Breaking Bad and Philosophy
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Badder Living through Chemistry

Edited by
DAVID R. KOEPSELL
and
ROBERT ARP

OPEN COURT
Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois
A Fine Meth We’ve Gotten Into

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A Fine Meth We’ve Gotten Into

DAVID R. KOEPSELL AND ROBERT ARP

Breaking Bad emerged on the airwaves at a critical time in American history. Deep in a never-ended recession, losing confidence with our technical and innovative prowess worldwide, outpaced by competitors, and nervous about the future and what we leave for the next generation, we are all Walter White. Our dreams and hopes for ourselves and our futures seem crushed by the everyday. Middle-aged, over-educated, and struggling to make ends meet, the bright, shiny futures we had been promised if only we lived right were never more elusive.

Then Walter White came along and gave us all hope. He’s a twenty-first century geek hero. Chemistry teacher turned meth manufacturer, dealer, and eventually king pin, he skirts his failures in the straight world by delving deep into a dark underworld, both physical and psychic. Walter White shows us that the nebishy, flabby, middle-aged nerd can be someone, despite being marginalized by a society and economy that have moved on without him.

It’s the someone he becomes that makes the show so interesting. It’s a modern morality play, showing us the shame, degradation, and moral decline that come from pursuing a life of crime. But it’s a morality play without the moralizing. Walter White remains our hero, and we root for his success, and the defeat of his foils. What this says about us, our society, and the meaning and roots of success are all great mysteries behind the success of the series, and the appeal of Walt.

Walt’s path in Breaking Bad is clear from the start. Once he has begun down the road he chooses, we know his fate. We’ve seen this story before. He is Macbeth, he is Faust, he is Milton’s Lucifer, and he’s all of these while being just typical enough to be Everyman. The fallen anti-hero can be sympathetic, but he must fail. That’s why we so desperately want him to succeed. But what does his success mean? What are the repercussions for his friends, family, and society at large if Walt’s pure blue meth conquers the Southwest? How do we grapple with these implications even while cheering for his success against the odds?

In these chapters, our authors consider the philosophical, psychological, and sociological issues behind this critically acclaimed drama. What motivates Walt, really? Is Walt in conflict with science itself? Is there something wrong with the
American psyche that makes a Walter White into a hero? What are the ethical issues behind drugs? What lessons does Breaking Bad have about existentialism? Can Walt be redeemed? Who is Gus Fring? These questions are just the tip of the iceberg (if you’ll pardon the expression). There are so many philosophical issues in the complexly unfolding characters and plots we’ve been treated to as we follow Walt and company’s descent into badness.

While Breaking Bad clearly focuses upon a single (anti) hero, there are many important relationships with supporting characters that are worth exploring. Jesse Pinkman, for instance, serves as a sort of surrogate child even while Walter Jr. seems to diminish into the background of Walt’s everyday existence the further he delves into the meth business. Skyler—who at some time came across as a one-dimensional, harping, nagging middle-class wife—emerges in Seasons Three and Four as a partner in crime for her husband. Male-female relationships in the show, the archetypes each embodies, and the evolution of each serve as a backdrop for discussing feminism on TV. Finally, Gus Fring’s complex character and relationship with Walt provide us with an opportunity to explore evil, to consider Walt’s path, and reflect upon the values we seem to admire in this cold-blooded villain.

The show is rich with complexity and poetry of a sort. Race, class, good, and evil are all confronted for thirteen episodes per year in the guise of a show about drugs, violence, and money set in the deserts around Albuquerque, New Mexico. The shame is that the show will someday end. The contract has been signed, and the final season is in the works. By the time you read this book, you’ll know more than we did in writing it about the philosophical implications of Breaking Bad. Did the ends finally justify the extremes?

Walter White goes from geek hero to Greek Tragedy, and as we said above, we know how it ends. But we desperately want him to succeed, even as he goes from bad to evil. As in Greek tragedy, his failure is inevitable, but his situation and motivations make him sympathetic. We feel his pain, and are empowered by his successes. Lucifer too was sympathetic in Milton’s Paradise Lost if only because he had the guts to rebel, however hopelessly, against a tyranny he didn’t create, and against whose dictates he would no longer stand.

Walt rebels too. He confronts a system that cheated him out of his just reward, and against a society that outlaws acts of self-destruction. He convinces himself that it is family, and not ego, that drives him. He’s the hero of his own drama, and a suitable anti-hero for the long, dark recessionary times we live in. The American dream lives on in Walt, and we cling to it with fading hope. But as Milton shows us, it is hope we must abandon at the gates of Hell, just as we know that Walt must fail, or meet a nasty death, and likely both.
Analyze

This
Walter White’s body count grows at an impressive rate over the course of the first four seasons, but more significant than the sheer number of those killed is the manners of their killings and Walt’s changing attitude to each new killing.

We can easily score Walt’s body count in the hundreds, if we include the deaths he causes indirectly. What of the innocent passengers of Wayfarer 515 (167 dead) in the final episode of Season Two (“ABQ”)? Is Walt the cause of their deaths? His actions are certainly part of a causal chain of events that leads to the crash of the flight, and morally we might hold Walt somehow responsible, though he would not legally be to blame. Other indirect deaths result from Walt’s actions, but we’ll focus on the easy cases.

Walt seems directly responsible for at least nine deaths by the end of Season Four:

- Emilio
- Krazy-8
- Jane
- the two guys he killed with his car to save Jesse
- Gale
- Gus
- Tyrus
- Hector “Tio” Salamanca

The nature and blame of Walt’s involvement or guilt in these deaths is complicated enough without us having to fret over Walt’s potential responsibility for hundreds of lives lost, so let’s concentrate on these deaths and evaluate Walt’s role in each, his moral and legal culpability, and theories of moral responsibility as applied to Walt’s guilt.
Walt’s first *bona fide* kill is Emilio. In the series pilot, Walt breaks bad in the worst way imaginable. His effort to raise money for his family in the wake of a diagnosis of likely fatal cancer goes horribly wrong. In deep over his head, he’s set upon by street-level drug thugs who intend on holding Jesse and Walt captive to force a demonstration (and presumably, to make a quantity of meth they can peddle) of Walt’s meth-making skills. Walt, in a panic, cooks up (sorry!) a scheme to win his and Jesse’s liberty from the thugs (Emilio and Krazy-8) by, basically, using a chemical weapon. It works, to the extent that Emilio is killed by inhaling the phosphine gas, but Krazy-8 survives the attack. Emilio is Walt’s first victim. The question is, of what?

Walt is directly responsible for Emilio’s death. He’s both the legal and actual agent of his demise. But is Walt’s killing justifiable in some moral way, or in some legal way, so that it isn’t a murder? In other words, for what is Walt morally responsible?

Dating as far back as Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), philosophers have considered under what conditions an agent might be praised or blamed for an action. Among the criteria he considered relevant, and still argued by many to be relevant today, are:

**the person’s capacity for choosing an action.** In a sophisticated bank robbery, for example, we’d never think to look for the culprit at a nursery school, because those kids could never pull off the job!

**the person’s motivations for an action.** We wouldn’t hold Johnny morally responsible for kicking the ball into Sally’s face on the playground if it was an accident. On the other hand, if Johnny’s *motive or intention* was in fact to hurt Sally, then we would see this as immoral in some way, and punish him accordingly.

**the consequences of the action.** Justice still needs to be served and someone has to pay for damages that result from an automobile accident (a true accident, not due to a drunk driver, but an honest mistake), even though we know it was an accident. Also, if someone commits a crime that has multiple bad consequences—like many people died in the explosion you caused with your bomb, or a *whole lot of* money was stolen from a *whole lot of* people in your credit card scam—then we punish that person more severely.

**the justification for an action.** What’s meant here is really the moral theory or rule that one uses to justify an action, complete with rational argument and explanation. For example, you might use the moral rule that says, “You should never lie” as your justification when you actually tell the truth, or an interrogator might use, “A great, good *end* justifies a little, evil *means* to attain that end” when torturing someone who knows where a bomb is located that will soon go off, killing hundreds of people.

More recently, debates about the truth of *determinism* (according to which the universe unfolds as it does regardless of our supposed choices) have complicated issues of moral responsibility, but a dominant theme has emerged with *compatibilism*, which holds that assigning guilt is still compatible with a deterministic universe. Even though it may be true that you were determined by your nature (genes and brain) and your nurture (your daddy beat you regularly and put you down constantly) to act
immorally and break the law, we can still hold you morally responsible, and put you in prison, give you therapy, and give you drugs so as to change your motivations so that you’ll be determined to act morally and lawfully, instead!

A final factor to consider, both in moral and legal responsibility, is the degree to which the actor is the proximate cause of a wrong or harm. Walt is a scientist, and probably also a determinist, but he clearly feels guilt about his choices, expressing horror at his role in Emilio’s demise, and later both horror and regret, as we shall see.

Walt’s moral culpability for Emilio’s death is arguably reduced given that he was attempting to, and did save, Jesse and himself from almost certain death. Emilio and Krazy-8 were cold-blooded killers who weren’t going to show Walt or Jesse any mercy. Moreover, the stress and duress of the situation in which he and Jesse found themselves further acts to relieve Walt of moral culpability for murder. Killing in self-defense is a well-known and widely recognized legal and moral justification or excuse. But this justification clearly dissolves (sorry again!) with the killing of Krazy-8.

Krazy-8

Walt had intended to kill Krazy-8 and Emilio with the phosphine gas in the RV. His and Jesse’s safe escape and future safety could only have been guaranteed by successfully eliminating both on the spot. Unfortunately, Walt failed to kill both immediately, and the job of finishing Krazy-8 was left for later. The immediacy of self-defense no longer existed, as Krazy-8 was bound in Jesse’s basement, slowly recovering from the phosphine poisoning. Imprisoned, immobile, and slowly regaining consciousness and strength, Krazy-8’s fate is clearly to die, and the killer is determined by a coin toss, which Walt loses. At this point, the nature of any excuse is considerably different than in the case of Emilio.

Walt is agonized by his duty to kill Krazy-8, so much so that he resorts to making a list of pros and cons either to help make or to justify his decision. The final, overpowering rationale that convinces him is the single pro, that Krazy-8 will kill Walt and his family if Walt doesn’t kill him. This outweighs the immorality of killing in itself.

Ultimately, Walt remains unable to kill Krazy-8, striking up conversations with him, getting to know him a bit, and sympathizing with him. The process apparently makes it harder for him to follow through with the killing, and he’s on the verge finally of letting Krazy-8 go. Walt finally realizes he must follow through when a knife-shaped shard of a plate Walter breaks accidentally while feeding Krazy-8 a sandwich goes missing. Krazy-8 intends to kill Walt once freed. Walt has nearly been tricked, and he brutally chokes Krazy-8 in a final confrontation, sustaining a stab wound in the process. Arguably, Walt’s actions now amount to valid self-defense, but his moral blameworthiness for killing Krazy-8 seems greater than for Emilio. What accounts for this distinction?

Krazy-8’s captivity seems to alter Walt’s moral responsibility for his killing. While Walt tried to kill them both under a clear situation of self-defense, it’s harder to claim
self-defense against a captive. Walt’s choice is clearly different in Krazy-8’s death. He’s had time to deliberate, and has options. He could contact the authorities and confess. His crimes at this stage are significantly more minimal than the murder of Krazy-8. Killing Emilio would have likely been seen as justified or excusable legally.

By choosing to kill an imprisoned and immobilized victim, Walt has taken on an extra degree of moral guilt. He’s the direct cause of Krazy-8’s demise, he has other options, he intends the death, and lacks any immediate excuse or justification. While not cold-blooded murder given Krazy-8’s intent and attempt to kill Walt, Walt’s killing of Krazy-8 is certainly more morally blameworthy than that of Emilio. He had less morally problematic alternatives available and chose not to pursue them. He took the path least taken, and descended further into the depths of his ultimate moral degradation, starkly illustrated in the deeply troubling circumstances surrounding the death of Jane in Season Two.

**Jane**

Jesse’s girlfriend, Jane, was a recovering junkie, building an honest new life as manager of her father’s apartment complex, and pursuing a job as a tattoo designer. Unfortunately, she met Jesse, an active drug dealer and addict. The net result is predictable, as she slips back into drug addiction and introduces Jesse to heroin. Addicted to heroin and in love with Jesse, Jane convinces him to turn against his partner and blackmail Walt to give Jesse his share of their drug profits. Walt knows full well that Jane and Jesse will inject the money straight into their veins, likely dying of overdoses, but at least wasting their lives. Nonetheless, he relents, realizing he must let Jesse make his own choices, and tries to deliver Jesse’s money. In the process, he accidentally knocks a heroin-addled Jane onto her back in bed next to Jesse, and Jane vomits, choking and dies in front of Walt while Jesse remains deeply drugged and asleep (“Phoenix”). So, to what degree is Walt responsible for Jane’s death?

Jane’s death presents a complicated set of problems for Walt’s moral culpability. She died, technically, due to her own choice to use heroin and the deadly consequences that come with its use. She knew full well that, when under the influence, a user can vomit, choke, and die. This is why she warns Jesse to lie on his side, and she does so herself. She had reduced the risks, but not eliminated them, as users can change position once under. But it was Walt’s actions in trying to waken Jesse, and accidentally turning Jane on her back, that was the direct reason for her becoming vulnerable. Jane’s vomiting wasn’t a necessary consequence of her lying prone, but was potentially fatal once she did. Walt was in a position to save her life, but consciously chose not to. His guilt over that choice and its result was obvious. He cries at her death.

But is he morally responsible, and to what degree? Part of this judgment hinges upon the distinction between active and passive responsibility. Ordinarily, we don’t view anyone as having a moral duty to save anyone unless they have some special knowledge or relationship with the victim. There’s no active responsibility to save a drowning stranger unless you’re a lifeguard and have thus placed yourself in a special relationship with swimmers. Strangers who fail to save drowning children aren’t
murderers, nor are they morally blameworthy in any but a passive manner. They have some moral guilt, but they aren’t the cause nor did they have an active duty to save. They may be passively responsible, especially if they had the clear capacity to save, but they’re neither legally nor morally culpable for the death unless they have somehow created the situation from which the victim requires saving, having taken some active responsibility.

Walt plays some active role, by breaking into Jesse’s home and disturbing the sleeping Jesse and Jane. His physical attempts to wake Jesse have the unintended side-effect of jostling Jane who flops onto her back, prone, and vulnerable to choking in case she vomits . . . which she then does. Walt has therefore contributed to the danger that Jane is in, and then consciously withholds his ability to save her. His reasons are clear: he fears Jane’s knowledge of his activities in the drug trade, and his influence on Jesse, his one-time partner who now, with his junkie girlfriend, will flee and work with Walt no more. Walt’s motives in failing to aid are clearly to save his relationship with Jesse, and possibly to save Jesse, but they’re nonetheless motives to see to her demise. He isn’t a guiltless, innocent bystander in the death of a stranger, he’s actively responsible for her vulnerability, and consciously aware of the repercussions for his failure to aid, choosing to allow her to die for mixed motives, including the beneficial effects her death will have for his own future.

Walt’s moral responsibility or blame for Jane’s death is reduced, but present, as well as a mixed form of both active and passive responsibility. The next two deaths are less complicated, both factually and morally.

**Aztec Speed Bumps 1 and 2**

Walt saves Jesse once again in the episode, “Half Measures,” near the end of Season Three. Jesse has discovered that Gus Fring was behind the use of his new girlfriend’s young brother’s employment to kill Jesse’s friend, Combo, and Jesse plans to use the chemical ricin to kill Gus Fring. A dose of ricin as small as a few grains of salt can kill someone. Jesse’s subtlety and sneakiness being what they are—nonexistent—Jesse’s threat to Gus becomes clear, and Gus orders Jesse’s death. But Walt saves Jesse once again (if we assume that Walt saved Jesse’s life by allowing Jane to die), ramming Jesse’s would-be killers with his Aztec, and shooting the one who survived the collision, point-blank.

Walt’s murders of Aztec Speed Bumps 1 and 2 are straightforward killings for which Walt is actively responsible. Unlike Emilio and Krazy-8, which were killings in self-defense (obviously self-defense with Emilio, arguably self-defense with Krazy-8), Walt wasn’t threatened by the men he killed. Jesse was. The question is: is Walt’s killing of those who threatened his friend justifiable—or even morally praiseworthy?

The duty to save might arise in the case of some sort of special relationship. Jesse and Walt have such a relationship, and in many ways Walt is a surrogate father to Jesse, seemingly more attached and interested in Jesse’s life than in that of his own son, Walt, Jr. As a guide, teacher, sometime friend, and partner to Jesse, Walt gives him direction, confidence, and skills he never would have acquired otherwise. True, Walt was involved in the death of Jesse’s great love, Jane, but he has also helped him
kick heroin, provided him training in cooking his famous blue meth, and watched his money and saved his life when it was threatened. Because of this special relationship and all it entails, Walt has taken on a special duty to protect Jesse, and his involvement first in preventing Jesse from trying to kill Gus, and then in saving Jesse when Gus’s thugs were going to kill him, may have been morally justifiable due to this special relationship.

Unlike the lack of active responsibility to intervene in saving strangers, we have heightened duties we owe to our friends, family, and others with whom we have certain special relationships like Walt and Jesse’s. While Jesse is certainly not an innocent, he was more so than was Gus or his hired henchmen bent on killing Jesse. At this point, Jesse has killed no one, and his intent to kill was perhaps somewhat morally justifiable as vengeance for his friend’s death, and to punish Gus for using an innocent child to do it.

Weighing Walt’s moral guilt in this instance involves a complex calculus. Is his killing of two non-innocents to prevent the death of another non-innocent justifiable? Jesse surely wouldn’t have been in the position of weighing whether to murder Gus but for Walt, so Walt’s own actions and intentions are partly responsible for Jesse’s intent to murder, and thus his targeting for murder. In a utilitarian calculus, if the total happiness is increased so that it outweighs the total amount of unhappiness from an action, the happiest result must be preferred, ethically speaking. Weighing Jesse’s life against the lives of Gus’s thugs, Walt’s actions would be justifiable. Moreover, because Walt himself has helped create the situation Jesse is in, his saving Jesse is perhaps morally justifiable based on Walt’s active responsibility, and given their special relationship and Walt’s relatively honorable intentions.

Gale

Walt’s moral guilt falls to a new low with the death of Gale. Although Jesse is the direct, proximate cause of Gale’s death, Walt is clearly morally responsible. Weighing the degrees of moral blame for Gale’s death becomes complicated due to the critical role of choice in assigning moral responsibility, and deciphering who has what choices in the final actions undertaken.

Gale is nearly innocent in the scheme of all of the characters in Breaking Bad. He’s a gentle geek, with ideological justifications for making quality meth. He has a pure and simple love for chemistry, appears not to be driven by greed or pride, and has genuine reverence and affection for Walt. He knows that what he’s doing is illegal, but justifies it based upon his libertarian ideals, the fact that meth addicts will find meth anyway, and at least he can provide them with chemically pure meth. He seems driven to do his job merely for the creativity it allows, his love of chemistry, and his need for a job. He also respects Walt and strives for his approval.

But Gale is being used by Gus to glean Walt’s knowledge, so that Walt can be eliminated. Walt realizes that Gale’s education in his methods means that Walt will become disposable, and knows full well that it’s either him or Gale. But Walt doesn’t pull the trigger. Instead, he sends Jesse to do so, although Walt himself has prevented Jesse from killing Gus, which would have also (presumably, had Jesse had even a