

Beyond Good and Evil: The Phenomenology of Confession in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*

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We usually view “Old Man” Potter’s face with disgust as he listens to George Bailey’s confession of mishandling funds in Frank Capra’s 1946 masterpiece film, *It’s A Wonderful Life*. After all, Bailey is a good man who has spent his life aiding others, often to the detriment of his own self and dreams. Surely a Judeo-Christian God of justice would see Bailey rewarded appropriately for his actions, as well as punish Potter. And yet, even as we see Bailey’s friends line up, hands full of cash, at the end of the movie, we see an absence of Potter, the quintessential evil presence that actually gets away with Bailey’s \$8,000 mishandled by George’s Uncle Billy. We are left unsettled even as we realize Bailey will not go to jail for a crime he did not commit. Even Uncle Billy is safe. However, why was justice not complete? A phenomenology of Bailey’s confession in light of the works of Paul Ricoeur will reveal George Bailey’s false confession and Uncle Billy’s lack of confession as the barrier between them and complete Judeo-Christian justice.

It is important to note that even though George Bailey falsely confesses on at least two occasions in *It’s A Wonderful Life*, his character obviously purports to superior moral values in the areas of caring and sacrifice. Throughout the film, Bailey pushes his dreams into passive awareness in his consciousness as he helps fulfill the dreams of others. He gives his college money to his brother, Harry Bailey, because the board of directors for the Bailey Building & Loan insists that George run the business after his father’s death. He purchases a dilapidated home his wife, Mary, wants, even though he is not particularly fond of it, and invests to renovate it as their home. He invests in a housing project, Bailey Falls, where those Potter ordains as rabble have the opportunity to purchase a home, and fights throughout his life to maintain justice in a town Potter endeavors to control. Even as a child, George illustrates a saintly character as he jumps into an ice-covered pond to rescue his brother, Harry, from drowning. As his father says, “You were born older, George” (*It’s A Wonderful Life*). As George continues his fight against evil, however, we see him fall into Kierkegaard-like despair in light of a seemingly impossible situation, which leads to his journey into an alternate reality where George’s guardian angel thrusts God into George’s active awareness.

We begin our discussion of George’s journey with the idea of confession in Ricoeur’s *The Symbolism of Evil*. For Ricoeur, the confession of the religious consciousness is the key to understanding what humankind has come to constitute as evil. “Evil,” which Ricoeur defines as defilement or sin, occurs at the crisis when the bond is broken between humankind and what it considers sacred (5). However, only in the progress of conscience, as it advances beyond defilement and yet retains its notion of it, is the meaning of defilement recognized. This leads to Ricoeur’s philosophy of “sin.” Sin is the conscience recognizing that the bond between man and God, the concept of the Hebrew covenant, has been broken (48). The Hebrew prophets point to different types of “evil” that are sin: iniquity, which comes from a wicked heart; pride, arrogance, false greatness; and adultery (57). Such sins are acknowledged at times by the absence of God which, according to Ricoeur, is an “insecurity and an anguish worse than suffering” (57). After an initial defilement and the recognition of sin, Ricoeur turns to the ensuing guilt humankind may feel. “Guiltiness is never anything else than the anticipated chastisement itself, internalized and already weighing upon consciousness; and as dread is from the beginning the way of internalization of defilement itself, in spite of the radical externality of the evil, guilt is a moment contemporaneous with defilement itself,” Ricoeur writes (101). Defilement is not a physical stain, but is “symbolic” stain; “sin” is the recognition of the breaking of the covenant between humankind and what it considers sacred, often God; and guilt is the “anticipated chastisement itself, internalized and already weighing upon consciousness” (101). The consciousness of fault is not fully experienced until it is expressed through the language of confession, Ricoeur writes:

It is this emotional note that gives rise to objectification in discourse; the confession expresses, pushes to the outside, the emotion which without it would be shut up in itself, as an impression in the soul. Language is the light of the emotions. Through confession the consciousness of fault is brought into the light of speech; through confession man remains speech, even in the experience of his own absurdity, suffering, and anguish. (7)

Then, for Ricoeur, the problem becomes the relationship between life “as the bearer of meaning” and the mind “as capable of linking meanings into a coherent series” (Ricoeur, *Existence*, 5). The bridge between these two are symbols and metaphors in language, both of which bear meaning of lived experiences and point to something other than themselves, other meanings that are layered within. This idea is a hermeneutics, Ricoeur writes, “for the most primitive and least mythical language is already a symbolic language: defilement is spoken of under the symbol of stain or blemish, sin under the symbol of missing the mark, of a tortuous road, of trespass, etc. In short, the preferred language of fault appears to be indirect and based on imagery” (9). Confession manifests itself in language, and for Ricoeur, that language of fault is essentially symbolic.

In *It's A Wonderful Life*, however, what is not confessed is integral to understanding the perceived lack of justice at the end of the film. We begin to see language *not* present in George's confessions as symbolic when we first see George as a youth, working for Mr. Gower at the local drug store. We see Mr. Gower, obviously upset and inebriated, bark orders to George to deliver some medicine to a family. George turns from the counter and picks up a telegram laying on the cash register. The telegram specifies that Mr. Gower's son has died unexpectedly. George asks Mr. Gower if he can help him, and Mr. Gower tells George to make the delivery. However, George sees that Mr. Gower has put poison powder in the pills, and Mr. Gower simply hushes him when George tries to explain what he has seen. Instead of insisting on explaining, George simply does not deliver the medicine, in effect omitting truth as he deliberately disobeys Mr. Gower's orders. Mr. Gower slaps George several times after the family calls to report the missing medicine, and as George cries, he blurts out the mistake Mr. Gower has made. Mr. Gower sees the error of his ways and apologizes, but the damage is done—George has established a pattern of taking the blame for the actions of others. In essence, George's lack of confession is an act of “bad faith” as philosopher Jean Paul Sartre maintains (207) because it leads to false perceptions, or lies, and George does nothing to ensure truth—in fact, the benevolent force telling the story of George's life is quick to point out that George never tells anyone about the incident. Per Ricoeur's ideas, George's lack of confession defiles him, and there is no confession to cleanse his defilement. In fact, until we see George in Kierkegaard-like despair at the climax of the film, God is absent from his active awareness.

George's quintessential lack of confession, however, is best evidenced as the climax of the film as he sits across a desk from Mr. Potter. George's Uncle Billy thinks he has misplaced \$8,000 of the Bailey Building & Loan's money, although he has mistakenly given the money to Potter in a folded newspaper as he was bragging about Harry Bailey's accolades in the war. The bank examiner is at the building and loan, analyzing the business accounts. Uncle Billy silently confesses to George that he lost the money; we see George go into Uncle Billy's office and close the door, and we know something is wrong when George emerges from the office. He and Uncle Billy retrace Uncle Billy's route to the bank that morning, but do not find the money; as they search, Potter watches through his partially open office door, but makes no attempt to reveal he has the missing money. This spirals George into despair. The latin word for despair, *desperare*, translates into, “to be hopeless,” according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, which further defines “despair”:

Despair, ethically regarded, is the voluntary and complete abandonment of all hope of saving one's soul and of having the means required for that end. It is not a passive state of mind: on the contrary it involves a positive act of the will by which a person deliberately gives over any expectation of ever reaching eternal life. There is presupposed an intervention of the intellect in virtue of which one comes to decide definitely that salvation is impossible. This last is motivated by the persuasion either that the individual's sins are too great to be forgiven or that it is too hard for human nature to cooperate with the grace of God or that Almighty God is unwilling to aid the weakness or pardon the offenses of his creatures, etc. (Delaney)

This sin of despair is not to be confused with the idea that some people worry about their place in the afterlife. According to Catholic doctrine, this despair is a mortal sin because it thrusts aside the specific attributes of God that lead to salvation as opposed to damnation (Delaney). It effectively bars the way to escape from sin, and those who suffer from despair often indulge freely in other sins.

This idea of despair is very much akin to Kierkegaard's. For the philosopher, despair is born from the endless choices individuals face alone, as individuals; “It is the result of the individual's having to make, for himself and alone, choices of lasting significance,” Moore and Bruder write (167). For Kierkegaard, despair is the “sickness-unto-death”:

There is so much talk about wasting a life, but only that person's life was wasted who went on living so deceived by life's joys or its sorrows that he never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self or,

what amounts to the same thing, never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that “he,” he himself, his self, exists before this God—an infinite benefaction that is never gained except through despair. . . . I think that I could weep an eternity over such wretchedness! And to me an even more horrible expression of this most terrible sickness and misery is that it is hidden—not only that the person suffering from it may wish to hide it and may succeed, not only that it can so live in a man that no one, no one detects it, no, but also that it can be so hidden in a man that he himself is not aware of it! And when the hourglass has run out, the hourglass of temporality, when the noise of secular life has grown silent and its restless or ineffectual activism has come to an end, when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then-- . . . eternity asks you . . . whether you have despaired in such a way that you did not realize you were in despair, or in such a way that you covertly carried this sickness inside of you as your gnawing secret, as a fruit of sinful love under your heart, or in such a way that you, a terror to others, raged in despair. And if so, if you have lived in despair, then, regardless of whatever else you won or lost, everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you—or, still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and it binds you to yourself in despair. (Kierkegaard 679)

The only path to salvation is through a complete commitment to God, Kierkegaard maintains (Moore 167), an idea akin to Aquinas’s idea that despair effectively bars one from salvation.

In *It's A Wonderful Life*, we see George on a path to damnation when he is faced with the seemingly impossible task of finding the missing \$8,000. He screams at Uncle Billy, to whom he had always been patient and kind: “Where’s the money, you silly, stupid old fool? Where’s that money? Do you realize what this means? It means bankruptcy and scandal and prison, that’s what it means. One of us is going to jail. Well, it’s not going to be me!” (*It's A Wonderful Life*) It’s as if George anticipates taking the blame for Uncle Billy’s action, a pattern he first establishes with the incident in Mr. Gower’s drug store, and he performs as expected. After going home long enough to berate his wife and children to the point where he asks his wife, Mary, “Why do we have to have all of these kids?” (*It's A Wonderful Life*), clutching at the children and crying as he moves in an emotional frenzy from kindness to rage, we see God in the active awareness of George’s wife, Mary, after George’s daughter, Janie, asks if she should pray for her father: “Yes, pray very hard,” Mary replies (*It's A Wonderful Life*).

In despair, instead of turning to God himself, George chooses to seek Potter’s aid. Potter, of course, is less than effectual, and yet, he is the driving force that presents the opportunity for God to help George through Clarence, George’s guardian angel. George begs Potter’s assistance during his false confession: “I’ve just misplaced eight thousand dollars. I can’t find it anywhere,” to which Potter replies, “You’ve misplaced eight thousand?” George replies, “Yes, sir,” engaging in yet another false confession. Potter, not impressed with George’s sacrifice, seizes the opportunity to crush him at last: “Look at you. You used to be so cocky. You were going to conquer the world. You once called me a warped, frustrated old man. What are you but a warped, frustrated young man, a miserable little clerk crawling in here. . . . You’re worth more dead than alive” (*It's A Wonderful Life*).

It is after this that George contemplates suicide, and Clarence effectively intervenes. First, however, George seeks solace in alcohol, something to which he never previously turned in the film, and we see the depths of his despair. “God, oh God, dear Father in heaven, I’m not a praying man, but if you’re up there and can hear me, show me the way. I’m at the end of my rope. Show me the way, God” (*It's A Wonderful Life*). Note that this is not a confession of his false confession or an acknowledgment of Uncle Billy’s guilt. When the husband of his daughter’s teacher hits him in the mouth for berating his wife over the telephone, George replies, “That’s what I get for praying” (*It's A Wonderful Life*). It is apparent at this point in the film that George’s despair is governing his thoughts and actions, an idea supported even more fully when George is about to throw himself off the bridge into the river below. Suicide is the peak of despair.

George descends into symbolic hell when he sees the world as it would have been without him, arguably the film’s most important point and obviously its most famous one. The main street, formerly lined with family owned businesses, is transformed into a Las Vegas-like showcase of bars, strip joints, and other lewd establishments. George had obviously been an instrument of good and morality in Bailey Falls without even knowing it. As Clarence explains, “Each man’s life touches so many other lives, and when he isn’t around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?” (*It's A Wonderful Life*).

God, through Clarence, helps George crawl out of the hell created when George wishes he had never been born, and George transforms into a grateful man happy to just be alive. The end of the movie illustrates the

value of friends and the idea that God does not forsake George, even though George never confesses that he did not lose the money. George's friends gather around him and donate money to him in a Christmas moment reminiscent of Scrooge's exuberance at the end of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and yet, something is amiss—Potter has made off with \$8,000 of the Bailey Building and Loan's money, and we see no justice for him in sight. In fact, he disappears from our active awareness as we fully embrace the loving moment of friendship that highlights the end of George's journey.

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