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# The **BIG** **LEBOWSKI** **AND PHILOSOPHY**



Keeping  
Your  
Mind Limber  
with Abiding  
Wisdom

**BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES**

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LEBOWSKI  
AND  
PHILOSOPHY**

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To Richard Fleming, who makes me laugh, as well as think

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# INTRODUCTION

## Sometimes There's a Film

What makes a book or a film philosophical? Is it being prepared to argue arcane conceptual minutiae? Whatever the cost? No matter how many people it bores? Is that what makes a philosophical text?

Well, it's certainly not a pair of testicles.

The editors and the contributors to this volume are committed to the idea that topics of philosophical interest can be found just about anywhere. Sure, in ancient Athens and contemporary universities but also in homes and bars, on iPods, and in movie theaters. When it comes to questions of truth, goodness, beauty, reality, and meaning, frankly, it's hard to find a time 'n a place they don't apply.

To some extent, the ubiquity of philosophical considerations in life is both philosophy's strength and its weakness. Because matters of philosophical interest are everywhere and involve pretty much everyone, it often seems as if anything goes in philosophy. It seems just as right to say to philosophers about their output what the Dude aptly tells the Jesus: "Well, like, uh, that's just your opinion, man."

Yet then again, just as not everyone who picks up a bowling ball is a golfer, not just anything a bunch of bums might say or do at a bowling alley can count as philosophy. 'Course, I can't say I seen London (recently), and I ain't been to France (as often as I'd like), but it seems to me that thinking philosophically about something, even a movie, means at least thinking carefully about it—means thinking about how it fits right in or doesn't fit right in with

established philosophical theories and principles. Not every child who wanders into the middle of a movie can achieve that kind of thinking. The essays in this volume, however, even those that might sometimes seem stupefying, really do.

Still, it might seem a stretch to take seriously the idea of examining *The Big Lebowski* philosophically. It can look like just a lighthearted comedy, a guy movie, kind of juvenile, really, something silly and escapist. *The Big Lebowski* may indeed have seemed that way to moviegoers when it was first released in 1998, because it proved to be a box office disappointment. Yet when you start to think about *The Big Lebowski*, and over time lots of people have, more and more new shit comes to light.

Obviously, the film confronts issues of sex, violence, and death. The action of the film is initiated by the escapades of a nymphomaniacal porn actress, an assault, rug peeing, and an apparent kidnapping. Donny dies. Maude conceives. Children are threatened with castration. Guns are drawn on old friends. Cars are burned. Cocktails are drugged. Money and rugs are stolen. Marmots are nearly drowned. That's enough by itself to lead any ethicist to put down the Thai stick and crack open the Plato.

Of course, there's more. In the twin Lebowskis, one finds the legacies of both leftist hippies (still quoting Lenin, or is it Lennon?) and Barry Goldwater's minions, still locked in struggle. There's class war between unemployed bums and capitalist achievers, too. Then there's the Dude's pacifism and Walter's Vietnam warrior ethic. There's Walter's inflexible certainty and the Dude's laid-back . . . well . . . Dudeness. There's religion in Jesus and Moses, as well as gestures toward things Eastern. Even the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher from Islamic Andalusia, Maimonides (aka Rambam) makes a brief appearance.

Stalking across the terrain of the film, too, is European nihilism. Important currents of recent philosophy have

focused on the threat (or the absurdity) of nihilism in modern culture, and a number of the philosophers in this volume have undertaken to consider seriously the film's response to it.

Perhaps most compelling of all, however, is simply the Dude and the way he "abides." Somehow, this silly, unemployed, developmentally arrested, pot-addled loser captures our imaginations. People are drawn to him as an exemplar of something. They have written about "Dudeism," and he's been called "the Duddha." Perhaps it's his stoic reaction to being attacked in his own home and having his head shoved down a toilet. Perhaps it's his simple, nonmaterialistic lifestyle. Perhaps it's his wit, his passion for bowling, his solidarity with his friends, or just his utterly convincing goodwill.

None of the philosophical dimensions of the film, of course, should be surprising because Ethan Coen graduated from Princeton University in 1979 with a bachelor's degree in philosophy, having written a senior thesis on "Two Views of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy."

Whatever the source of it all, people have discovered a lot that's of philosophical interest among the ins-and-outs and what-have-yous of *The Big Lebowski*. The contributors here draw on Kant, Aristotle, Mill, Derrida, Butler, phenomenology, Epicurus, existentialism, Augustine, ordinary language philosophy, the philosophy of history, and even modern logical theory to unpack the film and explore its resonances.

I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that, in knowing that thinkers such as those collected in this book are out there, waxing philosophical for all of us sinners, all of us readers—and all of us fans of *The Big Lebowski*.\*

Aw, look at me. As my students might say, I'm ramblin' again. Wal, I hope you enjoy the book.

\* A note about quotations, which are so important to fans: the standard for quotations in this volume is the film as it was released, rather than the published script or the script as it appears online. That's because the actors often deviated from the script when performing, and the online versions of the script differ from the film, from one another, and from the published script. The script as published in book form, however, has been used to guide matters of punctuation, spelling, and so on. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, *The Big Lebowski* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998).

# **PART ONE**

## **FIRST ROUND ROBIN: TYING IT ALL TOGETHER, OR NOT**

# Chapter 1

## WHAT WOULD THE DUDE DO?

### Deconstructing the Dude

*Joseph A. Zeccardi and Hilda H. Ma*

From the opening scene in Ralphs supermarket to his final commiseration with the Stranger at the bowling alley bar, we feel a strong affinity for the Dude. Of course, as the victim of various beatings, mistaken identity, and circumstances beyond his control, the Dude engenders sympathy pretty easily. Indeed, it's easy to feel sorry for him as Jackie Treehorn's goons micturate on the wrong Lebowski's rug and jam his head into the john. Beyond feeling bad for him, however, we find ourselves feeling a somewhat surprising admiration and a certainly stupefying respect for el Duderino. As the feller says, "I like your style, Dude."

Consider, for example, how he calmly but firmly counters the crude brutality of the carpet-pissers with simple toilet-seat logic. The Dude doesn't answer violence with violence, as the hotheaded Walter probably would. Neither does he merely lie or cower meekly on the bathroom floor, as the diffident Donny might. Instead, he patiently points out inconsistencies between the reasonable (but false) assumption that he is the wealthy husband of Bunny Lebowski, on the one hand, and the reality of his aging hippie bachelor pad, on the other. This is not to suggest that the Dude is a hero (because what's a hero?), but insofar as

the carpet-pissers are swayed by his logic and depart relatively peacefully, the scene demonstrates that the Dude's pacifistic, deliberative demeanor helps him navigate morally challenging and treacherous situations such as this. As we confront our own carpet-pissers, then, we would do well to ask, "What would the Dude do?"

In this chapter, we pursue an answer to this question through a deconstructive analysis of the film that presents the Dude as a virtuous alternative to the extreme ethical views represented by Walter's obsession with rules, on the one hand, and Dieter's nihilist credo that "Zere ARE no ROOLZ," on zee ozzer. Turns out that the Dude exhibits a Goldilocks combination of principles and virtues that serves him better than the extremes of either Walter's strictly rule-based ethic or Dieter's exhausting nihilism.

## **Deconstruction, Dichotomies, and the Dude**

So, what would the Dude do? One way to answer this question is to ask another question about the reasons that underlie the Dude's actions. After all, if we knew *why* the Dude does what he does, then we would be in a better position to decide *what* the Dude would do in any given situation. For example, if he follows strict ethical principles, then we can understand his actions in terms of general reasons. Figuring out what the Dude would do, then, would be a matter of applying the principles of the Dude. Such dedication to principles is characteristic of ethical generalism, the thesis that moral reasons must be general reasons, or reasons that admit generalization into principles. On the other hand, if we cannot consistently explain his



actions in terms of general reasons, then the Dude must rely on his judgment, character, or intuition to guide him, rather than on any principles. This rejection of moral principles is characteristic of ethical particularism, which holds that moral reasons need not be general.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the generalist approach does not seem too promising as far as the Dude is concerned, because he appears to be an opportunistic, nonconformist ne'er-do-well who rejects the societal conventions and rules (that is, the principles) exemplified and championed by the Big Lebowski (who consequently labels him a "bum"). Indeed, his proclivity for impaired driving and illicit drug use suggests that the Dude is not too concerned with rules of any kind, moral or otherwise. Despite his leisurely lifestyle, freewheeling sex life, and slow career, however, the Dude is a rigorously disciplined pacifist (who consistently refuses to fight even when the nihilists threaten to cut off his johnson). In addition, he is an author (who steadfastly refuses to accept revisions to the second, watered-down draft of the Port Huron Statement), a detective (who persistently follows a strict drug regimen to keep his mind limber), and a dipsomaniac (who unyieldingly refuses to drink anything apart from Caucasians and oat sodas). So, the Dude has certain rules, man, principles that he follows without exception, even if that means danger, dismemberment, or death. This suggests that the Dude is a generalist whose practical wisdom or moral decision making consists of the scrupulous application of these and other principles.

Even Walter—who plainly, loudly, and repeatedly expresses his affection for rules—recognizes the Dude's dedication to principles. After Walter pulls his piece out on the lanes, we find him and the Dude in the Dude's car outside the bowling alley, as each tries to calm the other down:

Dude: Just, just take it easy, Walter.

Walter: That's your answer to everything, Dude . . . pacifism is not something to hide behind.

Walter's claim that taking it easy is the Dude's "answer for everything" indicates that he applies this principle consistently and even to a foolish extreme, as in situations that call for action, when taking it easy is not the best or the right thing to do. The idea that the Dude "hides behind" his pacifistic principles also suggests that his dedication to generalism is so strong that it can overrule his own judgment or intuition and lead him to act in ways that even he finds morally lacking or otherwise inappropriate.

Indeed, soon after this exchange, it appears that the Dude's principles are leading him toward a significant and very un-Dude moral lapse. In the bowling alley, soon after entering into the employ of the Big Lebowski, he assures his teammates that any calls from Bunny's kidnappers will not distract him from bowling in the next round robin:

Dude: They gave Dude a beeper, so whenever these guys call—

Walter: What if it's during a game?

Dude: I told him if it was during league play—*[Here, the Dude makes a dismissive gesture indicating his intention to ignore any calls during league play and, in effect, suggesting that his obligation to the bowling team trumps his obligations to the Big Lebowski and/or Bunny.]*

This beeper dilemma sets up a series of potentially problematic moral conflicts for the Dude, conflicts that illustrate the limitations of generalism and threaten to undermine our confidence in the Dude's moral decision making. As a member of the bowling team and a friend to Walter and Donny, he has an obligation to bowl in the tournament. As an employee of the Big Lebowski and a moral role model deserving of our respect and admiration, however, he has an obligation to answer the call from the kidnappers who have threatened Bunny's life, which, after

all, is in his hands. If the kidnappers call during the tournament, then the Dude will be forced to choose between these apparently inconsistent obligations. Furthermore, if he chooses to keep bowling, even though he believes that this choice could result in Bunny's injury or death—that is, if his obligation to the bowling team trumps his obligation to Bunny's life—well, then the Dude is in serious danger of losing his credibility as a moral role model and a good person deserving of our respect and admiration.

Of course, this potential moral conflict never comes to its crisis in the film, and the Dude immediately explains why he believes that Bunny has kidnapped herself (and hence is likely to be in no real danger). Still, he doesn't *know* that the kidnapping is a scam, and the idea that the Dude would put bowling before Bunny's life, based on a hunch, is initially unsettling, nonetheless, particularly insofar as old Duder is an otherwise redeemable, even admirable, character. There are good reasons, however, to believe that el Duderino would do the right thing here, transcend his moral principles, and restore our justifiable faith in the Dude as a moral role model and a paragon of virtue. In fact, by deconstructing the traditional generalist-versus-particularist debate over moral deliberation, the film presents the Dude as a virtuous compromise between the extremes of Walter's rule-obsessed generalism and the exhausting particularism of the nihilists.

Arguing that language is arbitrary and, hence, that meaning is unstable, shifting, and delayed, the deconstruction theorist Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) held that the author "writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system."<sup>2</sup> In other words—drawing from the structuralist and poststructuralist theories that give rise to

deconstruction—the relationship between “signifier” and “signified” in language is arbitrary; there is no direct correspondence between a signifier and what it points to, the signified.<sup>3</sup> Anyone who speaks more than one language is confronted with the very arbitrariness of it when, for example, we find that certain concepts can be clearly articulated in one language and not so clearly in the other. Consider that speakers of Spanish will find the masculine overtones of “el Duderino” built into the phrase in ways that have no analogue in English. In this way, the language we use participates in creating a logic or a system of structuring and understanding the world. This allows for unintended and unseen contradictions within a discourse, contradictions that can turn a text against itself—in other words, new shit that may come to light.

Jonathan Culler notes that to “deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies.”<sup>4</sup> Deconstructive analysis begins by identifying tensions, oppositions, and dichotomies within a discourse, a theory, a work of art, literature, or any object of analysis. Along this line, the film is rife with dichotomies: the Dude’s near-poverty, as opposed to the Big Lebowski’s apparent wealth; the Dude’s notorious laziness, as opposed to the Big Lebowski’s (purported) über-achievement; Smokey’s pacifism, as opposed to Walter’s militancy; and what have you. These binaries are not only opposed, however, but are also hierarchical. As far as the Big Lebowski is concerned, he’s not just different from the Dude—he’s better. As Walter sees it, Smokey isn’t only different—he has problems (beyond pacifism) that make him a lesser man. In this way, the film not only sets up oppositions, it defines winners and losers, urban achievers and bums.

Deconstructive analysis undermines these hierarchies by revealing the ways in which the film actually decenters and

disrupts the very philosophy it seems to privilege and, as a result, destabilizes its own apparent structure.<sup>5</sup> Thus, deconstructive analysis identifies a conventional, or classical, interpretation of the film in order to show its own deviation from it. While the role of the critic is to find these self-contradictions, this discussion does not intend to suggest any shortcoming on the film's behalf. Rather, as Robert Gorsch explains in his assessment of a deconstructive approach, "the existence of a limit to the writer's mastery—will be approached not as an embarrassing failure on the part of an 'author,' but rather as evidence of the stubborn complexity of his or her relation to the discourse in which he or she participates." Gorsch proposes that the "author must employ, and at the same time struggle against, the vocabulary of the tradition in which he or she chooses to speak."<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, the film itself is a deconstruction of the traditional hierarchical opposition between generalism and particularism. As it employs this opposition, struggles against it, and finally offers a possible resolution to its own deconstruction via the virtues of the Dude, the film uses deconstruction to carve out a space for virtue ethics in the debate between generalism and particularism.

## **Walter's Generalism vs. Dieter's Particularism**

Through Walter and Dieter, the film reflects the oppositional debate between generalism and particularism about the structure of moral reasoning, about just how we actually—and how we ought to—deliberate and decide what to do in any given situation. If the Dude is a generalist like Walter, his moral deliberation will proceed from general principles (for example, lying is wrong), through descriptions of

particular acts (for example, telling Brandt that “The old man told me to take any rug in the house” is a lie), to moral verdicts or value judgments about those acts (therefore, telling Brandt that “The old man told me to take any rug in the house” is wrong). If the Dude is a particularist like Dieter, then his moral deliberation proceeds from particular facts about the situation at hand to value judgments about the right thing to do.

The principal advantage of ethical generalism is its straightforward approach to moral deliberation. As Walter himself notes, “The beauty of this is its simplicity. If the plan gets too complex something always goes wrong. If there’s one thing I learned in ‘Nam—” For the generalist, deciding what to do in any given situation involves an application of general moral principles to particular circumstances via an inferential process of reasoning. Of course, deciding which principles apply and how best to apply them can be tricky, but so long as the principles are *the* determinate factor in deliberation, the generalist can avoid any need to account for, say, his or her emotions, desires, personal relationships, and other potentially idiosyncratic or irreducibly contextual complexities that cannot be captured by any general principle. For example, the British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) held that the intentions and feelings underlying actions have no bearing on their ethical value, arguing instead that consequences are all that matter in terms of the ethical value of an action. Thus, for Mill, he “who saves a man from drowning does what is morally right whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for all his trouble.”<sup>2</sup>

As a generalist, Walter defines right action strictly in terms of its coherence with a general principle (or a set of principles), specifically Jewish law (or his interpretation thereof). According to Walter, the right thing to do in any given situation (or any that occurs on the Sabbath, at least)