

## SALVATION AND THE SOPRANOS:

# Redemption in New Jersey?

M. CATHLEEN KAVENY



**Prof. Kaveny** joined our faculty in 1995, becoming the John P. Murphy Foundation Professor of Law in 2001. She earned her A.B. from Princeton University in 1984, her J.D. from Yale University in 1990 and her Ph. D. from Yale in 1991. She then clerked for the Honorable John T. Noonan of the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit before practicing law in Boston at Ropes and Gray. She teaches contract law to first-year law students, and upper-level seminars that explore the relationships among theology, philosophy, and law. Prof. Kaveny is a prodigious and widely recognized scholar, having published over 40 articles and essays in the course of her career. Her recent work has focused on issues in medical ethics and on the moral and legal issues raised by one person's involvement in another person's wrongdoing.

In Romans 8:22, St. Paul says that the “whole creation has been groaning” while awaiting redemption. He wrote these words as an evangelist addressing the fledgling church in first-century Rome, but they might just as easily have been written by a current film or television critic.

**L**ike Paul's Roman audience two millennia ago, American society is deeply engaged with the question of whether—and how—human beings can be redeemed. Many of us aren't sure the question has a positive answer. And in America, such pessimism expresses itself most visibly in popular culture.

I want to justify this claim by discussing the Emmy-winning HBO series *The Sopranos*, which will begin the second half of its sixth and final season in April. *The Sopranos* centers on the life of fictional New Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano. Although its violent subject matter and coarse language will shock the faint of heart, it is easily the best series on television, both a popular and a critical success. The show's complex characters and sharp dialogue have attracted a wide variety of attention over the years. The online magazine *Slate* has sponsored forums of psychotherapists and mob experts offering their reflections on the weekly episodes. A *Sopranos Family Cookbook* has been a big seller. And no television show has explored more relentlessly—or more compellingly—questions of moral character, responsibility, excuse, and self-deception.

I'm going to focus on the most recent complete season of the show, season 5 (now available on DVD)—in my judgment, the heart of the series. But first, a little background for those who don't subscribe to HBO.

*The Sopranos* chronicles the two overlapping “families” of mob boss Tony Soprano. Tony's work family comprises the capos and soldiers who help run his various unlawful enterprises, while his home family includes his wife, Carmela, his daughter, Meadow (an undergraduate at Columbia in season 5), and his son, A.J. (a high school student on the verge of delinquency). Orbiting this nucleus are Tony's increasingly senile uncle, “Junior” Soprano (the titular head of the mob family), and his free-spirited sister, Janice, who is married to one of his soldiers, Bobby Bacalieri.

Although *The Sopranos* deals with an organized crime family, it would be a mistake to call it a “mob saga” in the tradition of *The Godfather* (1972). Tony's soldiers revere

Almost miraculously, Janice's therapy seems to work. Yet Tony's response to his sister's newfound equanimity is mixed; he is genuinely happy for her, but also jealous. As Janice radiantly presides over a peaceful Sunday dinner with the family, his jealousy takes over. In one of the most emotionally brutal scenes in the entire series, Tony deliberately baits her, wondering out loud where her son, Harpo—a child Janice abandoned years ago—is eating his Sunday dinner. A shaken Janice attempts to deflect his sardonic comments, but her psyche proves too fragile. His provocations strip away not only her newfound serenity but also her basic dignity and self-possession. As his howling and disheveled sister is physically restrained by her husband, a smirking Tony strolls out of their house into the sunlight.

The scene demonstrates the impossibility of therapeutic redemption for the Sopranos, whose family relationships are based on violence and destruction. Again, Jonathan Lear

### The question in a nutshell: Is therapy a morally neutral technique, to be deployed for whatever ends the patient desires—including reconciling himself to a life of criminality and violence?

offers a helpful framework. He argues that the therapist's work is ultimately an act of love for the patient, one that ideally exhibits three facets of loving relationships: an open-ended commitment to help the loved one achieve a higher level of self-understanding; an attempt to further the loved one's freedom, whatever that freedom might entail; and a ready imagining of what it would mean for the relationship to end, along with an associated determination to avoid causing (or needlessly perceiving) the kind of betrayal that could bring about that end.

In this light, Tony's actions toward his sister clearly subvert the therapeutic redemption toward which he initially pointed her; indeed, they exemplify the opposite of love. Tony does not help Janice achieve a higher level of self-knowledge, but deliberately conjures the family ghosts that haunt and

distort her perception. He does not promote her freedom, but provokes her into re-enslaving herself to her uncontrollable anger. Most disturbingly, he commits a fundamental act of betrayal, leaving her devoid of the capacity for self-reflection. Having brutally destroyed her psychic integrity, Tony takes pleasure in reducing his sister to the level of a wounded and enraged animal. That's not just betrayal—that's hate.

### Twelve-step redemption

Tony is not, however, entirely heartless. He shows tremendous patience toward his nephew, Christopher, who suffers from an out-of-control addiction to drugs and alcohol. Rather than punishing or even killing him after his addiction triggers several serious mistakes at work, Tony packs him off to a rehab center in Pennsylvania. Christopher emerges clean and sober, a devoted 12-stepper.

Overcoming an addiction is always hard when you return to the pressures of your job. And what if your job description is "Mafia enforcer?" The values of Alcoholics Anonymous and its daughter programs don't exactly mesh with mob values. Where

12-step programs call upon the alcoholic or addict (in the words of Bill W., founder of AA), to "perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others," Tony and his crew strive to perfect their material lives through the work and self-sacrifice of others. Where AA is firmly committed to the proposition that one gets by giving, Tony and his crew are firmly committed to the proposition that one gets by taking. And where AA is decidedly not a commercial enterprise—its Twelve Traditions include a strong caution against accumulating "money, property, and authority"—Tony and his crew grow rich by exploiting the addictions of those who are suffering, thereby piling misery upon misery.

The hard collision between the values of AA and the values of the Mafia reverberates in the story of a man Christopher meets

his gambling debts, and inexorably forward to his own death. As for Adriana, her moment of destiny occurs when Christopher, having initially agreed to leave his life as a “made” mobster and join her, heads out for cigarettes before leaving with her to meet with federal agents; he happens upon a beaten-down family piling into a rusted-out Chevy in front of the convenience store. Contemplating life in witness protection with no marketable skills, he caresses the gleaming hood of his pride and joy, a \$50,000 Hummer. Adriana’s fate is sealed.

These two grim tales suggest that we are trapped in a world ruled by an inexorable fate that seizes upon our moral failings in order to bring about our ruin. But the makers of *The Sopranos* have still more to say about redemption. Season 5 goes on to subvert three other prevalent American understandings of what it means to be redeemed: therapeutic redemption, redemption associated with 12-step programs based on Alcoholics Anonymous, and Christian redemption.

### Tony and therapeutic redemption

Since the show’s outset, Tony Soprano has been in psychotherapy with Dr. Jennifer Melfi. As a “wise guy” expected by his men to be strong enough to deal with his own problems, Tony undertook therapy with some trepidation. But his panic attacks were undeniably bad for business. He wanted a quick fix for what he saw as a troublesome but isolated problem. And so the series began its notable effort to grapple with the nature and purposes of psychotherapy. The question in a nutshell: Is therapy a morally neutral technique, to be deployed for whatever ends the patient desires—including reconciling himself to a life of criminality and violence? Is it possible, in other words, to be a happy, healthy, and well-adjusted mobster?

University of Chicago professor Jonathan Lear, a philosopher and a practicing psychotherapist, would answer both questions

with a firm “no.” In *Therapeutic Action* (2003), Lear provides a deeply humane account of the larger redemptive goals of psychotherapy. He argues that therapy, far from being a neutral technique, aims at enabling patients to develop a more

**Over and over again, the series drives home one lesson: The everyday brutality of “civilian” American family life bears an uncomfortable resemblance to life in the “family” of organized crime.**

“objective” perspective on the world, one less distorted by the unconscious projection of past experiences upon the present. Such experiences, frequently emanating from a traumatic youth, are like ghosts, repeatedly intruding upon one’s ability to experience the present in a capable and confident manner. According to Lear, therapy does not banish these ghosts; rather, it soothes them, by helping a patient develop a conscious perspective on the events of the past and their effect on his life. Doing so can establish “a different kind of connection” between the past and the present, Lear writes, one that lets the patient “explore the world from which this ghost arose, and in so doing place him back in his context.”

The Soprano family has more than its share of ghosts. In therapy Tony finally realizes that his persistent depression is actually rage turned inward. His father, also a “made” member of the Jersey mob, was prone to fits of domestic violence. His mother, Livia, not only failed to protect Tony, but also was emotionally abusive and vindictive in ways that continued long into his adulthood. Resentful that Tony put her into a nursing home, she convinced his uncle, “Junior” Soprano, to order a hit on him in retaliation. No wonder Tony is angry and depressed.

During season 5, Tony comes to see that rage really is a family problem—in both senses of the word “family.” The pathology of his biological family is embedded in the pathology of his mob family, and vice versa. When his sister, Janice, is arrested after pummeling another woman at a kids’ soccer game, Tony forces her to enroll in anger-management therapy.

[N]o television show has explored more relentlessly—  
or more compellingly—questions of moral character,  
responsibility, excuse, and self-deception.

that movie, seeing in it a grandiose reflection of themselves, but their own reality is grittier, more mundane, and more humorous than that of the *Godfather's* Corleone family. In the first season, we see Tony Soprano dutifully participating in a parent-teacher conference at his son's parochial school and visiting a psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, to seek help for depression and a panic disorder; his sessions with her remain a central feature in many of the show's episodes. It's hard to imagine *The Godfather's* Vito Corleone on Prozac, or attending a parent-teacher conference.

In contrast with the Corleones, then, the lives of the Sopranos are shockingly ordinary. True, members of Tony's work family inflict brutal physical violence on their associates, but the show and its creator, David Chase, place even greater dramatic emphasis on the emotional violence inflicted by members of Tony's home family on one another. Over and over again, the series drives home one lesson: The everyday brutality of "civilian" American family life bears an uncomfortable resemblance to life in the "family" of organized crime. So the question of whether the Sopranos and their circle can be redeemed, in my view, is inextricably related to the question of whether we ourselves can be redeemed.

### **Fate and moral failing**

Is there a path to a morally upright and socially respectable life? Is there a passage to physical security and emotional intimacy with the people we love? These two questions point to our elemental human understanding of what it means to be redeemed, what it means to be saved, and what it means to be safe. They outline our hopes for basic forms of salvation, not after death, but in the here-and-now of our lives. In two overarching story lines, season 5 of *The Sopranos* raises and then dashes these hopes.

The first has to do with the rise and fall of Tony Soprano's cousin Tony Blundetto. Seeking moral and social redemption, Blundetto returns to his mob family after spending years in

prison for a crime actually committed by Tony Soprano. Miraculously, he wants to go straight. In one of the show's perfect little ironies, he works hard to become a licensed massage therapist, healing human bodies rather than harming them, and initially resists the temptation to make easy money by resuming his mob activities. By the end of the season, though, Blundetto has not only been pulled back into the family business but has also been ejected from it in the most brutal possible fashion. Agreeing without Tony Soprano's knowledge to carry out a lucrative hit on a member of the New York mob, Blundetto enrages Tony, who decides to kill him (a shotgun blast to the chest) in order to keep the peace with the New York mob. A murderer, Blundetto is ultimately a victim of murder. There is doubtless some cosmic justice in this outcome. But there is no glimmer of hope for moral and social redemption.

Even more heartbreaking, though, is the downfall of Adriana La Cerva, fiancée of Christopher Moltisanti, Tony Soprano's nephew and protégé. In the end, it is Adriana's love for her family that proves to be her undoing. Forced by federal agents to choose between imprisonment on drug charges and life as a mob informant, she unwisely chooses the latter in order to stay with her beloved Christopher. When the feds increase the pressure for information, she finally tells Christopher the truth, imploring him to join her in the witness-protection program. Furious and terrified, Christopher viciously beats her, then collapses in tears. Ultimately he calls Tony and gives up Adriana. Tony's consigliere, Silvio, drives her out into the woods and kills her, shooting her as she attempts to crawl away in the fall leaves.

Neither Tony Blundetto nor Adriana La Cerva ever had a chance. In both cases, fate conspires with greed, the characteristic moral failing of mob life, to bring about their doom. Tony Blundetto's downfall begins when he picks up a bag thrown onto the sidewalk from the window of a speeding car. The bag contains drugs and money, around \$10,000. Blundetto tosses the drugs, but—chafing at the financial constraints of civilian life—keeps the cash. The money leads him back into gambling, then back into the mob life to pay

## Religious redemption has long been a prominent theme in mob sagas, where “paying the price” receives richly ironic treatment.

in rehab, J.T. Dolan, a former Hollywood writer whose heroin habit destroyed his career. In the 12-step meeting the two attend after leaving rehab, Dolan publicly thanks “my man Chris” for all his support. The two strike up a friendship, and when Christopher finds out that J.T. likes to gamble, he offers to set him up with a high-stakes game. After two straight days of poker, J.T. is in the hole for \$57,000. He begs Christopher to lend him the money, which he does—at the usual exorbitant rate. “Don’t give me that look,” he tells an astonished J.T. “This is your problem. I will not fuckin’ enable you!”

As with Tony and therapy, Christopher’s actions don’t merely disappoint AA’s values, they actively subvert them. Rather than help J.T. stay clean, Christopher facilitates his descent into another form of addiction, gambling, which he then exploits for his own monetary gain while mouthing platitudes. The attempt to combine the roles of brutal Mafia loan shark and supportive fellow recovering addict is darkly hilarious, with Christopher packing a hollow-eyed J.T. off to another stint in rehab—while confiscating his BMW convertible as partial payment on the loan and admonishing him that “there is no chemical solution to a spiritual problem.”

### Religious redemption

The word “redemption” comes from the Latin *redemere*, which means “to buy back,” a concept central to both the Old and New Testaments. In delivering the Israelites from Egypt, Yahweh is seen to ransom or redeem them. The New Testament extends, deepens, and sharpens this understanding of redemption, as the promised messiah comes to be identified with Jesus of Nazareth. As the obedient son of God, he “pays the price” for the sins of all humanity, offering himself as a sinless, perfect sacrifice out of love for humanity.

Religious redemption has long been a prominent theme in mob sagas, where “paying the price” receives richly ironic treatment. Who could forget Michael Corleone in the baptism scene in *The Godfather*? As Michael solemnly promises to reject

Satan and all his works, the dons of the other mob families in New York are murdered on Michael’s order. The subversion of religious redemption in *The Sopranos* is more subtle but no less decisive. Much of it centers on Carmela Soprano, Tony’s wife. A devout, intelligent Catholic, Carmela is no doubt familiar with the standard account of Christ’s redemptive activity and purposes. She sends her kids to parochial school and actively participates in parish life. Most of the time, no one could be nicer or more considerate. When the chips are down, though, she’s not above using the fear created by her husband’s way of life to get what she wants. In fact, she once delivered a threat gift-wrapped in a delicious ricotta pie to the lawyer who balked at recommending her daughter, Meadow, for admission to Georgetown. Needless to say, the letter was promptly written.

On rare occasions Carmela is directly challenged for her hypocrisy. In season 3, she consults a psychiatrist, Dr. Krakower. Unlike Tony’s therapist, Dr. Krakower has no time for nonjudgmental therapeutic affirmation. In fact, he speaks with the only morally unequivocal voice in the entire series. Like Jonathan Lear, Dr. Krakower does not consider therapy a morally neutral enterprise. He has no doubt that Carmela’s complicity in Tony’s mob life is incompatible with good psychological health. “You’ll never be able to quell the feelings of guilt and shame that you talked about,” he warns her, “so long as you are his accomplice.” Though she protests the label—after all, she only washes Tony’s clothes and cooks his food—the therapist insists on condemning her for taking “blood money.” “One thing you can never say,” he adds, is that “you haven’t been told.”

In season 5, Carmela is told again, and this time far more bluntly, by Tony himself. When she informs him that she is disgusted by him and wants a divorce—and “an equitable division of our assets”—Tony explodes. “The only reason you have anything is ‘cause of my fuckin’ sweat,” he berates her. “And you knew every step of the way exactly how it works. But you walk around that fuckin’ mansion in your five-hundred-dollar shoes and your diamond rings and you act like butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth.” In the end, after failing to find a lawyer

willing to cross Tony, Carmela decides to reconcile, but only at a price: \$600,000, the cost of the lot upon which she wants to build, decorate, and sell a “spec house.”

Tony agrees, and so Carmela is finally redeemed—“bought back” by Tony. But he does not free her; instead, and with her full consent, he buys her back into a state of moral slavery. And the price is indeed paid in blood money. When a now-reconciled Carmela and Tony tour the plot of land on which she will build her spec house, we can’t but notice that that lot is eerily similar to the wooded lot where Adriana was killed. In

**At last, the two overarching story lines of season 5, the stories of Tony Blundetto and Adriana La Cerva, find their proper place—in the worldview of Greek and Roman mythology.**

ensuing episodes, Carmela, increasingly troubled by Adriana’s absence and unable to believe the fiction that she has simply run away, dreams of having a conversation with her in the partly constructed house. In the end, Carmela cannot escape the fact that her spec house—in fact her whole life—is built on a foundation of murder.

As a self-described devout Catholic, Carmela surely knows that redemption from sin requires repentance and a firm resolve to amend one’s ways. From a Catholic perspective, redemption requires becoming a different person—in St. Paul’s terms, it requires putting off the “old man” of sin and putting on the “new man” of grace in Jesus Christ. But as her conversation with Dr. Krakower brutally revealed, Carmela cannot do this without leaving behind her family, her friends, and a substantial part of her own identity. No less than Tony or Christopher, Carmela has inextricably entwined her identity with the murderous double family. To redeem these characters is to erase them. And to the credit of the show’s creator, David Chase, we ourselves are forced to admit that as viewers of a drama, we would rather take these characters as they are, unredeemed.

## **Staging ground to the underworld**

One of the fascinating features of *The Sopranos* has been the way its makers address the moral criticisms raised in previous seasons by audiences and critics alike. During season 2, some charged that the series downplayed evil by concentrating too much on Tony’s charming and sentimental side. Season 3 provoked worries that the show was dissolving moral responsibility in therapeutic excuse by highlighting the nonjudgmental attitude of Tony’s therapist, Dr. Melfi, toward her patient’s deeds. After season 4, which culminated in Tony’s vicious murder and dismemberment of his equally vicious cousin Ralph Cifaretto, critics wondered whether the series had become nihilistic, depicting moral monsters engaging in morally obscene actions with no apparent qualms or consequences.

Season 5 effectively responds to these concerns. Tony’s dark side is always apparent to the audience, and his therapeutic breakthroughs, such as they are, don’t function to excuse his bad actions. And the world of *The Sopranos* no longer seems nihilistic; in fact, it seems infused with a cosmic retributive justice, which even Tony himself dimly perceives, although his own time of reckoning has not yet arrived. But season 5 raises its own set of problems. In the end, it presents us with the grim specter of a cosmos emptied of all redemption—bereft not merely of the prospect of Christian salvation, but also of the most powerful and widely available alternatives.

Once *The Sopranos* has dispatched the most commonly held hopes for redemption in American culture, what does it put in their place? The key to this question, in my view, lies in the poster for season 5, reproduced on the cover of this issue of *Commonweal*. Evoking an era in the Sopranos’ Italian heritage that antedates Catholicism, it gives us the worldview of Rome—not Christian Rome, but pagan Rome.

In book 6 of the *Aeneid*, Virgil recounts Aeneas’s visit to the underworld, the realm of the dead. Here, Acheron, the river of grief, its “whirlpool thick with sludge, its giant eddy

seething, vomits all of its swirling sand into Cocytus,” the river of lamentation. The bleak marshlands teem with ghostly figures that “moved along in darkness, through the shadows, beneath the lonely night.” Virgil tells us that they are trapped; the ferryman Charon will not take them across the river Styx because “the waves will only carry souls that have a tomb. Before his bones have found their rest, no one may cross the horrid shores and the hoarse waters.”

The poster for season 5, set in the marshes of New Jersey’s inaptly named Meadowlands, perfectly captures the pervasive bleakness of the underworld in its dual sense: the world of organized crime and the world of their dead. Both those characters who are living and those who are dead remain trapped. Why should the dead hurry to cross? Only harsh and unrelenting judgment awaits them on the other side. The judge Minos pronounces sentence on each soul as it disembarks the ferry, sending the righteous to the Elysian Fields (the Meadowlands, properly speaking) and the wicked through the adamantine gates of Tartarus to excruciating punishment.

At last, the two overarching story lines of season 5, the stories of Tony Blundetto and Adriana La Cerva, find their proper place—in the worldview of Greek and Roman mythology. Their lives were determined by inexorable Fate, which even the gods cannot defy. At the same time, their deaths were attributable to the moral flaw of greed, a flaw both shared with all those around them. In season 5 of *The Sopranos*, there is retributive justice. Indeed, in the end, there is only retributive justice.

How should we think about Tony’s fate as we approach the end of *The Sopranos*? In my view, Tony is the opposite of Aeneas, a sort of antihero. At the beginning of season 6, he makes his own visit to the underworld, after being shot in the stomach by his demented uncle, Junior. As Tony’s body fights to survive in an intensive care unit in Newark, his spirit dips a toe in the afterlife. He dreams he’s in California on a business trip, where he is pervasively mistaken for a man named Kevin Finnerty (which sounds a lot like “infinity”). After a series of mishaps,

including a scuffle with some Buddhist monks, he finds himself driving down a dark, winding road to a mysterious luxury resort, where he is met by an unctuous maitre d’hotel. Although neither man recognizes the other, the audience sees that the man is Tony’s cousin Tony Blundetto. Assuring him that his entire family is waiting for him, Blundetto gently but firmly insists that Tony relinquish the briefcase, which has come to symbolize his earthly affairs. Ever more uneasy, Tony glances over at the hotel, where shadowy figures drift in and out of sight against the brightly lit windows. As his eye captures the silhouette of his late mother, Livia, against the door frame, he hears a young girl sobbing in the shrubbery. As his spirit moves toward her, his body emerges from its coma, and his bleary eyes recognize the face of his daughter, Meadow, as she begs her father not to die.

Where exactly was the spirit of Tony Soprano? A man approaches an enticing California hotel, only to find out that he is trapped in it for eternity: a metaphor, perhaps, for the fate of a mobster, his trip to the afterworld demonstrating that you can never escape the family, in this life or the next. Later, trying to explain the vision he experienced while comatose, Tony will say, uneasily, “I saw something.” But what, exactly? As the Soprano saga draws to its close, heavy with intimations of its protagonist’s mortality, what redemption, if any, awaits? Is Tony’s vision one of heaven, or of hell?

My bet is on hell.

© 2007 Commonweal Foundation, reprinted with permission. For subscriptions: [www.commonwealmagazine.org](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org).