's plan to escape punishment for Kay's death by framing her young boyfriend, Randy. After Dormer blows up at him during a police investigation, Finch tells the Alaskan detectives that if Dormer is indeed a good cop, as they insist, then he (Finch) would "hate to see a bad cop" (chapter 24).

Dormer is upset (and draws on this real anger when he feigns an uproar to abort an initial inquiry into Hap's death) that he (and the local police) did not, but should have, known about the tunnel that the murderer used to escape from the trap into the fog whose shrouding density led to Hap's death. However, the truth is that human beings cannot anticipate and specially plan for every contingency. That is one reason we need to develop character traits, dispositions—virtues—to see us through unexpected turns of events.<sup>20</sup>

While still dazzled by her hero-worship, Ellie quotes to Dormer a remark of his that she had found in her police academy research on his

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<sup>20</sup> John Doris's book *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) argues that in general people do not have the kind of character traits that would count as virtues. Let us here set aside flaws in the psychological experiments and philosophical reasoning that purport to show the virtues' infrequent instantiation. The chief moral issue, however, is whether we should strive to cultivate and retain them, whether they are possible, achievable, and important. Not whether they are common.

cases: "A good cop can't sleep because a piece of the puzzle is missing. A bad cop can't sleep because his conscience won't let him." Dormer is at this point himself the bad cop. He has descended from framing one murderer for crimes from whose punishment he'll otherwise escape to attempting to frame another for a killing that Dormer himself committed, to a desperate struggle to spare himself from Finch's offer to help pin Kay's murder on her teenage boyfriend Randy. Dormer only half-remembers Ellie's quotation as a remark made by his own earlier self. He responds, "Yeah, that sounds like something I'd say." This manifest distance from himself, at least from an earlier and better self, poignantly invokes the film's theme of moral identity. It shows starkly his own migration from good cop to bad. He seems to flirt with a familiar moral skepticism, condescending to the supposedly immature young man who could pronounce on things in such simplistic, black-and-white terms. Yet, he knows that the younger Dormer's views, while more innocent, were not therefore immature, and that the contrast he drew should not have been dismissed as simplistic, but bore the clear simplicity of truth.

The chief moral danger Dormer faces is that he will adjust and adapt as Finch has, that he will come to sleep soundly, no longer troubled by a strangled or wearied conscience. That is the temptation Finch offers as a model and "partner." It is instructive to recall that Aristotle talks of persons linked in some forms of friendship as "other selves." Dormer's inability to sleep leaves him struggling day and (indistinguishable) night with the choice between being Ellie's good cop and Finch's adapted, adjusted bad cop. Though he longs to sleep, it is his constant wakefulness that provides him with the unwanted but needed opportunity to struggle for his identity, his self. The old saw is wrong: the wicked can rest. Aquinas affirms, paradoxically, that the pleasures of sin are part of God's way of punishing the sinner. His point is that the Lord sometimes makes it harder for us sinners to save ourselves, or to reform, by providing us pleasing distractions. Eventually, sin's soothing delights take on a horrifying visage. As we shall see below, though Dormer does not recognize it, his sleeplessness is less a curse than a blessing.

### 5. Images and Symbols

Dormer's sleeplessness, which is disturbed by insistent intrusions of light, indicates his troubled soul and gives Nolan's film its central motif, the one from which it borrows its title. Our awareness of this central symbol is aided by an array of additional metaphors and symbols, to which we should now turn, beginning with some of the movie's striking visuals. As the opening credits start, a small plane flies in and out of dense banks of clouds, the camera sometimes outside capturing the scene, sometimes inside the cabin with three men, a pilot and his two passengers. The elusive lucidity and unclarity of the fog continues through the pilot's ominous warning to his passengers, L. A. Police detectives Hap Eckhardt and Will Dormer, entering rural Alaska, "It's gonna get rough." It will, indeed, for both men, though in very different ways. This initial haze subtly introduces the film's continuing themes of longing for peace while fearing truth and clarity. Under the credits, we get images of (1) dark blood, spreading outward on a white cloth, permeating a rectangular weave of silvery fabric in (receding) close-ups, interspersed with (2) craggy, unforgiving peaks of icy mountain spires, and with (3) the plane coming into and out of fog, the screen bleaching white as it enters the fogbank. At the end of this sequence, with the pilot's warning, his plane suddenly crosses almost unimaginably lush, verdant forest—hinting at the possibility of an inner peace to match this idyllic glimpse—then plunges into impenetrable fog. This theme is resumed a short time later in the film. Having set a trap for the killer, luring him to a rustic cabin to retrieve some evidence, the detectives suffer a setback when a policeman clumsily knocks over a megaphone alerting the suspect. The detectives rush the cabin and, finding it empty, plunge through its broken flooring only to find themselves instantly enveloped in thick fog, stumbling over slippery rocks in their pursuit (chapter 8). That pursuit is not only unsuccessful, but sets the stage for Dormer to shoot into the beclouded scene where his bullet finds his partner instead of the killer, Finch.

Several times during the movie, we come across a bright glare, which might eventually facilitate vision but at first only blinds and dizzies both the characters and us viewers. This painful light serves as a symptom of Will's temporary insomnia, helping to disorient him during a phone call from Finch, who offers the once-good detective his

Faustian trade of cover-ups (chapter 22). (The proposed trade may recall the memorable “criss-cross” proposed, and unilaterally begun, in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*.) This luminosity seems to unsettle Will in ways that go beyond the physiological, perhaps threatening to illuminate an ugly fact about his past conduct, and an unambiguous one about recent actions, both of which he desperately wants hidden. For the same reason, however, this light also indicates Grace seeking Will Dormer, who may well here represent our own wills. The light will uncover the truth and, frightening and painful as the process may prove, it is only the truth that can set Will free. Significantly, such a glare seeps around and under a window-shade in Dormer’s Alaska hotel room with an insistence we want to call merciless, as Dormer desperately tries to block it out just prior to his final conversation with Rachel about his past catching up with him (chapter 27). The light is not merciless, however, but indicates a Mercy that will not be deterred.

The fog and the light serve to blind and confuse, threatening Dormer and his fellows with losing their way.<sup>21</sup> As his sleeplessness and moral confusion combine to addle Dormer’s mind, his car scarily spins out of control on a winding Alaska road (Chapter 28). Again, in a scene to which we shall return below, Dormer warns Ellie in the film’s final lines, “Don’t lose your way. . . . Just let me sleep” (Chapter 30). This pairing of the need to maintain the right path with Dormer’s longing for rest links the film’s two most important and pregnant themes. In fact, the L.A. detective will find tranquility only when he has regained the right path and rests, as they say, in peace.<sup>22</sup> The theme of dangerous, unsteady footing recurs. Rachel tells Dormer and Hap, upon their first arrival at the hotel she operates, that people like them, from the “lower 48,” reveal themselves in their gait: “I can tell by your walk...Unsure.” More dramatically, broken, perilous flooring marks both the trapdoor in the cabin beneath and near which the first chase

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<sup>21</sup> An Alaska mental health clinician whom I met at a London medical ethics conference confirmed in conversation with me that the sleeplessness the state’s long days can cause newcomers sometimes triggers both auditory and visual hallucinations, as Dormer’s character experiences.

<sup>22</sup> We shall not rest till we rest in Him, as Francis Thompson’s poem “The Hound of Heaven” vividly reminds.



ensues and the flooring in Finch's other cabin, where the film's action culminates and ends.

The motif of treacherous footing is memorably visualized in the movie's most harrowing sequence. Dormer quickly identifies the mystery-writer Finch as a suspect and goes to his home to investigate. Finch returns home, realizes that someone has entered and is still inside his apartment, and flees. Will gives chase through streets and down to the waterfront where Finch lures the detective out onto a run of logs in the river. The scene is as beautiful and majestic as it is terrifying, handsomely shot both from above and, apparently with hand-held cameras, at the level of the actors' bodies. Having impetuously continued the chase onto this new terrain, over which Finch nimbly speeds, the L.A. cop soon discovers himself over his head literally as well as figuratively. The camera again is at the level of the character's head, which is, more than once in the short sequence, nearly crushed between crashing logs as he surfaces for air. Through the camera's lens, we even peer up from depths at both the detective and the logs above him.<sup>23</sup> Plainly, the scene is rich in metaphorical significance. This is where Finch's ability to adapt, like the bird whose name he bears, is most effectively manifested. Both characters' upright posture on the riverbound logs calls to mind logrolling and, of course, in political slang 'logrolling' is a term for the cynical trades wherein politicians help each other to the public detriment (chapter 18). Finch proposes just such a deal to Will, a swap wherein Finch will help frame Randy for Hap's death at Dormer's hands, provided Will helps him frame Randy for Kay's death at Finch's. That Finch knows his way around in a way that Dormer does not, that entering the logs places Will in mortal peril, certainly points to the moral stakes of playing along, 'cooperating in evil' as the theologians call it. For, should he follow Finch, Will's soul is no less in jeopardy than is his body on the fast moving logs in the rushing river.

The water here, in the plunge through the floating logs, is turbulent. In several other scenes, we spy water washing, foaming, enveloping,

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<sup>23</sup> Nor should we slight here the work of the sound engineers in skillfully amplifying the river's roar and the crash of the colliding logs in the air and then muffling them when the camera submerges beside Dormer.

and churning, for example, in the foam behind the ferry where Finch outlines to Will the 'logroll' (deal) he envisions. In such scenes, the water's turbulence parallels the troubled state of Dormer's mind and conscience. There is, however, sometimes a very different view of water, especially in the placid waterfall shown as the plane moves towards its landing in the opening sequences. There, water seems to offer hope, perhaps symbolizing purgation, cleansing, even baptism.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, we should note a few of the other optical motifs that the film skillfully (and not always visually) offers. Dormer says at the beginning of the investigation, as he examines the victim's corpse, that the killer "crossed a line and didn't *blink*." He adds, "You don't come back from that," explaining his belief that this killer will strike again and more viciously. Later, the film recalls Dormer's stare as he finished planting evidence to catch an earlier case's murderer. This stare, accompanying his narrated recollection that he knew this wrongdoing would catch up with him, seems the functional equivalent of the blink that Finch never made. It is the fact that Dormer can still save himself, can still "come back," that provides the film its central ethical drama.

The need for moral clarity may lie behind a different optical motif: Dormer's eyes play tricks on him as his sleeplessness waxes and his conscience becomes more guilty. They offer him images of the living Hap as he pretends to join the search in the woods for his partner's killer and again, later, in his hotel room's chair. Sometimes, the optical symbolism approaches the didactic. Near the film's end, Dormer feels himself outsmarted by Finch and is close to a despairing surrender. As he struggles with palpable desperation to block out the creamy yellowed sunlight that bleeds through and around his room's feeble window shade, the hotelkeeper Rachel comes in response to complaints about the noise caused by Dormer's frenzied rearrangement of the room's sparse furnishings in his losing battle against the insistent light. Though we might expect her to upbraid the detective when she confronts him, she instead lives up to her surname. (The symbolism of the names of various characters is treated in the next section.) When

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<sup>24</sup> When I presented some of this material at a University of Notre Dame conference, one member of the audience suggested a possible allusion to Lady Macbeth in this motif.

he pitifully pleads to her, "It's so fucking bright in here," she gently corrects him: "No, it's dark in here."

Perhaps most vividly, near the film's close we learn that what looks at the beginning like someone's rubbing a shirtcuff to remove a bloodstain is actually Dormer's rubbing blood *into* the clothes of a murderer, in the course of which process he pulls the shirt partly on. This reversal of what we have seen, giving it a new and unexpected meaning and significance, pointedly demonstrates what Dormer is becoming and whose side he joined when he decided that his high-minded goal of convicting the guilty justified his planting evidence.<sup>25</sup> What we read as one crime turns out to be a transgression of a different kind.

## 6. Names

The richness of symbols used in the film is not limited to the guiding motif of sleeplessness and the visual and thematic elements we have just examined. Many of the names in the English version of *Insomnia* are likewise symbolic, even allegorical. Indeed, some critics complained of excesses here. First, the action is set in the town of Nightmute, Alaska, which is perhaps too obviously allegorical a name. Enveloped in a long 'silent night' where all is "bright" through daylight hours that stretch long into night, not all is "calm" in Nightmute. Russia's white nights showered Dostoevsky's young dreamer, who was mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, with dazzlements and astonishment that people could be wicked in such a world. His later recollection of them offers the satisfied, if deluded, recollection that he behaved well. The film's main character, Detective Will Dormer, is not young. In contrast with Dostoevsky's dreamer, Dormer is old, weary, and cynical, and all too aware that he has not behaved so well. Alone with his conscience, where sleep might have brought "heavenly peace," the daytime brings Dormer bleary-eyed hallucinations and the night dream images of a past sin that constitutes a hellish torment.

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<sup>25</sup> This small but consequential reversal recalls the slight auditory change and pivotal reversal of meaning at the end of Coppola's great 1974 film *The Conversation*, where "He'd *kill* us if he got the chance" shifts to "He'd *kill* us if he got the chance," transmuting the poignantly prescient fear of the perceived victims into the cool rationalization of the actual victimizers.

The characters' names are similarly fraught with symbolism.<sup>26</sup> Patently, Detective Will Dormer is not a name the filmmakers have picked at random. In fact, the protagonist's Christian name may be as important as his surname, introducing the theme of choice and images of sleep and sleeplessness. He knows how badly he has behaved, and what he experiences is not a "moment of bliss," but one of long delayed rest and peace. It is enough "for a lifetime" in that it redeems a life gone bad. Like John of the Cross, Dormer undergoes a reflection that proves purgative. The cinematographer, in one of the DVD's interviews, mentions the mirrors in the police offices, and the crucial scene, glimpsed several times, in which Dormer turns out to be planting evidence, is mainly seen in a reflection. Unlike Saint John, however, Dormer's purgative nights are involuntary, nudged along by his insomnia, his guilty conscience, and troubling new entanglements.

Detective Hap Eckhardt, Dormer's L.A.P.D. partner, has cut a deal, promising to cooperate in the investigation into police misconduct, thus threatening not only Dormer's reputation but also the convictions and incarcerations built on it. He dies, shot by Dormer in blinding fog, in an accident whose status as such Dormer himself comes to doubt. Hap's first name may hint at the chanciness of causal chains, an aleatory characteristic that serious moral theory recognizes as rendering them unsuitable to bear the weight of differentiating right from wrong actions. Some philosophers, notably Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, speak of "moral luck" both in the consequences of someone's actions and in the circumstances and choices she comes to face.<sup>27</sup> Character traits can constitute a hedge against moral luck, girding us to hew to what is virtuous and decent even in times of adversity and not just from the good fortune of an easy life.

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<sup>26</sup> I will suggest that several, particularly those of the women, are charactonyms, indicating traits of personality or character of those who bear them. Others, such as Finch and Warfield, I suggest, have a deeper significance.

<sup>27</sup> See Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), ch. 3, and Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 2.

Detective Ellie Burr heads the investigation for the police force in Nightmute, Alaska. She (in French, *elle*) is a 'thorn in the side' as Dormer's youthful admirer. She helps provide the 'prick' of conscience, 'needling' Dormer, not letting him rest. Perhaps she represents what some have theorized is a woman's distinctive moral voice.<sup>28</sup>

Walter Finch is the young girl's killer, who witnesses Dormer shoot Hap and Hap's pained death as he accuses Dormer and struggles to get away from him. Finch later offers to Dormer to trade help in matching cover-ups. What of this name? The finch is a songbird, and perhaps this directs us to attend to his utterances. More important, finches were one of the species whose survival in different environments through differential adaptation (esp., of beaks to varying food sources) inspired Darwin's evolutionary thought.<sup>29</sup> Finch is a writer of murder mysteries, who has come to Alaska, adjusted over time to the nighttime sun and, having struck Kay in a fit of passion, killed her. Rapidly adjusting once again, he has calmly cleaned her body and covered up the crime. Now he schemes to manipulate Dormer into helping him avoid capture. Finch is, at one point, described as Kay's "familiar": an odd phrasing that calls to mind the term "familiar" as used for an animal inhabited by a spirit (often a malign one) accompanying someone. Is Finch

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<sup>28</sup> See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> "The remaining land-birds form a most singular group of finches, related to [and differing from] each other in the structure of their beaks, [etc.] . . . [T]wo species may be often seen climbing about the flowers of the great cactus-tress; but all the other species of this group of finches . . . feed on the dry and sterile ground. . . . The most curious fact is the perfect gradation in the size of the beaks in the different species . . . from one as large as that of the hawfinch to that of a chaffinch . . . Seeing this gradation and diversity structure in our small intimately-related groups of birds, one might really fancy that from an original paucity of birds in the [Galapagos] archipelago, one species had been taken and modified for different ends." Charles Darwin, "Journal of Researches" (a.k.a. "Voyage of the Beagle," 2nd ed., 1845, in *Darwin on Evolution*, edited by T. F. Glick and D. Kohn [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996], pp. 28-29). From this and similar observations on the *Beagle's* 1831-1836 voyage, Darwin came not just to "fancy" but to hypothesize that the different bills evolved on different islands as adaptations to the islands' differing food sources.

Dormer's "familiar" in this sense of the term? Finch is metaphorically an animal (bird namesake, human predator), a malign spirit who "accompanies" the reluctant Dormer, phoning him, meeting him, haunting his nights.

Rachel Clement, the keeper of the Alaskan motel where Dormer and (briefly) Hap stay, is not exactly the scriptural weeping Rachel. Still, she refuses to judge or condemn when Will confesses to her, only listening sympathetically and offering him merciful (clement) words, as we discussed above.

As for the minor characters, Detective Warfield is absent and unseen, although often mentioned, and he is once briefly heard on the phone. Warfield is the L.A.P.D. Internal Affairs investigator. Surely, this is one of the film's pregnant, if admirably understated, tropes: the field of battle where the moral struggle occurs is an internal affair, something within the agent's soul, not a matter of results in the external world—not even the number of lives lost and saved. We will examine this and related points in the next section. Randy is the physically abusive and unfaithful (i.e., randy) boyfriend of the dead girl, Kay Connell.<sup>30</sup> Finch tries to frame him for Kay's murder. Dobbs, the child-murderer whom Dormer (and Hap?) framed some years earlier, is never seen or heard. He is visually indicated only by flashback scenes of Dormer 'daubing' Dobbs's clothes with blood to frame him.

Even some of the story's animals and books are given resonant names. Finch has two dogs. According to the jacket of one of his books that the viewer glimpses, one of them is named Lucy (light), a gesture towards the film's chief theme. We also come to know of three mystery novels that Finch has written. Shown, or mentioned on the glimpsed jackets of other books, they are titled *Otherwise Engaged*, *Blood Shack*, and *Murder...[at?] Sunrise*. Each of these titles seems to prefigure one or more episodes in the screenplay. First, Dormer investigates an Alaskan

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<sup>30</sup> Might it be significant that the dead girl's name is phonically indistinguishable from a mere letter? Is this, perhaps, meant to underscore the ease with which she can be reduced to anonymity, as when Finch urges Dormer to abandon his duty to bring her real killer to justice, invoking "the other Kays" who will be endangered if catching her killer sets other killers free?

murder in order to flee being investigated in LA. We also recall Dormer's secret agenda of covering up his killing of Hap while catching Kay's murderer. In addition, there is Finch's reversal of roles from suspect to unwanted partner. All of these episodes suggest covert forms of engagement beneath the public ones. Second, the violent attacks on Ellie and Dormer near the film's end, set in a rustic cabin, along with the mention and glimpses of Finch's painstaking cleaning of Kay's corpse in the same place, give substance to the description "blood shack." Finally, the early morning gunplay at the film's end reminds us that the third title, "murder at sunrise," almost finds a referent in the script's events.<sup>31</sup>

### 7. Moral Insight

The first moral issue we should treat is the one roughly captured in the question raised by the screenwriter herself: what circumstances make an event into an accident. The matter here is not merely of terminological significance, but ethical significance as well: which factors serve to mitigate or erase someone's culpability for her behavior? More deeply, what can justify a course of action? These questions are tied to the issue of moral identity, noted earlier. Finch thinks—at least, he repeatedly maintains—that he is not who and what Dormer initially thinks him to be. That is, he is not a vicious murderer who deserves to be caught and punished, because he killed his young admirer Kay Connell only by accident. But, his own account of the event belies this description. As he comforted her after a fight with Randy, he reveals that he became sexually aroused and began to slap her when she found this ridiculous, laughing at him. He insists to Dormer that he "never meant to do it," that he killed but never murdered the girl. Her killing was not premeditated, but his assault on her was intentional and, as it continued, so may her death have been intended. Even if it was not, Finch is reasonably held to account for the foreseeable effect of his unjustified and immoral behavior. Finch compares his lethal attack on Kay to Dormer's shooting Hap in the thick fog. But the analogy is faulty. The detective was justified in firing to hit a fleeing suspect who had just shot one of the Alaskan policeman pursuing him, and hit only by mistake. (Quite literally: in the fog,

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<sup>31</sup> There is, to be sure, a homicide but, just as surely, it is justified defense.

Dormer took Hap's figure for that of the suspect.) Finch, however, had already exceeded his rights in striking Kay. That he lost control and beat her to death cannot excuse his conduct, but it makes his crime manslaughter, that is, a kind of murder. The calm meticulousness with which he then cleansed her body to remove forensic evidence only heightens the contrast with Will's inner torment.

The truth matters little to Finch, who weaves fictions by trade. In a revealing exchange between the two principals, Dormer asks, "Is this an accident?" pointing his gun at Finch's head. Finch replies, "If you want it to be" (chapter 25). *Pace* Finch's claim, however, shooting a man doesn't become an accident simply from wanting it to be one, but only from not wanting and meaning it be his shooting. Aquinas rightly held that it is the agent's intentions that fix the moral status and species of her actions. Anscombe reminded us that there are objective and realistic limits on what we can intend any action to be. To think we can make our actions whatever we want, simply by our wanting itself, is to deny any objective truth to these matters at all, especially to deny that there can be truth and falsehood in moral judgments. In the next section, it is argued that what Finch presents principally as a consequence-based moral theory in fact masks a deeper moral nihilism.

The fact is that ethics proceeds from the outside in. Anyone's self-knowledge is limited; a person's own past motives are sometimes unclear, even opaque, to her, and not just in the minute details. Still, the partial indiscernibility of motives does not make them wholly undetectable, nor unimportant. Finch, the author, holds forth to Dormer, on the importance of motives: "It's all motivation. What did you feel [when Hap died]? Guilt? Relief?" Contrast Dormer's professed skepticism about the significance of motivation, when he sneers at Finch: "Reasons for doing what you did? Who gives a fuck?" (chapter 20). Human action, as such, is done for reasons and with intentions, a fact that the late philosophers Donald Davidson and Elizabeth Anscombe affirmed.<sup>32</sup> The particular reasons for which someone acts will not always serve to vindicate her action, as Dormer rightly insists.

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<sup>32</sup> See G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957); Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).



To think otherwise is to succumb to the error that good ends can suffice to justify any means. Still, as Aquinas affirmed, it is someone's plans for realizing an objective that determine the moral character of her actions. They do that insofar as they show how the agent is in acting responding to the various valuable (and disvaluable) possibilities in play in her situation. It is in intending objectives that we 'own' them, make them ours, and thus identify with them, investing them with our identity and investing our identity in them.

For Finch, at least as he puts it to Dormer, the problem is one in what some have called moral mathematics. Finch challenges Dormer to consider the consequences for other cases if he secures Finch's conviction for the murder of Kay Connell. For then, Finch will convincingly reveal Dormer's own morally suspect part in Hap's death, thereby discrediting him, which will likely free many of the killers that Dormer's past testimony and investigations helped convict. "What about the other Kay Connells?" Finch challenges the compromised detective. "Do the math. You're a pragmatist; you've got to be [as a cop]" (chapter 21).

Do the ends justify the means? Machiavelli famously thought so, the utilitarians agreed, Finch has argued their case, and Dormer himself appeals to this old saw to rationalize the past conduct whose exposure now threatens him and whose moral meaning that peril is forcing him reluctantly to face. In his sleepless, addled state late in the movie's action, he recalls the feel of Dobbs's clothing, the texture of his own descent from grace. This memory comes to him as he packs his own clothes to leave Alaska, thinking he has failed to catch Finch and must accede to the latter's framing of Randy. He offers his rationale to the merciful Ms. Clement, his voice now stripped of its conviction, betraying the purported reasoning for a rationalization. "Dobbs needed to be convicted. The end justifies the means, right?" (chapter 27).

The true mark of moral commitment, however, is not that to which one is committed but that which one refuses to do.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to the

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<sup>33</sup> Those interested in an introduction to some of the problems in utilitarian moral theory might profitably consult Sterling Harwood's "Eleven Objections to Utilitarianism" in *Moral Philosophy: a Reader*, 3rd ed., edited by Louis P. Pojman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), pp. 179-92.

utilitarians' emphasis on desirable results, the traditions of Kant and the theorists of virtue focus on the rights and 'inviolability' of prospective victims. This is progress, but the film digs even deeper in a way reminiscent of the famous suggestion of one of Graham Greene's compromised characters that matters of good and evil go deeper than those of right and wrong.<sup>34</sup> The issue is not merely one of somebody's conduct and its effects, but of what fits with who she is.

If the agent's ends do not justify her chosen means, what does? In the words of the British philosopher Sir David Ross, what makes right acts right? The argument of this author, which requires further development at another time, is that moral justification proceeds from within the agent, from her motives and choices, to the action she performs, not from the action's effects in the outside world. While the movie, of course, does not explicitly articulate a moral theory, there are hints within it of a similarly input-driven account of right and wrong. "What the hell's wrong with you?" a pedestrian shouts to Dormer when he starts his car and almost runs her down. This incident unfolds just after he has switched the bullet he fired from Finch's gun into the dead dog with one from Hap's corpse (chapter 13). There is, then, never merely wrong or right action, but always something wrong or right *with us*.

It is character that is central, the usual site and source of the moral motivations and choices that determine our actions' moral status and significance. Because character itself—at least, good character—involves and requires a certain integrity, that is, an integration of the self, its motives, and its projects, there is support for Kierkegaard's pronouncement, borrowed from Scripture, that moral consistency demands "willing one thing." We find Dormer, however, in his moral confusion, acting at cross-purposes, covering up one killing while investigating another; trying to frame Finch for one death (Hap's) and to build a legitimate case against him in another (Kay's). This is antithetical to genuine integrity (that is, the moral virtue of integrity) and it is in this, rather than in Finch's distracting numbers game, that moral substance lies.

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<sup>34</sup> My reference is to Pinkie in Greene's *Brighton Rock*.

Character involves facts about both actual and counterfactual situations: what is, but also what would be. In a related way, several of the movie's characters debate the moral significance of both what was done and what would have been done. Thus, Dormer charges that Finch would have slept with Kay, as if it does not matter that he did not. Similarly, Finch insists that Randy would have hurt Kay worse if she had lived, as if it did not matter that Randy did not in fact kill her and that he could be licitly punished for it as if he had.<sup>35</sup> In such implicit reasoning, both go too far. Still, both Dormer and Finch are right to say that people's inclinations (as shown in counterfactuals) do reveal something morally important about them, if not about their actions. Their dispositions to act and react, their traits of character and their commitment all entail facts about what they *would* do in various circumstances. In short, it is there we find their virtues and vices (chapters 23, 25). Often, the most important effects of a course of action are not on others and their happiness, but on the agent herself and her character. The late Pope John Paul II stressed the reflexivity of action, its effects in helping shape and confirm the agent's own traits. Some dialogue in the film also invokes this theme. "You're tainted forever. You don't get to pick when you tell the truth. Truth is beyond that," Finch tells Dormer, correctly pointing out that people will lose trust in Dormer once some of his frame-ups are discovered (chapters 20, 25).<sup>36</sup>

But is this not comparatively minor stuff? Can concern for the agent's motives and traits really serve as an adequate replacement for a focus on the happiness and suffering of other people? No, it cannot do so entirely. Agents must concern themselves with others' well being, and that is a principal mark of their virtue. It does not follow that the moral judge or ethical theorist must do the same. In any case, the

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<sup>35</sup> Compare the plot of Stephen Spielberg's 2002 film, *Minority Report*, wherein police apprehend people and have them charged for "future crimes." Someone who will certainly decide to do evil unless impeded should be dissuaded, even prevented. But she cannot be punished, not legitimately, not even intelligibly.

<sup>36</sup> On "taint," note our surprise, which was mentioned earlier, when we learn at the end that the unidentified hand was not rubbing the blood out of the white fabric but rubbing it in, polluting. Dormer's corruption has already sunk deep by the time the film's main action begins.

problem here is not one of magnitude, as the movie's dialogue handsomely affirms. In a revealing conversation between detectives Dormer and Burr, when they first meet, the L.A. veteran instructs the Alaskan neophyte not to ignore what she considers minor matters. He reminds her that "small things" display character. "People give themselves away [in small things]," he cautions, employing an intriguing ambiguity. "It's all about small stuff. Small lies, small mistakes. People give themselves away the same in misdemeanors as they do in murder cases. It's just human nature" (chapter 6). We should consider the ambiguity between the epistemic and ontological/juridical senses of 'giving oneself away': both unintentionally informing others about oneself ("betraying" one's character, as we sometimes say) and also losing (alienating) one's soul/self. We do well here to attend to a deleted scene on the DVD where Will and Rachel discuss people who have, in his words, "lost someone." The larger question is, having thus lost oneself, given oneself away (or sold it for the whole word), how do we regain our selves? What is crucial is not the magnitude of an action's benefits and harms, but rather to what extent a person is invested in her actions and their effects, and thus what motivates her to perform them, what it is in her that they make manifest. These are what determine whether she stands to lose herself in the bargain.

One way of framing the point is that the movie offers itself to interpretation as an essay in what can be called an ethics of identity, according to which the moral life is essentially an internal affair. Can an action's *intentions* and motives matter morally, even more than its *effects*? Warfield, recall, was the L.A.P.D. Internal Affairs officer investigating corruption. It was he who had secured Hap's cooperation against Dormer in events just before the film's action. In the work's most pregnant metaphor, internal affairs are the moral *battleground* (that is, the field of warfare) where the story's chief drama plays out. This deepens the metaphor of internal affairs, calling to mind the spiritual writers' talk of "the interior life."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Compare the shallower metaphor in the 1990 film *Internal Affairs*, which featured Richard Gere and Andy Garcia. There, 'internal affairs' involved only the 'mind games' that Gere's crooked cop played on Garcia's honest one, especially playing on the latter's insecurities and marital problems.

Perhaps what is ultimately at stake, what the protagonist is (and we are) capable of, is indicated in a brief conversation from the original Norwegian film that, unfortunately, has no parallel in the American remake. When the Norwegian detective, Engstrom, pays a hospital visit to a local policeman wounded just before the chase that resulted in the other Norwegian policeman's 'accidental' death, the wounded cop, alone in the room, doesn't pay attention to Engstrom's entrance, thinking at first it is just a hospital worker in the room. However, he soon looks up and says, "I thought you'd come to put out the light." Indeed, Engstrom does have reason to put out the light of this man's life, as he may be the only witness to the cop-on-cop killing. (As it turns out in both versions of the story, the wounded policeman saw nothing of the fatal shooting, but the murderer they'd hunted did.)

### 8. Moral Nihilism

We observed above that Finch tells Dormer, even while the detective holds a gun to the writer's head, that shooting him—and, by implication, any action—can be turned into an accident just by wanting it to be one. This denies the reality of our actions, deprives them of any internal nature or essence and thus of any inherent moral stature. In a late night phone conversation with the agonized and sleepless Dormer, Finch is more explicit about what philosophers would call his moral anti-realism. "You and I share a secret. We know how easy it is to kill somebody. That ultimate taboo? It doesn't exist outside our minds." As Finch sees it, even the most serious moral proscription is mere taboo, nothing more than a local convention of disapproval (chapter 22).<sup>38</sup> Finch, however, offers no explanation of how he achieved this supposed insight, nor why he thinks himself justified in affirming it. That life is fragile, and the moral proscription against its violation easy to break, does not show that proscription is a mere figment of thought, so that nothing really counts as breaking it. Nor does the fact that Finch might well get away with murder prove that neither it nor anything else is really good or bad but is only popularly *thought* to be

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<sup>38</sup> The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas stressed the proscription against unjust homicide as the paradigmatic, original, and gravest of moral norms, conceiving it as an inescapable imperative confronted in the Other's face. See Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

so. It is hard to see how it even lends support to that thesis. Finch's murder fills him with a self-perception that he is one of the elite, a member of the *cognoscenti* who see through the illusions that cloud lesser minds, those of the common run of mankind. However, he offers no reason for this new identity, and if he is right to think himself an unusually thoughtful murderer, he is no less vicious for that.<sup>39</sup> We reasonably see him as both perpetrator and victim of self-delusion along with other crimes.

The filmmakers, we may assume, do not share Finch's arrogant delusion, but neither is it clear that they see through it. It is disappointing that one of the film's main moral suggestions, put in the mouth of one its most sympathetic characters, is in fact not so different from Finch's. To Dormer's pathetic entreaty for vindication, his plea that she agree that his end justified his framing of Dobbs and by implication his capitulation to Finch's seemingly inevitable framing of Randy, Rachel Clement replies, "I guess it's about what you thought was right at the time, then: what you're willing to live with."<sup>40</sup> But what about how to act, not just now, but also "at the hour of our death," which Dormer must decide? It is not evident how, or even that, her proposed solution can address that question. More important, the film's narrative dramatizes a deeper problem with the simplistic formula to which Rachel gives voice. Some of us are able to adapt to, and thereby to "live with," almost anything, like Darwin's finch, from whom I think the name of Robin Williams's character is borrowed. By

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<sup>39</sup> For a helpful refutation of the assumption that the reality, objectivity, and seriousness of moral features can somehow be rejected in a way free of normative implications and without making substantive moral claims, see Ronald Dworkin's "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It" in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 87-139.

<sup>40</sup> The audio is indistinct here and it may instead be that what she says is "I guess it's more about what you thought was right at the time than [about] what you're willing to live with." In either case, we should perhaps recall Aristotle's suggestion, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, that the voluntary and the involuntary are distinguished in the agent's later reactions.

his life and example, Walter Finch proves the inadequacy of Rachel's shallow ethic.<sup>41</sup>

The real issue is not whether the locus and source of morality are in our minds. Even if it is, Finch's conclusion that it is illusory is premature. Many philosophers have thought ethics "only in our minds" without thinking it therefore empty. That giant of the Enlightenment Immanuel Kant took moral duty to consist in commands of pure reason. His contemporary Adam Smith construed duty and virtue as conformity with our approval as idealized spectator/judges. Smith's friend David Hume saw virtue as based in natural human tendencies to sympathetic feelings.<sup>42</sup> In our time, John Rawls saw social justice as rooted in our agreement behind an imaginary veil of ignorance—and so on. The issue, rather, is what we are saying in making a moral judgment and whether the relevant part of the world really is like that or is only thought to be. So, moral judgments, reactions, and relations may be "only in our minds" but also accurate, well-grounded, objective (at least, intersubjective), and therefore non-illusory, *pace* Finch's assumption.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps what Finch is trying to articulate is that morality has no sting. Even if its rules and principles are somehow real, or at least objective, they have no sanction to enforce them. Why be moral, live virtuously? Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill all thought morality's sanctions needed, in somewhat different ways, to be socially contrived. Of course, Christians hold that our immorality can wreck our

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<sup>41</sup> The moral philosopher will also want to ask the pointed question, how can its being thought right (by its agent) be a right-making feature of an action? What plausible theory of moral justification supports such a claim?

<sup>42</sup> *New Yorker* magazine film critic David Denby seems confused about this in his review of a book on the Scottish Enlightenment; he attributes to Adam Smith and David Hume the view that morality is a human invention. See Denby, "The Scottish Enlightenment," *New Yorker*, Oct 11, 2004, pp. 90–98.

<sup>43</sup> We should bear in mind that Finch's dismissal of taboo is uninformed. The Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in his provocative *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, reminds us that even Polynesian "tabu" started out as intelligible restrictions on harmful and ignoble action, and only later (under Western influence) degenerated into arbitrary, manipulated restraints as social control by the more powerful over the less powerful.

immortality; unrepentant sinners live eternally, but in the torment of damnation. One problem is that this seems to be no less an external sanction than are Bentham's, even if more certain. More recently, Robert Nozick has suggested that immorality has an internal value-cost: it makes the agent's life a lesser one, whether or not she knows or cares.<sup>44</sup> The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas goes deeper, and the Polish Catholic Karol Wojtyła joins him.<sup>45</sup> For them, it is only in and through committing ourselves to other persons, and therein to the moral virtues, that our personhood is known and brought to its fulfillment. This may well be where the film points in its linkage of morality to identity and the way in which, in fulfilling official duty, the good cop therein fulfills his or her self.

## 9. Conclusion

The scene between Dormer and Rachel in the hotel room on his last night brings to culmination his long battle, mentioned above, against the insistent light that always finds its way around or through every window shade, every obstacle. The American poet E. E. Cummings famously found love to have smaller fingers even than the rain, which can work its way into and saturate heavy fabric, even stone.<sup>46</sup> But it is in the verse of the English Catholic Francis Thompson that we find a closer prefiguration. His eponymous "Hound of Heaven" seeks out the sinner who flees Him, insinuating himself into and undermining every

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, 1981), ch. 5.

<sup>45</sup> See Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* and Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, translated by Teresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> ". . . your slightest look will easily unclothe me/though I have closed myself as fingers,/you always open petal by petal myself as Spring opens/(touching skillfully, mysteriously) her first rose/or if your wish be to close me, i and my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly/ . . . nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals the power of your intense fragility . . ./(i do not know what it is about you that closes/and opens; only something in me understands/the voice of your eyes is deeper than all the roses)/nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" E. E. Cummings, "somewhere i have never travelled" (1931) in *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, edited by George Firmage (New York: Norton, 1994).



distraction into which flight is taken, turning it into a signpost back to the God from whom the narrator tries with increasing frenzy to escape.<sup>47</sup> In just the same way has the Light, the light of Grace and the light of Truth, thwarted each of Dormer's efforts to elude it. He seeks mental oblivion in slumber, but he is not ready for it.<sup>48</sup> At this point still, his would be that sleep of reason that produces monsters. First, he must learn a lesson from Scripture: "Let us throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves properly as in the daytime..." (Romans 13: 12)

In the movie's penultimate scene, Dormer looks into the water, through the hole in the floor of Finch's cabin, and sees Finch's face looking up at him as if it is his own reflection (chapter 30). Has he become Finch? Then, slowly, Finch's face fades away as his corpse sinks. It is as if Dormer is being released from this option, this part of himself. Dormer then goes outside into the fresh air, beneath a cold grey sky, to spend his last moments with Ellie, his other option and *alter-ego* (alternative self). He devotes them to helping her, admonishing her "not [to] lose [her] way," receiving a sort of absolution from her, and finding the peace for which he asks. "Let me sleep. Just let me sleep..." he says, not imploring this time, not desperate, but hopeful. At last he is ready to receive the rest for which his pursuit had become increasingly frantic. Now he is at peace, at home within himself, ready to slumber even surrounded by the light he has fled throughout most of the film. "From a chalice/Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring./So it was done:/I in their delicate fellowship was one . . ." <sup>49</sup>

"Don't lose your way," Dormer warns. This is the injunction by which we must all live, recalling C. S. Lewis's conception, in his *Abolition of Man*, of Lao Tsu's *Tao* as The Way, the natural law written in our hearts.<sup>50</sup> How should we walk this way? "Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of Light" (Eph. 5: 8). The

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<sup>47</sup> "Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue . . . /'Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me'" (Thompson, "Hound of Heaven").

<sup>48</sup> "Therefore stay awake! For you don't know on which day your Lord will come" (Matthew 24: 42).

<sup>49</sup> Thompson, "Hound of Heaven."

<sup>50</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

Christian, presumably, will not need to be reminded to bear in mind the more authoritative injunction, "Sum via, veritas, vita."<sup>51</sup>

We have here undertaken what might be called a close moral reading of Nolan's remake of *Insomnia*. Godard wrote, in the screenplay for his 1960 film *Le Petit Soldat*, "Photography is truth. Cinema is truth twenty-four times a second."<sup>52</sup> There are places where Nolan's *Insomnia* approaches moral truth—at least, surprisingly serious and sensible moral reflection—in whatever today's digital analogue is to twenty-four times a second.<sup>53</sup> It provides glimpses of the grace that, as we saw at the start, Maritain thought perfects moral life as poetry does art. That is to say, grace brings the moral life to its highest realization. Still, we can do better in closing than quote Godard and invoke Maritain. Let us turn in the end to Jesus' instruction to Nicodemus on the timeless contest between illumination and obscurity. It could serve as a commentary on Detective Will Dormer's flight from light and his final redemption:

"For God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved...On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light has come into the world

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<sup>51</sup> "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6).

<sup>52</sup> The indicated time was that of the speed of frames through a movie projector. I had taken this to be a claim that motion pictures go beyond photography by insistently bombarding us with the repetition of reality and by closely recording its changes over minute portions of time. Critic Michael Wood has recently suggested a different nuance, finding in the French a suggestion that viewing a film may intensify and magnify our experience of reality. He offers this as a more literal translation: "the cinema is twenty-four times the truth . . . each second." (See Michael Wood, "Taking Reality By Surprise," *New York Review of Books* 51, no. 17 [November 4, 2004]: 53.)

<sup>53</sup> Contrast Nolan's with the morally superficial film *Changing Lanes*, released around the same time in 2002, where Ben Affleck's character rejects the way of the Church he walks out of and instead decides to blackmail his corporate bad-guy bosses into doing the—materially, objectively—right thing. The viewer has little reason to think this arrangement can last much past the credits, and the silly 'kick-ass'-resolution shows that the scummy character has changed only his ends, not his means, and that therefore he has not grasped the broader importance of means (the quality of any intentions, will) nor their internal connection to ends and character.

men have shown they preferred darkness to the light; because their deeds were evil. And indeed everyone who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed. But the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light" (John 3: 19-21).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Other works consulted: J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," and "Three Ways of Spilling Ink," in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 175-204 and 272-87. Thomas Hibbs, "A Neo-Noir Filmmaker Echoes a Philosopher's Quest for Truth," in *Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 14, 2003). Jonathan Weiner, *Beak of the Finch: Evolution in Real Time* (New York: Knopf, 1994).