

Religion And Morality In Woody Allen's Crimes And Misdemeanors

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Introduction

Woody Allen's 1989 film [Crimes and Misdemeanors](#) asks whether morality has authority in a universe that does not reliably reward goodness or punish evil. The film places an apparent crime beside a series of social and romantic "misdemeanors," combining drama with comedy to show how people narrate their behavior until it becomes bearable. Judah Rosenthal, a respected ophthalmologist, arranges the murder of his mistress Dolores when she threatens to expose their affair and financial misconduct. Cliff Stern, an idealistic documentary filmmaker, compromises in less violent ways while judging the superficial television producer Lester. Rabbi Ben speaks for religious faith even as he loses his sight. The parallel stories refuse a simple division between believers and unbelievers, good people and bad people, or justice and chaos. (Allen, 1989; Lee, n.d.)

The original analysis correctly identifies the film's concern with God and moral responsibility, but it makes the conclusion too absolute. Rabbi Ben's blindness does not straightforwardly mean that God cannot see injustice, and the film does not prove that goodness always suffers while evil always prospers. Instead, Allen constructs a world in which moral consequences are psychologically, socially, and legally uncertain. Judah initially experiences terror and guilt, then discovers that he can live comfortably after the police investigation moves elsewhere. That discovery is more disturbing than a clear statement that God does not exist. The film asks what remains of moral obligation when punishment is not guaranteed. (Allen, 1989; Blake, n.d.; Lee, n.d.)

Judah's Crime and the Language of Self-Justification

Judah's crisis begins with choices he has already made. His affair with Dolores is not a random external threat. He has promised intimacy while protecting a marriage, reputation, and professional identity built on concealment. When Dolores insists that he tell Miriam the truth and threatens exposure, Judah describes himself as a victim. He asks whether it is just for one mistake to destroy everything he has built. This language converts consequences into persecution and allows him to imagine murder as defensive action. (Allen, 1989)

His brother Jack provides the practical route to violence, but Judah remains morally responsible because he authorizes the act. The use of an intermediary gives him psychological distance. He does

not see himself as a killer in the ordinary sense; he sees himself as a respectable doctor who permitted a problem to be removed. The distinction exposes how professional status and social respectability can coexist with severe wrongdoing. Evil need not appear as theatrical cruelty. It can emerge through ordinary concern for reputation combined with the decision that another person's life is expendable. (Allen, 1989; Lee, n.d.)

After Dolores is killed, Judah visits her apartment and confronts the material reality of what he ordered. His distress suggests that conscience has not disappeared. Yet conscience is not an automatic court that guarantees confession. It is a psychological capacity that can be suppressed, reinterpreted, or absorbed into a revised story. Judah survives by changing the meaning of the past: the victim becomes a threat, the murder becomes an exceptional necessity, and his later happiness becomes evidence that life has forgiven him. (Allen, 1989; Blake, n.d.)

Religion, Vision, and Rabbi Ben

Rabbi Ben represents a religious conviction that moral life is meaningful even when events cannot be explained. His blindness is symbolically important because the film repeatedly connects sight with ethical perception: Judah is an ophthalmologist who preserves physical vision while refusing to see the humanity of Dolores, whereas Ben loses physical sight while maintaining moral clarity. The symbolism should not be reduced to the claim that God is blind. It creates irony between sensory and moral vision. (Allen, 1989; Blake, n.d.)

Ben's faith does not produce worldly protection. He suffers illness, and he cannot offer Judah proof that wrongdoing will be punished. His position is therefore more demanding than a simple promise of reward. He believes that a moral structure must be lived even when empirical evidence appears uncertain. Judah wants religion to guarantee a favorable outcome or to disappear. When he says that God is a luxury he cannot afford, he reveals that faith has become unacceptable because it would require surrendering the life he is trying to protect. (Allen, 1989; Lee, n.d.)

The imagined family discussion from Judah's childhood stages the film's philosophical conflict. His father insists that he would choose God over truth if forced to choose, while Aunt May argues that power and success determine what happens. The scene is a memory shaped by Judah's present fear, not an objective theological debate. He recalls competing voices and selects the one that permits survival. Religion in the film functions through memory, family, ritual, and conscience even when Judah rejects belief. (Allen, 1989)

Cliff, Lester, and Everyday Moral Compromise

Cliff's story appears comic beside murder, but it broadens the analysis. He sees himself as serious, authentic, and morally superior to Lester, whose success depends on charm, self-promotion, and conventional entertainment. Cliff accepts a job making a documentary about Lester because he needs

money and access. He then edits the footage into a hostile portrait, using professional control to humiliate his subject. Lester may deserve criticism, but Cliff's method is not neutral truth-telling. It expresses resentment and risks violating the purpose for which he was hired. (Allen, 1989)

Cliff also idealizes Halley and imagines that their shared intelligence makes him entitled to romantic recognition. When she chooses Lester, he experiences the decision as evidence that the world rewards vulgarity. Yet Halley is not a moral prize assigned to the more deserving man. Cliff's disappointment reveals the self-interest within his idealism. He can perceive Judah's hypothetical crime as monstrous while remaining less attentive to his own dishonesty, vanity, and emotional claims on others. (Allen, 1989; Lee, n.d.)

The contrast between crime and misdemeanor does not equate murder with professional spite or marital dissatisfaction. It shows continuity in the stories people tell to protect self-image. Lester treats success as proof of merit, Cliff treats failure as proof of integrity, and Judah treats survival as proof that his act can be left behind. Moral blindness often begins with a flattering narrative. (Blake, n.d.; Lee, n.d.)

Moral Luck, Law, and the Absence of Guaranteed Justice

Judah's outcome depends partly on moral luck. The police suspect another person, the murder is not traced back to him, and time reduces his panic. If evidence had appeared, society would have judged him differently even though his decision was the same. The film exposes the uncomfortable role of luck in legal and social consequences. Some offenders are caught, others are not; some betrayals become public, others remain hidden. A system of morality that depends only on punishment cannot guide action consistently because punishment is uncertain. (Allen, 1989; Lee, n.d.)

This uncertainty does not prove that morality is meaningless. The victim's death remains real even if Judah feels peaceful. Moral facts are not created by the offender's emotional state. Dolores loses her future; Miriam remains in a marriage built on concealment; an innocent suspect may bear consequences; and Judah's social world continues through a false account. The film distinguishes getting away with an act from making the act right. (Allen, 1989; Blake, n.d.)

Legal justice also has limits. Courts require evidence and due process, not metaphysical certainty. A morally guilty person may escape conviction, while a just legal system must resist punishing without proof. The gap between moral knowledge and legal outcome creates frustration but is preferable to arbitrary punishment. Allen's film places the audience in possession of knowledge the institutions lack, forcing viewers to carry a judgment that the fictional society cannot enforce.

Storytelling, Memory, and the Final Encounter

The final conversation between Judah and Cliff turns the crime into a story proposal. Judah describes a man who has a mistress killed, suffers guilt, and then resumes ordinary life. Cliff expects a conventional ending in which the man confesses or is destroyed by conscience. Judah rejects that ending as unrealistic. This exchange reveals the ethical power of narrative. Cliff wants art to impose justice, while Judah uses narrative to normalize impunity. (Allen, 1989)

The film itself occupies a more complicated position. It does not punish Judah, but it does not endorse him. By revealing the crime and then denying the audience a satisfying resolution, the film makes viewers feel the absence of justice rather than merely hear a statement about it. The ending asks whether art should provide the moral order reality lacks or expose the desire for such order. Cliff's preference for confession may be aesthetically predictable, yet Judah's comfortable survival is not therefore morally neutral. (Blake, n.d.; Lee, n.d.)

Professor Louis Levy's documentary reflections provide another perspective. He suggests that human beings create meaning through love and memory despite an indifferent universe. His later suicide shocks Cliff because a wise philosophical voice does not follow the narrative Cliff expected. The film refuses to make any one character its final authority. Meaning is fragile, constructed, and still necessary. (Allen, 1989; Lee, n.d.)

Does Morality Require God?

The film raises but does not settle the question of whether morality requires religious belief. Judah's loss of belief helps him silence fear of divine judgment, but atheism does not logically justify murder. Cliff's secular idealism includes moral commitments, and religious characters are not the only possible sources of compassion. Likewise, belief in God does not guarantee ethical conduct; Judah grew up within religious tradition and still chose violence. (Allen, 1989; Blake, n.d.)

Religion in the film provides a language of command, accountability, repentance, and transcendent witness. Secular ethics can provide reasons grounded in human dignity, suffering, reciprocity, rights, and the conditions of shared life. Both require people to act without complete assurance that virtue will be rewarded. The deeper conflict is not belief versus unbelief but responsibility versus self-exemption. Judah does not commit murder because he has solved a philosophical problem. He adopts the philosophy that allows him to live with the murder. (Lee, n.d.)

Conclusion

Crimes and Misdemeanors presents a world in which moral and legal consequences do not arrive automatically. Judah protects his status through murder and eventually regains comfort. Cliff retains a

sense of moral superiority while compromising his work and misunderstanding his own desires. Rabbi Ben's faith survives without proof or protection. These outcomes make morality difficult rather than meaningless. (Allen, 1989; Blake, n.d.; Lee, n.d.)

The film's most unsettling insight is that conscience can be narrated into silence. People do not merely choose between good and evil; they construct stories in which their preferred action appears necessary, deserved, or harmless. Religion, law, art, and personal memory offer different forms of accountability, but none operates without human participation. Judah escapes punishment, yet the audience's knowledge preserves the judgment he has evaded. The film therefore leaves viewers with a demanding answer to its central question: people must act morally not because justice is guaranteed, but because the suffering of others remains real even when the universe is silent. (Allen, 1989; Lee, n.d.)

Works Cited

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