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PHIL P383, Philosophy through Popular Culture, Summer II 2012

3 August 2012

Dr. Heisenberg and Mr. White

The Transformation from Mild Mannered Family Man to Drug Kingpin in AMC’s Breaking Bad

 In the opening scenes of the first episode of the AMC network television show *Breaking Bad*, we are introduced to a distraught (and pants-less) middle-aged man named Walter Hartwell White. He pleads for mercy from the authorities into the lens of his hand-held camera and asks to have a moment alone with his family. After a second to steady his breathing, Walter White looks directly at the faces of his family, and with tears in his eyes, he says goodbye to his wife and son: *“Skyler, you are the love of my life, I hope you know that. Walter Jr., you’re my big man. There are going to be some things, things that you’ll come to learn about me in the next few days. I just want you to know, that, no matter how it may look, I only had you in my heart. Goodbye.”*(“Pilot”, Season 1, Episode 1) He places the camera on the ground, and marches out to meet blaring emergency sirens. He cocks the gun his hand, raises it, and aims at the vehicles speeding towards him. The scene fades, the title card comes up, and the tones of the theme music rise to a crescendo. As viewers, we have no idea who Walter White is; all we can assume is that he is a family man who has come to a crossroads in his life. He is about to make a decision that may alter his family’s perceptions of him, and may ultimately change his life forever.

 The state of Walter White’s character is at the center of this gripping crime drama; as viewers, we are ripped back and forth between loving and hating him for the acts he executes. Over the first four seasons of *Breaking Bad*, we are shown the transformation of a mild-mannered, even sheepish, high school chemistry teacher and family man to a calculating, methodical drug kingpin, who uses his book knowledge to gain an edge on any street hustler pushing Crystal Meth. There are key moments throughout the forty-six episodes of the first four seasons to which I will apply Aristotle’s theories from “Nicomachean Ethics” in order to paint a portrait of Walter White, a hapless victim-turned-villain. Also, I will look at the concept of authenticity, as philosopher Charles Taylor describes, and how Walter holds or does not hold true to the concept of his character. By looking at these key moments and experiences, I will show how the intertwining of virtuous and vicious acts has helped to create duality in the character of Walter White/Heisenberg.

Walter is the chair of the Science Department at his Albuquerque high school and works part-time at a car wash, to help make ends meet. He dotes on his pregnant wife, cares deeply for his son, and awaits the day where his baby daughter will be born. He is the ultimate family man, even close with Skyler’s sister, Marie, and her husband (and DEA agent) Hank. By all accounts, his character is ‘good’ because “states of character arise out of like activities.” (1) From playing cards and spending weekend afternoons together, to helping failing students after class, we are shown these are the “good acts” that help solidify Walter’s character. Throughout the span of the first four seasons, largely through the use of flashbacks, we are shown that Walter is an extremely intelligent individual (perhaps over-qualified to be teaching basic chemistry at a high school level).

At his surprise birthday party, Walter is juxtaposed against Hank, to show that Walt is a pacifist, squeamish at just the sight of a gun. He is surrounded by friends and family, and is shown to be a good man. In these first moments in the series, we are made to believe that he is a virtuous man. Aristotle goes on to say that “we are adapted by nature to receive [virtues], and are made perfect by habit.” (1) After he receives the diagnosis of inoperable Stage IIIA lung cancer, his first thought is how to continue to provide for his family, and in an even better way than he is currently doing with a modest teacher’s salary and part-time after-school work at the car wash. A virtuous husband and father concerns himself first with securing a future for his family, even long after his untimely death. As someone familiar with medical sciences, he realizes the gravity of his diagnosis, and immediately begins to map out his plans for the foreseeable future.

After he reunites with former-student-turned-meth-cook Jesse Pinkman, his plans are clear: “You know the business, and I know the chemistry. Maybe you and I could partner up. Either that, or I turn you in.” (“Pilot”) It is at this moment that we begin to see the transformation within Walter. Jesse, years removed from being a student in Walter’s chemistry class, is confused as to why his former teacher chooses now to “break bad.” Walter’s only answer: “I am awake.”(“Pilot”) As Walter White is clearly the anti-hero of the *Breaking Bad* universe, it’s not out of the question to say that this part of Joseph Campbell’s ‘Hero’s Journey’ is the Revelation/Abyss, where he dies and is reborn. Whereas most heroes would strive for greatness (in the virtuous sense), Walter chooses to “break bad” by entering the seedy underbelly of meth manufacturing, and eventual Mexican drug cartels, from whence there is no easy return.

As Walter becomes immersed in this new persona of Heisenberg – calling himself by this moniker to protect the ones he loves, much like Batman or Spiderman – the lines between morally good and morally wrong begin to blur. His focus is no longer solely to provide for his family after his death, especially considering after surgery he is given the good news that he is in remission. As he transforms into Heisenberg, while Walter White falls away, (though not completely), he seems to care as much about manufacturing a chemically sound product and becoming a feared drug kingpin. Philosopher Charles Taylor asks the question: “Can one say anything in reason to people who are immersed in the contemporary culture of authenticity? …who seem to accept no allegiance higher than their own development?” (2) As viewers, we’re given a tiny glimpse into Walter’s past as a post-graduate student who is lauded as one of the best minds in modern-day science. He is the “White” of Grey Matter Technologies, and was on the fast-track towards becoming a scientist who would be remembered for all time. But this is where our knowledge of his past stops – we are never given any explanation why he chose to leave the company and become an underpaid and overqualified high school teacher.[[1]](#footnote-1) We can assume that there was a falling out between Walter, Elliot and Gretchen; one that sent Walter bitter into a normal, boring life, where he is unable to make scientific discoveries that would not only make him rich beyond his wildest dreams, but also satiate the desires of pure invention.

The outlet of creating ‘Blue Sky’, which the DEA calls “the purest [methamphetamine] they have ever seen,” (Season 1, Episode 4 “Cancer Man”) becomes Walter’s obsession. He refuses to compromise the quality of the product coming out of his lab, be it in the RV that he and Jesse first start producing out of, or Gus’s “super-lab” that they work in during Seasons 3 and 4. Suddenly, the viewer starts to question, is he putting himself in harm’s way to help provide for his family, or is he satisfying his innate need to create something as a superior chemist? I believe his authenticity has taken a turn towards the “self-centered and narcissistic” that Taylor discusses. (2)

There are two final plot points that I would like to discuss in showing the transformation from Walter White to Heisenberg: one is passive, the other is active. During Season 2, Episode 12 “Phoenix,” the question of moral responsibility comes into play in regards to Walter’s role in the death of Jesse’s girlfriend Jane. While he cannot be solely blamed for her death, as she voluntarily chose to use heroin after weighing the risks of possibly choking in her sleep, Walter did stand tragically by as she actually did choke on her own vomit. Because his sense of moral goodness is compromised at this point on his character arc, instead of rushing to her aid, he calculates (instantaneously) that her death would solve more than one of his problems. As he has become a dysfunctional father-figure to Jesse, he may be out for his partner’s best interests, and her death may trigger Jesse to get “clean.” Also, because Jane is black-mailing Walter and threatens to expose his exploits to his family, her death also means that he can continue his ascendency to Dr. Heisenberg. To Walter, Jane is just another junkie and threatens to take Jesse down with her. Aristotle would say that Walter “takes refuge in theory” and that he “thinks [he] is being [a] philosopher and will become good” (1) and may think that Jane’s death is a necessary “evil” – one death as compared to the many lives that could be shattered. He feels that his actions are morally permissible to achieve his desired outcome.

During Season 4, Episode 12 “End Times” and Episode 13 “Face Off”, another of Jesse’s family succumbs to the “sins of the father” as it were, as his girlfriend Andrea’s son is admitted to pediatric ICU under suspicions that he has been poisoned. During these episodes, I believe the full transformation from unlucky-in-life Walter White to the feared Heisenberg is realized. Walter is ten steps ahead of Gus for the time-span of these episodes, although as viewers, we think that he is ten steps behind. Aristotle says that “we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” (1) As the opposite of virtue is vice, it is not out of the realm of possibility to say that Aristotle also believed that we can become immoral by doing immoral acts. As we come to find out at the end of Season 4, Walter, in fact, is the catalyst that brings the entire season to a fever pitch. He is able to see every action and eventual reaction, much like dominoes set up on the floor in front of him. He believes that these actions are morally permissible to achieve the desired outcome. However, the lengths he has gone to set into motion the eventual death of three of his enemies puts him on an immoral path; one from whence he can never return. I think it’s safe to say that after the dominoes fall, the viewers are left puzzled; can they continue to root for Walter White, when it is obvious that the collateral damage he is responsible for is of no consequence to him? While we are awed by the hyper-intelligence he possesses, we cannot continue to empathize with him after the decisions he has made and executed.

These acts seal Walter White’s fate and put to death the mild-mannered family man just trying to provide for his family. For all intents and purposes, we can say without a doubt, that the man diagnosed with Stage IIIA Cancer has died, and has been reborn as Heisenberg. He is no longer mentored or helped on this path; he has become the teacher and master of his fate. Philosopher Taylor explains that “authenticity seems once more to be defined here in a way that centers on the self, which distances us from our relations to others.” (2) While Taylor believed that this was not true authenticity, I believe that it describes Walter’s transformation into Heisenberg. At this moment, Heisenberg has been self-actualized. In this way, this bastardized authentic self (as Heisenberg) has killed off the once moral goodness that he first started seeking out on his Journey. If his family knew the extent of his moral calamity, they would never accept a dime from him, alive or dead.

The man we were introduced to in the desert, pleading for understanding from his family as he speaks to them through a camera lens, is gone. If you were to have a conversation with this character, up until his dying breath, he would say (as he did in that first introduction) that “no matter how it may look, I only had [my family] in my heart.” However, we know that these acts have manipulated this man’s moral compass. It is hard to believe that everything he has done over the span of forty-six episodes always had Skyler, Walter Jr. and baby Holly at the forefront of his mind, and the center of his heart. While his journey may have started out as a virtuous one, by the end of Season 4, he has become nothing but vicious.

**Sources:**

1. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Editor: W.D. Ross
2. Taylor, Charles. The Ethics of Authenticity. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003
* Breaking Bad and Philosophy Editors: Robert Arp and David Koepsell.
* Breaking Bad, Seasons 1-4, various episodes

1. Through Season 4, at least! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)