"Am I the Only One Here Who Gives a Shit About the Rules?": The Dude's Virtues of Authenticity

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> The Big Lebowski: "What makes a man, Mr. Lebowski? Is it being prepared to do the right thing, whatever the cost? Isn't that what makes a man?"
>
> The Dude: "Hmm…sure. That and a pair of testicles."

1 Introduction

Like many of the Coen Brothers' films, *The Big Lebowski* numbers among its concerns the question of what makes a man. And if, as the Dude slyly points out, "being prepared to do the right thing, whatever the cost" is not sufficient to make a *man*—there are, after all, *women* who also have moral integrity—we might at least think that it has something to do with what makes one a good *person*. A good person, that is, is someone who takes morality seriously, and thus one who sees life as a morally serious matter.

But what is it to take life seriously in this sense? Some who fail to do this are easy to recognize: the Big Lebowski, for instance, who shows no interest whatsoever in doing the right thing, despite his rhetoric to the contrary. But what about the Dude's best friend, Walter Sobchak? Walter certainly takes things seriously: his propensity to fly into a rage when confronted with those who would frustrate his will is evidence of this. But does this mean that Walter is, to borrow the title of a more recent Coen Brothers film, a serious man?

We want to suggest that the Dude, in fact, possesses an insight into the nature of morality that no other main character in the film, and certainly not Walter, has managed to grasp. In the morally corrupt world of *The Big Lebowski* the Dude emerges as a kind of noble anti-hero who follows in the spirit of other celluloid anti-heroes who have come before him, namely, Luke (Paul Newman) of *Cool Hand Luke* (1967)

and Randle Patrick McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). Like Luke and McMurphy, the Dude serves as a beacon of integrity, authenticity, and virtue in a corrupt, power-oriented society. It is in this sense, perhaps, that the Dude really is, in the words of the Stranger, "the man for his time and place."

2 Virtues and vices: On being "very unDude"

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with right and wrong, good and bad, and how we should live. So when we ask what makes one a good or bad person we are asking a question that is both philosophical and ethical. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) proposed that answering the question *what does it mean to be a good person?* involves an understanding of a kind of human excellence, or "virtue." The only way to *define* virtue is in terms of what a morally good or virtuous person would do. For Aristotle, virtue is to be found not in strict adherence to rules but rather in a kind of *activity* that involves developing one's character. According to Aristotle, cultivating such a virtuous character involves a kind of active habituation, such that "it makes no small difference to be habituated this way or that way straight from childhood, but an enormous difference, or rather *all* the difference."[1]

We don't know much about the Dude's upbringing, but we do think that his approach to life represents an understanding of virtue in line with Aristotle's. To come to an understanding of the Dude's virtues we will proceed by exploring three moral vices, moral character flaws that the film suggests are "very unDude." The first is a kind of *rule rigidity* exemplified by Walter. The second is really a pair: *hypocrisy and inauthenticity*. These are personified by the Big Lebowksi, by Walter, and by others. The third, *exclusionism*, is instantiated by almost all of the film's central characters, with the exception of the Dude himself. It is by avoiding and rejecting all three of these character flaws that the Dude manages to serve, for those who have eyes to see it, as a manifestation of virtuous authenticity.

3 "Am I the only one who gives a shit about the rules?": Walter's moral rigidity

What does it mean to be a good person? Some people think that being good is a matter of following the rules that determine good behavior. This is what we often tell our children: do what we tell you to do, or you are a bad child. Of course, being a good person is not simply a matter of following just any old rule; if it involves following

[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, Vol. 2*, Jonathan Barnes, Editor, Princeton University Press, 1984.

rules at all, it must be the moral rules that matter. But what is special about moral rules? One thing that seems special about them is this: moral rules apply to you—that is, like laws, they have a kind of authority over you—whether or not you have agreed to them.

Compare this with the rules of bowling. If you have chosen to engage in a game of bowling then you have reason to follow the rules. For instance, you have reason to make sure that when you roll, your foot does not cross the foul line. But notice that this is only true if you have chosen to play the game. If you were engaged in some other activity—cleaning the lanes, chasing an escaped cat, or fleeing from a pursuer—you would not hesitate to cross the foul line. After all, there is no *intrinsic* reason not to cross the foul line. It isn't as if something bad happens when you do—unless, of course, you are bowling, in which case something bad does happen: namely, you are penalized. But this in itself only matters to you to the extent that you are continuing to abide by the framework of bowling, and so taking it as important how well you score, whether you commit a foul, and so forth.

The distinction we are discussing is closely related to the distinction drawn by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) between hypothetical and categorical rules (or, in Kant's terms, "imperatives").[2] *Hypothetical* rules are relative to certain goals, or perhaps to certain roles or identities:

> Drink some warm milk (if you want to get a good night's sleep).
>
> Don't cross the foul line when throwing the ball (if you are bowling).
>
> Don't drive on Shabbos. (if you are an observant Jew).

Note that these rules do not apply to you if the parenthetical conditions are not met: if, that is, you are not trying to go to sleep, not bowling, not an observant Jew.

Categorical rules, on the other hand, are supposed to apply to everyone, even people who have not specifically accepted their authority in any way and who would rather exempt themselves. Moral rules are usually seen as categorical, as are legal rules: the point is not that you should not murder innocent people (or, for that matter, pee on their rugs) *if* your aim is to achieve so and so (you want to stay out of prison, you want people to like you, or what have you). The categorical rule says: don't murder innocent people, period.

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that in *The Big Lebowski* Smokey's toe does cross the foul line when he bowls his eight. If so then Smokey has (unintentionally) violated one of the hypothetical rules that defines bowling, and Walter is right to complain. But Walter is *not* right to back up his complaint by brandishing a firearm and

[2]Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor, editor, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

threatening Smokey with physical violence. There are categorical rules (both moral and legal) against that—categorical rules that are weightier and more compelling than any hypothetical rule Smokey might have violated. (And again, Smokey's violation was unintentional—we aren't even talking about *cheating* here.)

In acting this way, and in shouting "Am I the only one who gives a shit about the rules?", Walter shows that in fact he does not understand the rules—he does not *understand* which rules are important and which less so. He does not understand that, as we noted above, there is nothing *intrinsically* wrong with crossing the foul line. And so he does not understand that, as the Dude reminds him, bowling is "just a game."[3] There is a sense in which this does show that Walter takes morality seriously: he is "prepared to do the right thing [as he sees it] whatever the cost." But this rigid willingness to obey and enforce relatively trivial rules at all costs is not admirable.[4] It is in fact a moral flaw, as the Dude, in a remark that implicitly draws the contrast between virtue-based and rigid deontological approaches to ethics, observes:

> Walter: Am I wrong?
>
> The Dude: No, you're not wrong–
>
> Walter: Am I wrong?!
>
> The Dude: You're not wrong, Walter. You're just an asshole.

4 "Okay, but how does all this add up to an emergency?": Rules, meta-rules, and judgment

The issue of whether and how to *enforce* rules is closely connected to the question of when we should make *exceptions* to rules. Here we want to suggest that the good person is not someone who follows (or, for that matter, enforces) all rules rigidly and mindlessly. Rather, the good person is someone who follows the rules *when following the rules is appropriate*, but who also knows when following the rules is not appropriate.

Let's return to Kant. According to Kant, there are principles that define what morality requires, and these principles have no exceptions: lying, for instance, is not only *typically* morally wrong (something most of us probably accept), but is *always*

[3] It is interesting that, later in the film, a toe is severed. Is this, perhaps, some sort of cosmic punishment for Smokey's transgression, inflicted not on Smokey but on a nihilist who would claim to reject the very idea of line-crossings? When Walter says to the Dude, "I can get you a toe," is it perhaps Smokey's toe that he has in mind?

[4] For a nice discussion of Walter's rule adherence see Douglass, Matthew K. and Walls, Jerry L., "'Taken' 'Er Easy for All Us Sinners': Laziness as a virtue in *The Big Lebowski*" in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, The University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

wrong, regardless of the situation. One could not lie, according to Kant, *even to save a life* (by, say, misleading a serial killer as to the whereabouts of his next intended victim).

This position is, perhaps, even more extreme than Walter's: he at least seems to acknowledge *some* exceptions to the rules (though as we will see, this is problematic). Even Walter, that is, recognizes that rules have exceptions, can come into conflict with other rules, and sometimes simply need to be ignored. The rule against driving on Shabbos, for instance, may be suspended in the case of a genuine emergency.

All available evidence, though, suggests that Walter insists on seeing those exceptions as being, themselves, rules—or rather, meta-rules that tell us when ordinarily binding rules need not be followed:

> Rule 1: Walter may not drive on Shabbos.
>
> Rule 2: Walter is allowed to drive in cases of emergency.
>
> Rule 3: In cases of conflict (an emergency on Shabbos) rule (2) has priority over rule (1).

But there is a problem with thinking that such a maneuver can keep the set of moral rules as rigid and stringent as Walter would like them to be. For what constitutes an emergency? If Walter is right that it must be rules all the way down then there would have to be a rule that tells us how to distinguish emergencies from non-emergencies. But it seems very unrealistic to expect that we should be able to formulate a comprehensive set of rules that could decide every such question. As Aristotle notes, ethical and other practical questions are not as precise as this. The reasonable man, he wrote, "is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits: it is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician as to demand strict demonstrations from an orator."[5]To decide what constitutes a genuine emergency, and what does not, a person cannot appeal to some further rule. Rather, he needs to appeal to something that Walter has very little of: good judgment.

To see the importance of the idea of judgment, consider the way that it is built into our legal system itself—a system that it is very natural to think of as being composed of rigid laws. In a trial the defined standard is that the defendant's guilt must be proven "beyond a reasonable doubt." There is no attempt to give a precise and comprehensive definition of what 'reasonable' means in this context: the best we can do is say that it is what a reasonable person would think. (Notice the connection here with the virtue-ethical claim that good behavior is defined in terms of what a good person would do.)

[5]*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I paragraph 3.

But Walter is quite incapable of feeling "reasonable doubt." Once he makes up his mind that someone is guilty, he allows himself to become completely convinced, and almost nothing can dissuade him. Moreover, the effect of his certainty is always the same: to prevent him from feeling compassion for others. At various points he is convinced, on the basis of speculation and very little evidence, that Bunny kidnapped herself, that Larry Sellers stole the million dollars, and that the Big Lebowski is faking his disability. ("I've never been more certain of anything in my life," he tells the Dude.) It is on these occasions that Walter's rigid approach to morality, and to life, is most obvious—and most disturbing.

5 "Dude, 'Chinaman' is not the preferred nomenclature": Walter's inauthenticity

> Walter: Without a hostage there is no ransom. That's what ransom is! Those are the fucking rules!

By dividing the world into the permissible and the forbidden, rules give the world structure, and so help make sense of it. Walter's most profound fear—his fear of nihilism—is of a meaningless world in which there are no rules. ("Nihilists? Fuck me. I mean, say what you like about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude, at least it's an ethos.") As the remark commonly attributed to Dostoevsky has it, in a nihilistic world there is no God, and "everything is permitted."

To see how the virtuous person of good Dude-like character fits into to this scheme, picture a continuum with Walter at one end and the nihilists at the other. At Walter's end, there exist rules for everything; while at the nihilists' end, there are no rules at all, nothing is right or wrong, nothing is better or worse than anything else. True virtue, according to the Aristotelian idea of the Golden Mean, exists at the point of moderation between the two extremes (of excess and deficiency). It is at this point that we find the virtuous person, who acts in the right way with the right motive at the right time to the right extent.

Near the beginning of the film we witness the first President Bush's famous statement that Iraq's "aggression [against Kuwait] will not stand"—a statement, along with its accompanying talk about drawing "a line in the sand," that is later parroted both by Walter and by the Dude. The idea is that there are some things that good moral persons will not abide, the implication being that if we refuse to draw such lines then we are taking a nihilistic "anything goes" attitude. (The fact that Smokey's transgression involves a literal line-crossing surely helps to explain Walter's extreme over-reaction, given his nearly pathological fear of nihilism.) In a completely nihilistic world there are no rules, no values, and no firm identities or hard boundaries. Since there are

no rules, there are no rules for language—no right and wrong way to use words—so that every utterance is as true (or as false) as any other utterance; any name can be applied to any thing. The attempt to give something its proper name—a project we see Walter engaged in more than once—is like the attempt to draw a line in the sand: it is an attempt to put things into categories, to define their essences, and to separate the permissible from the off-limits. No wonder Walter is so desperate to find a set of rules—any set of rules—to give him some kind of standards and sense of meaning to cling to:

> Walter: And let's also not forget—let's not forget, Dude—that keeping wildlife, an amphibious rodent, for uh, domestic, you know, within the city—that isn't legal either.
>
> The Dude: What're you, a fucking park ranger now?

And no wonder Walter is so concerned with using "preferred nomenclature": it is precisely by drawing lines and accepting what would otherwise seem to be arbitrary rules that Walter has constructed his identity, or rather identities. But precisely because his identities are, in large part, constructed—as the Dude protests at one point, "Walter, you're not even Jewish, man! You're fucking Polish-Catholic!"—Walter's personhood is fragile, precarious, and largely inauthentic—which seems to be the source of a good deal of his anxiety.[6]

Walter's apparent rugged individualism belies a lack of real individuality—something the Dude has in spades. This lack is masked by his self-identification as a Jew and a Vietnam vet, and as a defender of various and sundry classical and neo-liberal individualistic rights, including the rights to engage in free speech, to self-identify, and to bear arms and engage in vigilante justice. As is apparent to nearly everyone but himself, though, Walter's commitment to these values is relatively shallow. For instance, despite his insistence that others adhere to "preferred" (politically correct) nomenclatures, Walter himself frequently makes use of racial epithets and ethnic slurs including "krauts" (Germans) and "camelfuckers" (Iraqis), as well as referring to Bunny as a "strumpet" and paraplegics as "spinals."

The insults and accusations Walter hurls at other people tend to reflect his deep-seated fears about himself. His deepest fear is that he is without identity, or without a meaningful world in which to find an identity. We sense this fear in the angry outbursts he directs at Donny, whom he accuses of being "out of [his] element" and of having "'no frame of reference." "You're like a child," he says, "who wanders into the

[6]Moreover, the nihilists reveal their inauthenticity as well. They turn out to be quite rule-bound themselves, insisting that since the girlfriend gave up her toe (because she thought, mistakenly that they would get the million dollars) that such an outcome is just "not fair"—to which Walter quite properly (for once) responds, "Fair?! Who'ts the fucking nihilist here?"

middle of a movie and wants to know—" (at which point he is interrupted by the Dude).

As the contemporary philosopher Rick Furtak writes,

> It is one thing to admire another person, and quite another to admire oneself admiring. In the latter case, the emotion has been cut off from its outward foundations and has become inauthentic or sentimental.…The sentimental or inauthentic person, in other words, wants to have the effect without the cause, to experience an affect without having to deal with its grounding conditions.…This is how emotion frequently becomes inauthentic: one misrepresents the world in order to feel the way one wants to, noticing only those details that justify a pleasant response (or an unpleasant response, if that is what one is seeking). This kind of selective attention is a form of self-deception…"[7]

We see this kind of "selective attention" in Walter's insistence on finding, in nearly every conversation or event, a justification for flying into a rage about Vietnam (the unpleasant response that he constantly seeks):

> Walter: Those rich fucks! This whole fucking thing—I did not watch my buddies die face down in the muck so that this fucking strumpet—
>
> The Dude: I don't see any connection to Vietnam, Walter.
>
> Walter: Well, there isn't a literal connection, Dude.

But given Walter's fear of meaninglessness, it is little wonder that he has trouble distinguishing between the hypothetical rules of games and the compelling categorical rules of morality. He lives in a society that has eroded that distinction by placing an absurd degree of significance on artificial social roles—roles that are a matter of appearance rather than reality, and whose main functions are to protect the wealth and power of the privileged and to assuage people's fear of nihilism by giving them a sense of meaning.[8]

6 "Every bum's lot in life is his own responsibility": The Big Lebowski's Hypocrisy

All of this is especially apparent in the case of the Big Lebowski. The narrative offered both by Brandt and the Big Lebowski regarding the latter's character is one of phil-

[7] Furtak, Rick. "The Virtues of Authenticity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2003): 423-438.

[8] This sense of meaning is connected to the archetypal American Horatio Alger story about how it is possible for anyone to succeed and move upward by working hard—a story whose hollowness is revealed by its being placed in the mouth of the biggest fraud in the film, the Big Lebowski.

anthropic service and personal achievement in the face of hardship and adversity, virtues by any measure. Yet, as Maude reveals, the truth about the Big Lebowski's is that he is a failed and inept businessman, a fraud and a bum ("he has no money of his own") whose "weakness is vanity."

No number of plaques, awards, or keys to cities can make the Big Lebowski the kind of achiever that he imagines and portrays himself to be. He is both perpetrator and victim of a particularly harmful kind of self-deception; an inauthenticity that exists beyond his own conscious awareness of it, wherein he adopts modes of dress, of speech, and even of dwelling that suggest an identity he does not truly occupy. Even what should be the most important relationship in his life, his marriage to Bunny, is part of the sham: as the Dude comes to realize in a moment of enlightenment, the Big Lebowski "no longer digs her. It's all a show!"

Though all outward signs suggest that he is an achiever, the truth is that he has achieved very little; he himself is a living counter-example to his own claim that "[e]very bum's lot in life is his own responsibility." Similarly, when he says to the Dude, "Condolences. The bums lost," his utterance is doubly ironic: first, because he is condemning himself as much as or more than he is condemning the Dude; and second, because his unearned social status shows that some of the "bums"—the ones who were able to hide the fact that they are bums—did not, in fact, lose.

The Big Lebowski draws what appear to be clear lines, using them to make moral distinctions that distinguish good persons from bad, bums from achievers, and "real" men from cowards and bullies, constructions that create for him an identity that can inhabit the "right" side of such boundaries. In the penultimate scene we see the Big Lebowski collapse under the weight of his own body, a metaphor for the collapse and unraveling of the inauthentic, fraudulent identity he has crafted for himself—an identity that allowed him to look in the mirror and see, not a fraud, but the "Achiever of the Year."

7 "Donny, you're out of your element": Language, Exclusion, and Line-Drawing

Modern moral thinking shows a consistent trend toward equality and inclusion. "Taking the impartial element in ethical reasoning to its logical conclusion means, first, accepting that we ought to have equal concern for all human beings," the philosopher Peter Singer writes in his book *The Expanding Circle*.[9]

But most of the characters in *The Big Lebowski* show little interest in expanding their circles. They display the very unDude vice of moral exclusion: they refuse to see

[9]Singer, Peter, *Ethics: The Expanding Circle*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981.

other people as morally significant, to treat them as persons, or to welcome them into their communities.

Democracy is a conversation, as Al Gore once observed. Shutting people out of conversation is, then, implicitly and sometimes explicitly a political act, an exercise of power. Consider how Donny is repeatedly excluded from conversation by Walter's belligerent verbal attacks. Or how the Dude is shut out of the apparently hilarious joke shared (in Italian) by Maude and video artist Knox Harrington. Or how the nihilists who claim to have kidnapped Bunny express their displeasure at the Dude's failure to show up alone to the drop by hanging up the phone. Consider, too, the extent to which young Larry Sellers completely shuts out Walter by uttering not a single word under interrogation. (To quote Walter, "We have a language problem here. The little prick's stonewalling me.") And consider, of course, the Big Lebowski's reluctance to waste any of his allegedly valuable time speaking with the Dude, and his bullying "Hello! Do you speak English? Parla usted Inglese?" Indeed, the Big Lebowski's fortress-like home is all about exclusion: we are not surprised, when the Dude shows up there the second time, to discover that he is "in seclusion in the West Wing." One of the benefits of material wealth, after all, is that it relieves one from having to rub shoulders with the commoners, or even with one's own employees.

Other acts of exclusion are more physical, and more forceful. The Dude is drugged and removed from the Treehorn compound, arrested and commanded to stay out of Malibu. Soon after that he is summarily thrown out of a cab for expressing his hatred of the Eagles. And both the Dude and Walter are nearly thrown out of a coffee shop—and indeed, the Dude chooses to leave—when Walter insists on disturbing this "family establishment" with his loud profanity. (Even the Stranger, who shows considerable affection for the Dude, objects to his using "so many cuss words.")

In contrast to this, the Dude himself shows no desire to dominate or exclude. He moves in and out of various circles, and seems comfortable in nearly every setting and milieu—a talent no one else in the film seems to possess. On first leaving the Big Lebowski's mansion he responds jokingly to Brandt's obviously insincere semi-invitation, treating him, ironically, as if he were being sincere:

> Brandt: Well, enjoy, and perhaps we'll see you again sometime, Dude.
>
> The Dude: Yeah sure, if I'm ever in the neighborhood, need to use the john.

The Dude is open, inclusionary, and flexible, allowing people to address him in any number of ways: the Dude, Duder, His Dudeness, El Duderino ("if, you know, you're not into the whole brevity thing"). It is no accident that his most prominent attempt to exclude people—by wedging a chair between a nail-studded piece of wood and the door to his apartment—ends in utter failure, because it goes so deeply against his

nature. As the private eye Da Fino observes, the Dude excludes no one: he is "in bed with everybody."[10]

8 "Fuck it, Dude, let's go bowling": Outsiders and their Games

But despite the fact that the Dude is "in bed with everybody"—or, perhaps, because of it—the Dude is, in a very important sense, an outsider. The figure of the outsider plays an important role in a number of literary works and films that preceded *The Big Lebowski*, including, as we mentioned earlier, *Cool Hand Luke* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.[11] All three films feature a protagonist who is a kind of anti-hero, one who possesses a brave integrity, authenticity, and virtue of character, who navigates a society that is itself deeply corrupt and within which only a virtuous, authentic anti-hero can understand justice, virtue, and the meaning of what it is to be a good person. As the Stranger remarks of the Dude, he is "takin' 'er easy for all us sinners." And there is something else, too, that shows up in all these films and helps unite them thematically: the importance of games.

Early on in each of these films we discover the sense in which each central protagonist counts as an 'outlaw.' None of these involve serious criminal transgressions; rather, they are better categorized as anti-authority or anti-establishment acts. Luke "pays back an old debt" by cutting the heads off of parking meters. McMurphy is institutionalized for being "belligerent," for having "talked when unauthorized," for being "resentful in attitude toward work in general," and for being "lazy"—or, as McMurphy himself describes it, for his liking to "fight and fuck too much."[12]The highlights of the Dude's college years involve "occupying various administration buildings, smoking a lot of Thai stick, and breaking into the ROTC." The outlaw aspects of these three characters are symptoms not of malice or criminal dispositions, but of their

[10]Given this, it is ironic that the Dude's behavior toward Da Fino is uncharacteristically un-inclusive: he rejects Da Fino's invitation to "pool our resources [and] trade information," and shows a level of irritation that almost amounts to hostility. Then again, given what the Dude has suffered to this point, the fact that his encounter with Da Fino immediately follows his realization that the Big Lebowski has been playing him for a fool, and the fact that Da Fino has been anonymously stalking him for some time, it is not surprising that he might be feeling a bit out of sorts.

[11]For an insightful analysis of the politics and religion behind *Cool Hand Luke* see Halton, William, "Laws of God, Laws of Man: Power, Authority, and Influence In Cool Hand Luke," *The Legal Studies Forum*, (22) 233, 1998, <http://www.pugetsound.edu/faculty-sites/bill-haltom/cool-hand-luke>.

[12]Does the fact that McMurphy "likes to fight and fuck too much" suggest that he indulges in excessive behaviors, and so is not a good Aristotelian? In our view the "too much" should be read as referring, ironically, to society's standards, and not McMurphy's own. Aristotle's view of virtue would not disallow either physical violence or carnal pleasure, so long as these were engaged in at the right times and for the right reasons; and what we see of McMurphy's conduct suggests more strongly that he has a healthy appetite for such activities—albeit, an appetite that is likely to meet with disapproval in the moralistic and repressed society he lives in—than that he desires or enjoys such activities excessively.

being outsiders. Further, all three see the dangers of adopting a Walter Sobchak-like blind adherence to rules—rules that are, after all, frequently arbitrary, and are used mostly to maintain the *status quo*.[13] Indeed what their "crimes" symbolize, more than anything else, is the rejection of rules as the ultimate determinants of justice and of obedience to rules as the highest morally admirable form of behavior.

It is in connection with this anti-establishment resistance to authority that we find the importance, for all three characters, of games. In a fascinating book about games, the philosopher Bernard Suits argues persuasively that a game is a goal-directed activity that involves three essential aspects.[14] First, games must have what he calls *prelusory goals*, that is, goals that can be described independently of the game. (For example, in bowling, the goal is that the pins are knocked down.) Second, games must have what Suits calls *constitutive rules*, rules in which the most efficient means of accomplishing the prelusory goal are prohibited. (One must stand at a distance from the pins, and may not walk up to them and simply knock them down with one's hands.) Third, according to Suits, one must come to the activity with what he calls the *lusory attitude*, which involves a willing acceptance of the constitutive rules. (Being forced against one's will to roll a ball down a lane, or doing it for some non bowling-related purpose, does not constitute playing a game.)

For both Luke and McMurphy, card playing acts both to establish the position each takes in their respective hierarchies—raising them to positions of leadership within their cohorts—and in so doing, to usurp power from their respective authority figures. Other types of games are also used as means of communicating both with their disciples and with the authorities they oppose, revealing the reality of arbitrariness and cruelty that lies behind the show of authority. As a snub to the warden and guards, Luke incites a game of tar-the-road-as-quickly-and-enthusiastically-as-possible, and later bets his fellow inmates that he can eat 50 hard-boiled eggs in one hour. Similarly, McMurphy wagers that he can lift an entire sink fixture from its moorings. He also responds to Nurse Ratched's refusal to permit the viewing of the World Series by creating his own imaginary World Series game for which he animatedly provides the play-by-play, leading the others to uproarious cheers over the "home run" hit by Mickey Mantle.

In each of these cases, of course, the overt game is just a mask for the real game,

[13] In connection with the issue of the arbitrariness of rules, consider the fact that one of the crimes committed by McMurphy is that of statutory rape—a crime which, by its very nature, must be defined in a way that is at least to some degree arbitrary. It would be an absurd philosophical error, that is, to think that there exists an 'age of consent' that is the same for each human being, and that sexual intercourse can be a morally serious misdeed at, say, 11:50 pm on the day before a person's sixteenth birthday, but perfectly fine ten minutes later. On the other hand, we assume that McMurphy would agree with Walter that there are clearly some limits here: as Walter remarks of Jesus Quintana, "Eight year olds, Dude."

[14] Suits, Bernard, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.

wherein the prelusory goal is to usurp power from a corrupt authoritarian, and the constitutive rules require that the prelusory goal be achieved by adhering to (though bending) unjust institutional rules. The Dude, by contrast, keeps his game-playing mostly separate from the rest of life, but shares McMurphy and Luke's skepticism toward authority, and their refusal to be taken in by outward signs and symbols of authority. He knows, as do they, that wealth, status and prestige are simply masks for power, that society itself is essentially a kind of game, and that if we forget this we will inevitably find ourselves trapped by its conventions and strictures of that game (including conceding to the insistence of those like the Big Lebowski, Jackie Treehorn, and others, that the 'losers' be harshly punished). The idea is not so much the cynical one that the only way to win is not to play, as the more optimistic idea that one can win—or at least, can avoid being completely beaten—so long as one does not forget, or let others forget, that playing a game is what you are *all* doing.[15]

9 "No Funny Stuff": The Virtues of Perspective

We began this paper by suggesting that a good person is one who takes morality, and in a sense life itself, seriously. That life is a game is not incompatible with this, for some games are to be taken seriously. One need not, though, be solemn about it. Indeed it is worth remembering that, unlike nearly everyone else in this very funny film, the Dude has a sense of humor. He shows an appreciation for the absurdity of the behavior of those around him and of the situations he finds himself embroiled in. ("It's, uh, down there somewhere, let me take another look.") If the nihilists' motto is "no funny stuff"—a motto that would be endorsed by nearly every character in the film—the Dude's philosophy of life would seem to be very much the opposite.

There is, we should note, one other character who shares both the Dude's sense of humor and his philosophy of life. After visiting Maude, the Dude is returned to his home in a car. The car's driver, Tony, tells him a joke (the punchline is "you know me, I can't complain"), following which, the two have this philosophical exchange:

> The Dude: I gotta tell ya, Tony. I was feeling really shitty earlier in the day. I'd lost a little money, I was down in the dumps.
>
> Tony: Aw, forget about it.
>
> The Dude: Yeah, man! Fuck it! I can't be worrying about that shit. Life goes on!

[15] Here one might once again contrast the Dude with Walter, who takes games too seriously (threatening Smokey's life for denying that he stepped over the line) while treating situations that might actually be serious (Bunny's kidnapping) as if they were games.

The "little money"" referred to, of course, is the million dollars the Dude believes to have been in the stolen briefcase; and for someone as poor as the Dude to be able to think of this as "a little money" and to be able to say "Fuck it! I can't be worrying about that shit!" shows an admirable if not astonishing sense of perspective.

One's sense of humor is rooted in one's sense of perspective, and many of the vices we have discussed (and their implied corresponding virtues) are connected with perspective. The Dude's ability to see people for who they really are and not be taken in by pretension or illusion; his good judgment in knowing when rules are to be applied, and when they should be ignored; his ability to forgive (Walter, in particular) and to show compassion and sympathetic concern (for Bunny, among others); and his acceptance of an imperfect world, shown in his willingness to say "fuck it" and walk away from bad situations rather than clinging to futile and counter-productive ideals—all of these are expressions of his ability to see the world from a reasonable and realistic perspective, to respond to what is there and not to what he wishes were there, and to avoid being deluded by self-protective or megalomaniacal fantasies. We won't say the Dude is a hero. What's a hero? What he is, though, is an authentic human being, and a man of compassion, integrity, humor, and perspective. Far from being a loser or a bum, the Dude really is "the man for his time and place."