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O FATHER, WHERE ARE THOU? The Coen Brothers and the Riddle of Existence

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SYNOPSIS

The Coen Brothers are among the most critically acclaimed directors of our time, yet their work presents critical challenges, as their films resist easy interpretation. Confusing on a first viewing, the meaning behind the movies is often veiled in mystery. This element offers a clue about the Coens' worldview. The difficulty is part of the design. The viewer must wrestle with the meaning behind the movies, just as the main characters struggle to make sense of a chaotic and confusing universe. Given their apparent atheism, if we had to ascribe a worldview to the Coens, the viewer may be tempted to see them as *nihilists*. However, they seem to share *The Big Lebowski's* disdain for nihilism's lack of an "ethos." Rather, the Coen brothers seem to share in the existentialist's philosophical struggle with nihilism, encouraging human wrestling with ultimate issues, even if they think the struggle is unlikely to succeed. In this sense, the Coens might be grouped more safely with absurdist such as Albert Camus, who see the tragedy and comedy in the human striving for meaning, and our perpetual failure to find it. Given one of the brothers' philosophical training, it is not a stretch to see their works as fundamentally Socratic in nature: questioning all attempts at ultimate answers but encouraging the ongoing struggle to understand our place in a harsh universe. Though the filmmakers themselves are not spiritual, they are deeply interested in religious issues, returning again and again to the questions of faith and morality.

Nabokov once said, "One cannot read a book; one can only reread it." This seems true of most good books; they are better on rereading. It is *certainly* true of just about every Coen Brothers movie I've ever seen. Of the seventeen feature films by this duo, almost every single one left me going, "Huh?" at the end. Sometimes with a sense of disappointment. Never without some unresolved questions: *Is that the end? What about the rug? But they never found the briefcase?!*

RETURN AFTER READING

This experience of initial befuddlement at Coen films is common among even die-hard fans. But it almost always comes with an appreciation that follows after with the determination of Anton Chigurh.

I recall two personal instances. The first, in college, was watching *The Big Lebowski* in my dorm room, thinking it was one of the least funny comedies I'd ever seen, only to buy the DVD soon after and wear it out with continual use.

The second, a decade later, was when I took my wife to see *No Country for Old Men*. After the film was over, she turned to me with annoyance and said, "You owe me another date night." I agreed. This was fair. I too, thought the film a disappointment. *The main character dies suddenly, offscreen. Why? What did that final dream mean?* But I couldn't get the movie out of my head. I watched it again soon after, realizing that the person I thought was the main character was *not* the main character. Then I assigned *No Country* in my film class. The following February, I cheered as it won an Oscar for Best Picture.

This long, autobiographical introduction has a point. First, the experience of befuddlement-then-appreciation is so central to the pleasure of the Coens' *oeuvre* it should have its own name, preferably a German compound. Second, perplexity is so important to the meaning of the brothers' films that it might be their central theme. In a Coen movie, it's often the case that no one, not the characters *nor* the audience, knows what's going on. And that's why we return to their movies.

ARE THE COENS UNSERIOUS MEN?

Commenting on the book of Job, G. K. Chesterton remarked, "Every great literature has always been allegorical — allegorical of some view of the whole universe. The 'Iliad' is only great because all life is a battle, the 'Odyssey' because all life is a journey, the Book of Job because all life is a riddle."¹ Comparing the Coens' movies to the book of Job is apt. For one thing, they made a modern-day retelling of Job with *A Serious Man*, which is perhaps their most autobiographical film to date. The story of a confused man beset by misfortune is set in the time period, locale, and Jewish religious world in which the Coens grew up. Poor Larry Gopnik, cuckolded, kicked around, and disaster prone, consults three rabbis who give him confusing advice and cold comfort.

The Job-like hero of *A Serious Man*, though, isn't the only confused character we meet. In every film, most of the heroes are in the dark about answers to the big questions in life. From Hi and Ed's infertility, to The Dude's misguided attempts to solve the mystery of Bunny Lebowski's kidnapping, to Ed Crane's search for peace of mind, to Llewelyn Moss's attempts to outpace his hunter, to Barton Fink's attempts to write a wrestling picture for the common man, the typical Coen hero is often outmatched (not by the villains, who are also often clueless, but seemingly by the riddling nature of the universe itself). Often, the heroes *don't know* what they *don't know*. As Barton Fink says, "What don't I understand?"

The Coens themselves also are mischievous and obfuscatory intentionally. They often edit their own films under the pseudonym Roderick Jaynes, who they pretend is a real person. Their Oscar-winning film *Fargo* begins with the words, "This is a true story" (it isn't). They spin false narratives about their films in interviews and create bonus materials for their blu-rays that deliberately mislead.² The Coens revel in confusion. One wonders if they are even brothers.

All of this, clearly, makes unpacking the meaning of a Coen film difficult for a critic, especially for a religious critic, whose deepest concerns always are fundamentally earnest. I do not envy the task the writers of a recent set of religiously focused essays on the Coens faced in trying to speak straightforwardly of these riddling filmmakers. In *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, a repeating question is whether the Coens are "moralists or ironists."³ If the Coens are insincere ironists, a question arises, "Are the Coens just fooling around? Are they mocking their characters? Are they mocking us?"⁴ As the editor of the volume notes, it seems to many that "if [the Coens] employ irony and mockery, then they must not be 'really' religious."⁵

RELIGIOUS BUT NOT SPIRITUAL

This skepticism about the Coens' unseriousness (that they are not "serious men"), however, loses sight of the presence of religion as a repeating motif in their work. Christ imagery abounds in *Miller's Crossing* and *Hail, Caesar!* Prayers are offered in *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In the latter film, one key prayer seems to be answered providentially (only to be immediately dismissed by the fleetingly penitent Everett). Bible verses and rabbinic writings are quoted in *Barton Fink* and *A Serious Man*. The Dude and Walter Sobchak debate whether a possible kidnapping is enough of an emergency to permit Walter (a Polish Catholic turned Jew) to drive on *shomer Shabbos*.

Though Hollywood films often seem to take place in a world in which religion never existed, the Coens often face it dead on. They rarely treat religion *reverently*, but they allow their characters to take it *seriously*. This raises the question, then, about what role God plays in the Coenverse? In a previous article for this publication, I argued that Quentin Tarantino's cinematic universe allows for the existence of God and gods in a polytheistic sense.⁶ My sense is that the Coens' cinematic universe falls in line with their apparent atheism.⁷ No God could appear in a whirlwind to speak to any of their characters, even to add more questions to the pile, because no such God exists for them.

But this isn't to say the Coens lack a theology. (Even atheism is a theology of sorts.) Rather, the theology of the Coens looks much like the philosophy of *Socrates*: ironic, questioning, testing, and listening. This philosophical tone is unsurprising; Ethan Coen studied philosophy at Princeton. The Coens may not accept the answers of Midwestern Rabbis or born-again Southerners, but they do seem to like listening to their questions and watching their struggles with faith.

PICTURES FOR THE COMMON MAN

In an important urtext for the Coen filmography, the screwball comedy *Sullivan's Travels*, hotshot director John L. Sullivan wants to break with his pattern of directing lighthearted comedies to tell a heart-wrenching story about poverty. The studio execs fight him tooth and nail, trying to talk him out of it. "I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. Stark realism. The problems that confront the average man!" Sullivan earnestly proclaims. "But with a little sex in it," one exec shoots back. "A little, but I don't want to stress it...I want to hold a mirror up to life. I want this to be a picture of dignity! A true canvas of the suffering of humanity!" Another exec pushes back again, "How 'bout a nice musical?"

Despite the execs pointing out that Sullivan knows little about the common man (he attended a swell boarding school and has had unbroken successes), the young director is undeterred. However, an early line in the film points to how ill-prepared Sullivan is to tell a serious story, and forecasts his later troubles. Sullivan idolizes a recent hard-nosed art film depicting the struggle of the common man. "It died in Pittsburgh!" one exec barks. "Aw, what do they know in Pittsburgh?" Sullivan retorts, suggesting an inherent elitism at odds with his goal. "They know what they like!" is the response. "If they knew what they liked, they wouldn't live in Pittsburgh," Sullivan responds, showing how little he truly cares about the perspective of the average person. In this, we hear an echo in a later Coen film, *Barton Fink*, as Barton often waxes poetic about telling the story of the common man but doesn't care to listen to such stories when they are offered him. Barton and Sullivan both, in the Socratic sense, do not "know themselves," and are thus ripe for the withering mockery of the films they inhabit.

One additional connection is worth mentioning. What is this serious film Sullivan aims to make that will hold a mirror up to life and discuss the problems of the average man? It's to be called *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* This prompts the question whether the Coens *themselves* show genuine interest in the common man. This goal is expressed superficially by Sullivan and Barton Fink. *Sullivan's Travels* interestingly explores a middle space between light comedy and a picture of suffering, concluding that humor is the best way to alleviate the suffering of the unwashed masses.

TRAGEDY AND COMEDY IN TENSION

The filmography of the Coens can be seen as playing out this dialectic between screwball lightness and somber seriousness. Even their lightest films (*Hudsucker Proxy*, *Raising Arizona*, *O Brother?*) touch on real issues faced by the bedraggled underclass, while their most serious (*Fargo*, *A Serious Man*, *Blood Simple*) integrate morbid humor and dry wit. In my view, their best films hold the two poles together in tension.

For example, *Fargo's* outlook on the banal perversity of human corruption is tempered by the even-keeled Midwestern good sense of Marge Gunderson. Staring down the darkest villain of the film, and taking stock of the carnage he has wrought, Marge's sunny, folksy outlook is able to understand the situation without seeming to let it affect her soul: "So, that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there. And I guess that

was your accomplice in the wood chipper. And those three people in Brainerd. And for what? For a little bit of money? There's more to life than a little money, you know. Don'tcha know that? And here ya are, and it's a beautiful day. Well. I just don't understand it."

If *Fargo* falls on the dark side of noir, with a toe in comedy, *The Big Lebowski* reverses the tone, tempering humor with occasional sadness. The Dude seeks to get his rug back — "That rug really tied the room together" — but never does. The foolish nihilists are defeated and unmasked as posers who do not know themselves. ("It's not fair!" they whine at their defeat.) But the joyful climax is darkened by poor Donny's heart attack. The Dude still abides, a SoCal version of Marge's unflappable cheer, but the Stranger comments that he didn't like "seeing Donny go."

O Brother offers an even more optimistic resolution of conflict, if dimmed by a sepia-toned tension of doubt. Everett, Delmar, and Pete survive their escape from the law by a seemingly providential tidal wave that (in other hands) might have baptized Everett into earnest faith. But as soon as they emerge from the cleansing waters of their salvation, Everett immediately doubts the divine origin of the wave as an answer to his prayers. The film itself undermines what would seem to be a supernatural gift — Everett finds his ex-wife's wedding ring in the floating roll-top desk — when we discover this isn't the correct ring in the final moments of the film.

WRESTLING PICTURES

This underlying tension in these films forces the viewer to wrestle with questions about the goodness of the universe and the possibility of human flourishing. Through the dialectic of comedy and tragedy, the Coens refuse to resolve what might simply be called the "problem of suffering." In one scene in *O Brother*, Everett lays down in the woods to sleep, and the viewer can clearly see a stone under his head, functioning as a pillow. With less biblically literate filmmakers, this detail might be written off. But given the frequent allusions to literature, philosophy, and Scripture in their films, one suspects the Coens are referencing the story of Jacob, a tricky man like Everett (and Ulysses, which is Everett's real first name and whose odyssey provides the primary allusion for the film). Jacob's trickery leads him into trouble but also great blessing. And he notably wrestles with an angel of God for a blessing.

Wrestling is a key image in the Coens, especially in *Barton Fink*. Barton is tasked with writing a wrestling picture. He wrestles with the script and is offered tips on wrestling from his only friend, who turns out to be a hellish murderer. To learn more about wrestling, he watches the unfinished print of another wrestling picture, *Devil on the Canoe*. In the most hellish of all the Coens' comedies, we watch the protagonist wrestle unsuccessfully with his own calling: wrestling for a blessing.

One senses the Coens themselves no longer wrestle with the big questions in a philosophical sense. I think they tapped out on the possibility of transcendence long ago. But they seem endlessly fascinated by watching *us*, the common man, wrestle with these questions, and their best art is an attempt to keep the match going indefinitely.

Like Socrates, their art acts as an unsettling gadfly, biting the complacent viewer out of his stupor and forcing him to consider the big questions.

MORALITY IN THE FACE OF MEANINGLESSNESS

I say the Coens have tapped out long ago because a few of their films seem to answer the ultimate question of meaning in the negative. *No Country for Old Men* is by far their darkest film, though notably one they very faithfully adapted from a Cormac McCarthy novel that sets the tone. The film asks a fairly basic question: how do we maintain our moral integrity in a world that rewards evil?

The film follows a morally ambivalent man, Llewelyn Moss, as he tries to escape from a monstrous criminal, Anton Chigurh. The hidden hero of the film gradually is revealed to be the straightlaced Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, who is trying to find Moss before he's killed. Chigurh is the ultimate predator, treating normal people (the decent, common man) like so much cattle to be slaughtered. At points, we have hope that the sympathetic Moss might escape, but the film's opening lines ought to remind us evil has the advantage nowadays. Sheriff Bell despairs about the present: "The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure. It's not that I'm afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job. But I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard. He'd have to say, 'OK, I'll be part of this world.'"

In the end, we see Sheriff Bell unwilling to face down the extreme, perhaps inscrutable evil of Chigurh. And Chigurh *wins*, reclaiming the money and killing all in his path. Guided by his coin flips, Chigurh seems to symbolize the cruelty of fortune in a world without providence.

Yet even here there is resistance to full-blown nihilism. The film concludes with Bell, now retired after his failure to confront Chigurh, describing a dream where his father had gone ahead of him on horseback, carrying a horn with fire. Bell says everything around him was cold, but when he got to where his father was, there would be fire. In McCarthy's other book, *The Road*, carrying the fire seems to symbolize maintaining the good in the face of a destructive, uncaring universe.

In *No Country*, the viewer is prodded to ask how one can be good while still being "part of this world." Bell taps out, but not without wrestling. Marge Gunderson faces evil, too, though seemingly without trying to understand why people would do such evil "for a little money." The Dude simply "abides" in a chaotic universe he cannot understand, comforted by weed, White Russians, and bowling. But the viewer is still left with questions of morality and meaning.

A CROSS WITHOUT A CHRIST

Whatever the answer to these questions, however, the option for hoping in the divine is closed off by the Coens. In a telling few moments in *Hail, Caesar!*, we get an attempt at a religious answer to the problem of meaning. As Eddie Mannix attempts to court the

approval of leading religious leaders for his prestige picture, *Hail, Caesar! A Tale of the Christ*, a religious dispute breaks out about the person of Jesus Christ (one who was both God and a common man). A Catholic priest discourses on the nature of the Incarnation, noting that the Son of God takes the sins of the world on Him so “through faith” we can enter the kingdom of heaven. In one of the film’s closing scenes, the lead actor in the film-within-the-film, a Roman centurion, stands before the cross, repentant and prophetic. In words that intentionally evoke the sun-drenched yet sinful world of Hollywood, the movie almost offers some hint of the divine: “Why shouldn’t God appear here, among these strange people to shoulder their sins. Here...in this sun-drenched land. Why should he not take this form, the form of an ordinary man?”

But the actor stumbles with the final line, saying that the Christ offers “a truth that we could see if we had but...” Here he forgets his line, and the director has to shout the final word into a megaphone: “*Faith!*” Faith, the one thing needed for salvation, is the one missing piece of the puzzle.

As I mentioned above, a few of the Coens’ central characters take on the role of a Christ figure. They suffer for others, but without resolving the underlying problems that bedevil the world. Eddie Mannix in *Hail, Caesar!* is, in fact, the only suffering servant the film has to offer. He’s an ordinary man who sees our sin and bears it, but without redemption for himself or for others. And, as we know from the final words of The Stranger in *The Big Lebowski*, The Dude is taking it easy “for all us sinners.” These common men bear crosses (of sorts) for others, but the salvation they offer is only fleeting and finite.

The Coens present us with a universe that offers no real hope of ultimate redemption or meaning, but they seem to find real dignity and value in the struggle. Perhaps we may say that they have never stopped wrestling with the absence of God.

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NOTES

- 1 .G. K. Chesterton, “A Defense of Nonsense,” in G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012), 28.
- 2 Cf. the fake materials on *The Big Lebowski* disc or the deliberately incompetent commentary on *Blood Simple*.
- 3 Elijah Siegler, *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order* (Waco, TX: Baylor, UP, 2016), 15.
- 4 Ibid., 8.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Philip Tallon, “Reservoir Gods: Quentin Tarantino’s Premodern Theology,” *Christian Research Journal* 39, 1 (2016): 38–45.
- 7 In an interview with *Playboy*, Joel Coen said he doesn’t believe in God, “in the Jewish sense,” and added that he thinks death is final, and there doesn’t seem to be justice in the universe. This leaves room for some vague conception of a god, but certainly not any deity of the major world religions. (Cited in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amora Order*, 272.)