

# DOGVILLE®

“In all my years of moviegoing, I've never had a picture lose me so completely and then win me back so thoroughly as this one. After a half hour, I was tired of it. After nearly an hour, I was struggling to stay awake. And then the movie took a slight turn, and I revived, then became interested, then involved, then caught up emotionally and then, finally, awestruck. This is a seriously important film and a huge achievement.”

– Mick LaSalle, San Francisco Chronicle<sup>1</sup>

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Pre-film Kant terms:

**Hypothetical imperatives:** Conditional commands, dependent upon goals. Generally of the form “If I want A, then I must B.”

**Categorical imperatives:** Unconditional commands, independent of goals. Of the form, “I must C.”

## FIRST TWO FORMULATIONS OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

*I. Formula of Universal Law: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*

*II. Formula of Humanity: Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.*

“The penal law is a categorical imperative; and woe to him who creeps through the serpent-windings of utilitarianism to discover some advantage that may discharge him from the justice of punishment, or even from the due measure of it, according to the Pharisaic maxim: “It is better that one man should die than that the whole people should perish.””

– Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*<sup>2</sup>

As you watch the film, pay particular attention to motifs of Punishment, Observation, Appearance vs. Truth, Desert, and Respect.

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<sup>1</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, April 9, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *The Science of Right*, Trans. W. Hastie, (Raleigh, N.C.: Alex Catalogue, 1790). Also commonly translated as *The Doctrine of Right*, though I have selected an older translation for this quote because I think it truer to the original German and more vivid. Mary Gregor’s translation of the *Metaphysics of Morals* in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6:332, excludes the “serpent-windings” terminology and includes the term ‘Eudaimonism’ (instead of ‘Utilitarianism’) in translation of “Glückseligkeitslehre.” The complication here is that there is also a German word for ‘Eudaimonism’ (*Eudaimonismus*). It matters, obviously, whether Kant is speaking of Eudaimonism or Utilitarianism. Here is Kant’s original: “Das Strafgesetz ist ein kategorischer Imperativ, und, wehe dem! welcher die Schlangen-windungen der Glückseligkeitslehre durchkriecht, um etwas aufzufinden, was durch den Vorteil, den es verspricht ihn von der Strafe, oder auch nur einem Grade derselben entbinde, nach dem pharisäischen Wahlspruch: » es ist besser, daß ein Mensch sterbe, als daß Menschen auf Erden leben.«” from Immanuel Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, Werkausgabe Band VIII, Herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel, pp. 453.

# POST-FILM DISCUSSION

## “Bingo. I have to tell you, your illustration beat the hell out of mine.” – Tom to Grace

**Tom’s Illustration:** In the first chapter, we are told that Tom is seeking a gift that will help him illustrate how the town can help others. He receives this gift in Grace, a gift that will help him illustrate how to *receive*, that will help him illustrate “the human problem.” “I think you have plenty to offer Dogville,” says Tom. But Tom is a game player, a calculator. “The whole Country would be better served,” he continues, explaining how this gift will benefit mankind’s understanding of each other. Says Grace at one point, “You make it sound like we’re playing a game.” Tom seeks to demonstrate how the town can help others by showing that it is to their benefit to help others.

At first, Grace is accepted into the town and aided because of what she can give the town, by how she contributes to their well-being. This is clear from the beginning, where Liz mentions that she had a “selfish reason” for voting to keep Grace in Dogville (to keep Tom’s eyes off of her). As time progresses, however, we realize that this was the motivating factor for all, all along. In fact, this was how Tom argued that the townspeople would see that they should help others. As the costs/risks/burdens to Dogville increase, the costs to Grace increase. Says Tom: “From a business perspective, your presence in Dogville has become more costly.” Grace is “punished” in this way for her increased cost by leveling out these costs with benefits to the town. (Tom Edison Sr. later says that we should not consider the fly-wheel around her ankle as “punishment,” supporting the view that she is just being “charged” her due.) At various points, the townspeople teach Grace a “lesson” for her transgressions and begin to feel as though they can take liberties with her.

This, until she is accused by Tom, in a benevolent but public lie, of stealing Tom Edison Sr.’s money – “I’m trying to help you,” he says to Grace after telling the residents of Dogville that she was the one who stole the money. But he is still thinking in the same universal, principled, welfarist terms; thinking of the town as a whole. (Tom eventually explains to Grace that he is writing a story of a small town, which he refuses to call “Dogville” because he needs something more “universal.”) Unlike the other residents of Dogville, Tom suppresses his desires in order to pursue his goal of teaching all a lesson on “helping others.” He thinks this way until the very end, when he, through what can only be called a “weakness of the will,” nearly caves to his desires. (Narrator, earlier in the film: “Tom ‘tactically’ thought it ill-advised to press his desires of the flesh.” And then later in the film, Tom explains angrily: “I just rejected everyone I’ve ever known – wouldn’t it be acceptable to forget one of your ideals just to ease my pain?” Grace rejects him, bound as she is, unable to make the free choice to make *true* love.) Instead of pursuing Grace further, Tom reassesses, and with his universalist moral view, decides that the better course is to turn Grace in for the ransom promised by the Gangsters.

*Further observations:* All of Grace’s crimes are apparent. She is chased by “murderous” Gangsters. She is listed as “missing,” which first leads the townsfolk to believe that they are committing a crime by not reporting her to the police, though she has committed no crime that they know of. She is later wanted by the police for “participating in bank robberies in California,” though the townspeople know that she could not have committed these crimes. With every scene, the “risk” to the townspeople grows, even though they are all aware of her innocence. What they fear is alien forces, heteronomous law, from outside the town—like the persistent clanging of the ghostly ‘penitentiary’ under construction, always off in the distance (narrator: “what might or might not be a penitentiary”); like the returning, poster-hanging, law enforcement; like the townspeople outside the walls as Chuck has his way with Grace; like the people and the Church in the Georgetown square while Grace and Ben are in the truck.

**Grace’s illustration:** Grace’s illustration comes through the power of her father, who, we learn, views all of the townsfolk as greedy animals, “Maybe they are victims, but I call them dogs. And if they’re lapping up their own vomit, the only way to stop them is with the lash.” Grace explains that “Dogs only obey their own nature. One cannot pass judgment on dogs.” But her father contests that this is *arrogant*, that “Dogs can be taught many useful things, but not if we forgive them every time they obey their nature.” Grace would be willing to forgive, we learn, but she determines that the Dogvillians do not deserve forgiveness for their transgressions. “How could I ever hate them for their own weakness?” she wonders. And then it dawns on her: “If she had acted like them, she could not have defended a single one of their actions – and if one had the power to put it to rights, it was one’s *duty* to do so.” Carved into the headboard on the mineshaft—

DICTUM AC FACTUM: NO SOONER SAID THAN DONE.