

Responsibility for actions in Woody Allen's *Irrational Man*

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Abstract: *Abe, in this film, has a kind of mental constipation going on. He can't write and can't have sex and can't be embraced socially in his world. He is truly reckless, as shown by his encounter with Russian roulette. When he begins to see himself as Raskalnikov in "Crime and Punishment," he commits a murder which he justifies by saying the world is a better place without a harsh judge. He then is led to try to kill Jill to silence her but falls down the elevator instead. The film thus clearly comments that you may take justice into your own hands like Abe Lucas but you cannot escape the divine justice of God causing you to pay for your murder by falling down an elevator. There is just no luck as is constantly brought up in the film only God's will and divine providence. Luck will run out and turn against you and force you to take responsibility for your own crimes and sins. It is truly only God and divine justice forcing Abe Lucas to take responsibility for his murder in the end. Divine providence or God's justice is relentless and overpowers any of man's efforts to take justice into his own hands as with Abe Lucas' murder of the judge.*

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Joaquin Phoenix plays Abe Lucas, a philosophy professor who has signed on to teach a summer course at a small-town college. And why not? He has nothing better to do. Abe is lost – physically, spiritually, intellectually. He's bored with himself and bored with life, but he keeps pushing forward, because that's what people do. The existential philosophy that he discusses with his students seems to give him a bit of a spark, but also seems to be extinguishing it in him at the same time. He has overanalyzed life to the point that it has lost all its meaning.

You might think that such a personality would send people trying to get as far away from this guy as possible, but you'd be wrong. Abe's students appear engaged by his class discussions and some of the women on campus (well, two of them anyway) seem to want nothing more than to be around him as much as possible. A fellow professor, Rita Richards (Parker Posey), is one of them and Jill Pollard (Emma Stone), one of Abe's students, is the other. Rita is married and Jill has a boyfriend (Jamie Blackley). Rita says she would be willing to leave her husband and run off with Abe, while Jill stubbornly insists that her relationship with Abe is purely platonic, but she can't help but be attracted to her brooding professor.

Eventually something changes in Abe.

Something existential in nature. While talking together in a diner, Jill and Abe overhear a conversation that gives Abe an idea. The professor who says he values life lessons above all other kinds, decides to take positive action and probably change someone's life for the better. This person he'd be helping is a stranger to him and this action he decides upon is highly illegal, but just the thought of it awakens Abe, as if from a long sleep. His life now has a purpose. He's completely energized by the thought of actually doing something meaningful instead of just talking about meaning in class. Small town philosophy professor Abe Lucas sets his mind to planning and carrying out "the perfect crime", something that he is able to rationalize, but could only be seen by other people as the action of a completely irrational man.

Abe becomes friends with Jill Pollard (Emma Stone), a perky young student of his who picks his brain every chance she gets, whether it be about existentialism, a conversational favorite of his, or his own personal life. While Abe will answer any question she has, catering to her curiosities and human interest, he still is in an ostensibly irreparable funk. Even wrapping himself up in an affair with Rita (Parker Posey), a science professor, doesn't excite him, for his impotence makes love-making nearly impossible and the pleasure achieved by an orgasm has stopped.

However, while eating breakfast with Jill one day, both of them overhear a conversation occurring in the booth next to them between a woman and her friends about a brutal courtroom custody battle she

is a entangled in and how she will soon lose her kids because her husband's lawyer and the judge are good friends. Here, for the first time in a long time, Abe is excited - thrilled, even - to realize he has a potential to commit a moral act that will benefit the woman and society in addition to reclaiming the thrill of existence everyone but him seems to indulge in.

"Irrational Man" focuses on that tipping point past depression where you're just content with everything about you and around you sucking. You stick with your passion (in this case, philosophy) because it's convenient and makes being upright during the day something more tolerable, but in your head, you're long gone dead and in search of a person, an event, or just about anything to make you appreciate being alive. Consider a scene where Jill drags Abe to a party, only for him to lie on the couch sulking and slugging away at his beer. When the host reveals her father's revolver in the closet, however, Abe becomes entranced with playing a game of Russian Roulette with himself. While the partygoers freak out at his potential suicide, he claims that it's an existentialist lesson about the thrill of being alive you cannot find in a textbook.

Abe's plan to realize his potential ethics makes sense, but to carry it out is to commit an amoral and heartless action. However, Abe is so far past the point of rationality, paradoxically, given his field of thought, he can only act irrationally. It's the only school of thought existentialism- choosing to act to feel alive-that makes sense to him at this point - that's how lost he is as a person.

As for the moral issues the movie raises, the first, the murder of the judge, is not so ambiguous. If you see someone about to be murdered and you kill the person instead, are you not justified? If you have no other way to prevent a corrupt authority figure from perpetrating a horrific injustice (with diligent fact checking and exploring other avenues of resolution, which the story took license to assume), what would, or should you do? If you do take action, you must assume responsibility for the correctness of your judgement, and for the system resolution that follows. Abe's crimes leads to a series of consequences in which God makes him pay for his murder with his own life. There is no luck, only God's providence.

When one reads the book "The Irrational Man" by William Barrett, one gets a touch of everything that haunts the persona of Joaquin Phoenix's professor in this film. He had almost developed a sort of out of body experience as he lays the principals of philosophy on his private school students. He is a loner and a cynic and can't find happiness. He has begun to pick and choose the most abysmal views on life. All those philosophers from Kant to Kierkegaard have seen the underbelly of reality in the world. Yet, like Woody Allen, they continued to write and produce. Why? Because when push comes to shove, our mortality is what we have; our lives are still all we have. Unless you believe in some afterlife where we continue to act as we do now, even that is filled with uncertainties. Abe, in this film, has a kind of mental constipation going on. He can't write and can't have sex and can't be embraced socially in his world. He is

truly reckless, as shown by his encounter with Russian roulette. When he begins to see himself as Raskalnikov in "Crime and Punishment," he commits a murder which he justifies by saying the world is a better place without a harsh judge. I think where it falls apart is that Abe never, for a moment, considers that police often have to blame someone. Emma Stone's character lays it out for him later and it's as if he had never thought of the results of his actions. He really believed in the perfect crime. He really believed that they would never blame someone. He is then faced with a choice as to whether to confess and give up his life for someone he doesn't even know. As a result he tries to push Jill down an elevator he broke and in the struggle that ensues he falls down the elevator instead. The film thus clearly comments that you may take justice into your own hands like Abe Lucas but you cannot escape the divine justice of God causing you to pay for your murder by falling down an elevator. There is just no luck as is constantly brought up in the film only God's will and divine providence. Luck will run out and turn against you and force you to take responsibility for your own crimes and sins. It is truly only God and divine justice forcing Abe Lucas to take responsibility for his murder in the end. Divine providence or God's justice is relentless and overpowers any of man's efforts to take justice into his own hands as with Abe Lucas' murder of the judge.

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