English 67N: The Ethical Gangster: How to be Moral, How to be Good—Mafia Style

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 1:30-2:50
Lathrop 298

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Office: 413 Margaret Jacks Hall

“Capitalism is the legitimate racket of the ruling class” ---Al Capone

Is there a difference between being moral and being good? Does it matter? Does knowing the difference matter at all to how a person should conduct him or herself in close relationships, in social groups, in professional life, in politics? The answer to all these questions is a resounding yes. This class will explore human moral psychology: the intuitions we have about right and wrong, fair and unfair, harm, justice, loyalty, authority, sanctity, freedom and oppression. We will then relate these intuitions to systematic ethical theories of right and wrong. We will do so by immersing ourselves in a somewhat surprising source—the greatest hits of Mafia movies from Little Caesar to The Sopranos. We will also consider recent findings in experimental moral psychology.

Since the 17th century, stories about gangsters—hardened, often violent criminals who build networks of criminal activity and operate outside the norms of ordinary society—have magnetized poets, fiction writers, and filmmakers. I want to probe this fascination.
It is a striking and perhaps unappreciated fact of modern literature that much very direct moral talk—talk about moral dilemmas, talk about how to behave in ethically challenging situations, talk about serious ethical compromises and lapses—gets presented to us through gangster fiction—not just crime fiction, but fiction about organized crime. Why should this genre, in particular, be so fruitful for the dramatic staging of ethical challenges? In this course we will address the question of why gangster fiction has been so popular and what its popularity can tell us about characteristically modern ethical dilemmas and core issues in moral psychology.

The class will consider such topics as when and under what conditions we root for evil; the so-called puzzle of imaginative resistance (dating to Hume, who claimed that we resist fictional scenarios that challenge our moral intuitions much more readily than we resist scenarios that just seem implausible); how moral dilemmas—especially those involving the greatest good for the greatest number—are framed with reference to competing interest groups; and why tribes (and their breakdown in the modern world) are an especially fruitful background for the sorts of fictional scenarios that prime our ethical intuitions. These core issues include the nature of justice and injustice, what it means to live an ethical life, whether moral psychology is fixed or changes in relation to circumstances, the relative nature of good and evil, and the difference between gangsters and successful legitimate politicians who use similar methods.

Watch

Chase, David. “The Sopranos” (Selections)
Cooper, Scott. “Black Mass”
Glazer, Jonathan. “Sexy Beast”
Kazan, Elia. “On the Waterfront”
LeRoy, Mervyn. “Little Caesar”
Howard Hawks, “Scarface”
Newell, Mike. “Donnie Brasco”
Scorsese, Martin. “The Departed”
Scorsese, Martin. “Goodfellas”
Tarantino, Quentin. “Pulp Fiction”

Read


Schedule of Readings and Assignments

June 20
Introduction to Class
Watch “Little Caesar” in class

June 22
Watch “Scarface” (1932) in class

Omerta/Uomo

June 24  Read Baumeister, chapters 1-4
          Watch “On the Waterfront”

June 27  Baumeister chapters 5-8
          “Waterfront” discussion continued

Good and Evil

June 29  Read Baumeister, chapters 9 and 11 (10 is optional)
          Watch “The Departed”

The Godfather

July 1   Read Bloom (chapters 1-3)
          Watch “Sexy Beast”

July 6   Watch “The Godfather”; Read Bloom (chapter 4)

The Godfather’s Legacy

July 8   Finish “The Godfather Part 2”  Finish Bloom
July 11  Watch “Goodfellas”

The Godfather and His Legacy continued

July 13  Watch “Donnie Brasco”

July 15  Finish Haidt, Righteous Mind

Tribes and Tribal Ethics

July 18  Read Greene (first quarter);
Watch “The Sopranos” (selections)

July 20  Read Greene (second quarter)
Sopranos continued

July 22  Greene (third quarter); Sopranos (selections)

Tribes and Tribal Ethics continued

July 25  Read Greene (finish)
Sopranos continued

July 27  Watch “Black Mass”

Wrap up: Tarantino, comic genius

July 29  Watch “Pulp Fiction”
Course requirements:

All students must read, watch the films, and participate in class.

Daily quizzes, one 1000-word paper, one take-home final exam, due at the end of the regularly scheduled examination time for this class

Grading:

Classroom participation (including daily quizzes): 40%
1000-word paper: 20%
Take home final: 20%

Writing Assignments:

The writing assignments will be designed to explore the question: what is the relationship between moral intuitions and moral norms and rules (roughly, what is the relationship between “is” and “ought”?) Is there a way to move between one and the other or should we try hard to keep them separate? The class will examine one style of ethical theory in depth, namely utilitarianism. Your writing assignments will be geared towards exploring utilitarian ethical theory in relationship to moral psychology.

Required Texts (Available in the Bookstore, although all of these are also available as electronic books).

Copies of the films will be placed on reserve in Green Library. I will supply one copy to the class every week so you can take it and watch it together on your own. Please also subscribe to Netflix or to some other video rental site (iTunes, Amazon, Google Play etc.)

**Canvas:** Other required readings will be announced along the way and available via the “Materials” section of our Canvas site. Please also check the Canvas site for announcements regarding readings and assignments, and for supporting materials and links.

**Policies and Expectations**

I have a strict no gadget policy including laptops. Please switch off phones and other electronics. I will consider exceptions to this rule in cases of compelling need.

**Students with Documented Disabilities**
Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: [http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaes](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaes)).

**Honor Code**
The Honor Code is the University’s statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or
receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work
that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading.
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well
as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by
refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable
precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also
avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the
Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements,
the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable
academic work.