justice, mercy, and friendship in *the third man*

julia driver
Now the city’s divided into four zones, you know, American, British, Russian and the French. But the centre of the city, that’s international, policed by an international patrol, one member of each of the four powers. Wonderful. You can imagine what a chance they had, all of them strangers to the place and no two of them speaking the same language.

—The Third Man, from the opening narration (American release version)
believe that is fully true. In the end he does not altogether abandon his friendship with Harry Lime. One of my claims in this paper is that friendship can survive vice, a claim that would be denied by an Aristotelian. Further, in the case of Holly Martins and Harry Lime, the lingering friendship explains exactly how the film ends.

*The Third Man* also represents—along with *Casablanca*, in my opinion—a kind of movie that seemed particularly inspired by the events of WWII and the war’s nihilistic underpinnings. Many wanted to offer a response to the moral nihilism they saw represented by the Nazis and represented by the failure to consider human beings as deserving of moral respect. Of course, the voice of nihilism in *The Third Man* is Harry Lime, who has no political allegiance to the Nazi party. Still, he is the one who doesn’t appreciate the value of human life. In the famous Prater Ferris wheel speech, when he is trying to explain his actions to Holly Martins, he notes, looking down on the people in the amusement park:

> Look down there . . . . would you feel pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? . . . If I offered you £20,000 for every dot that stopped—would you, really, old man, tell me to keep my money?

It may be, however, that to the extent that Harry represents any moral perspective at all, it isn’t so much a nihilist perspective as a kind of moral elitism, rejecting conventional morality. In the same speech he seems to argue that his ruthlessness is important because it is only through strife and conflict that human greatness is achieved:

> In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare terror, murder, bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo–Leonardo Da Vinci, and the Renaissance . . . . In Switzerland, they had brotherly love. They had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? . . . . The cuckoo clock. So long, Holly.

One is expected to hate Harry Lime, while at the same time admiring his charm and his cunning. At the end of the day, however, it is, in my opinion, the nihilistic interpretation of what Harry is about that wins. He is not striving for human greatness. He is striving for more poundsmoney.

### i. background

Holly Martins arrives in Vienna naïve. He is the not-so-bright American who, with a sense of true justice and entitlement, proceeds to investigate on his own his friend’s rather mysterious and sudden death. He is dismissive, at least initially, of the British authorities in the city who have control of the Lime investigation. He believes the officer in charge, Major Calloway, does not take the odd circumstances of Harry’s death seriously enough. He aims to show Calloway that there’s more to
Harry’s death than the authorities are accepting. Holly Martins, however, is operating in a city that doesn’t resemble anything he could be used to.

Vienna after the war is a devastated city. Neighborhoods contain the rubble of bombed, destroyed buildings. The infrastructure has been gutted by the war—that there is nothing like normal commerce. As the opening narration indicates, it is also a mess in terms of legal administration. The city is controlled by four powers, and authority is divided into four sections. The authorities in each of those sections were working to sort things out in the city to their advantage, and the most feared of those authorities were the Russians. The screenplay for the film was written by Graham Greene, who fully exploited this in the film’s plot. Newspaper reports at the time *The Third Man* was being planned and written reported Russian kidnappings of “displaced persons” in Vienna. Interestingly, however, Carol Reed, the director of the film, resisted the American producer’s instructions to portray the Russians more unfavorably.²

For the residents of Vienna, what resulted from the division of authority was a chaotic mess of regulations that served to facilitate a sizable black market in goods and forged papers. At first, Holly believes Major Calloway has some kind of vendetta against Harry for simply participating in the black market, which would make him no different from almost anyone else in the city. Calloway, however, is not after Harry for trading cigarettes for eggs.

Since the city was divided into sectors, each under the control of a different authority, black market criminals made use of a mode of crossing sectors that helped keep them hidden. Criminals frequently used the sewers in Vienna, since they allowed fairly free travel between sectors. They allowed people to bypass the maze of checkpoints above ground. This too, would figure into Greene’s script.³

The seeming arbitrary division of authority in a city that had been severely damaged during the war probably hampered attempts on the part of the residents of Vienna to rebuild the community. In *Humanity*, Jonathan Glover has written of how a sense of community can help underwrite our sense of humanity to fellow humans. One of the devastating effects of World War II, and the years immediately preceding the war in Europe, was that in many communities the feeling of shared values and shared commitments was lost. The Nazi contribution to this is well known. Glover discusses how in Vienna the Nazi’s engaged in campaigns of humiliation, and much worse, against the Jewish residents—forcing them to scrub sidewalks, and to clean latrines with sacred artifacts.⁴ And these acts were a prelude to other horrific atrocities.

Another Viennese case that Glover mentions is that of a Jewish man who had lost a leg as a result of a World War I wound. He had fought beside his countrymen in that conflict and been severely wounded in the process. In Nazi-controlled Vienna, as elsewhere, Jews were forced to wear identifying yellow stars. When this man fell down on the sidewalk and could not get up, no one stopped to help him. Glover writes, “For three hours he asked passers-by to help him, but they all left him there. He broke his wrist when he finally managed to...
As Glover notes, the Nazis often relied on a process of “distancing” to blunt natural human reactions of sympathy and concern for others. “Distancing” is visible in Lime’s Ferris wheel speech. He is standing up over all the little unrecognizable people, the “dots” that simply stand for a certain number of pounds. They are like figures on a balance sheet, to be erased, and then filled in with something else.

These kinds of cases illustrate how, in Vienna, as elsewhere in Nazi-controlled Europe, human beings had been treated as less than human. Populations had been made complicit in this rejection of humanity. This is where Holly Martins finds himself at the film’s opening. This is the precarious moral space occupied by the four powers and their competing claims to authority. It is also the space in which Harry Lime had made a home.

**ii. the film**

At the outset in the film Martins is presented with a mystery—Harry Lime has been killed, it seems, in a hit and run accident just as the authorities—and particularly, a certain British Major Calloway—were displaying a keen interest in his activities. The authorities seem unaware of the significance of conflicting evidence in the case—particularly the report of a “third man” at the scene of the accident, someone who was left out of most of the eye witness testimony. This fuels Holly’s pursuit of justice for his friend Harry.

Major Calloway makes an effort, ultimately successful, to expose Harry Lime’s moral failures to Martins. He explains how Lime was betrayed by his accomplice in the theft of penicillin, a man named Joseph Harbin, who has very inconveniently disappeared. Calloway is convincing, so convincing that Holly loses heart in his pursuit of the truth about Harry. He goes to Harry’s former girlfriend, Anna, and tells her about Harry, but Anna seems barely moved. Or, barely moved in the right direction:

HOLLY: Seventy pounds a tube. He wanted me to write for his great medical charity . . . . Perhaps I could have raised the price to eighty pounds for him.

ANNA: Oh please, for heaven’s sakes, stop making him in your image. Harry was real. He wasn’t just your friend and my lover; he was Harry.

HOLLY: Well, don’t preach wisdom to me. You talk about him as if he had occasional bad manners. Oh, I don’t know, I’m just a hack writer who drinks too much and falls in love with girls—you.

ANNA: Me?

HOLLY: Don’t be such a fool, of course.

ANNA: If you’d rung me up and asked me were you fair or dark or had a moustache, I wouldn’t have known.
HOLLY: I am leaving Vienna. I don’t care whether Harry was murdered by Kurtz or Popescu or the third man. Whoever killed him, there was some sort of justice. Maybe I would have killed him myself.

ANNA: A person doesn’t change because you find out more.

This segment of dialogue is extremely important to understanding the shift in Holly’s views about Harry Lime. Numerous reviews of the film have noted the connections between the typical Western plot and this film. References to Holly’s Westerns populate the film. Here, Calloway makes it explicit:

CALLOWAY: I told you to go away, Martins. This isn’t Santa Fe. I’m not a sheriff, and you aren’t a cowboy. You’ve been blundering around with the worst bunch of racketeers in Vienna, your precious Harry’s friends, and now you’re wanted for murder.

MARTINS: Put down drunk and disorderly too.

CALLOWAY: I have.

Like the Western hero, Martins feels he needs to set things right, at least a little. When he finds out about Harry’s crimes, he’s ready to leave and to leave Harry’s possible murderer alone. He even acknowledges a kind of rough justice in what has happened to Harry—the kind of rough justice one sees in a culture lacking stable authority. Vienna is then like the lawless wilderness; Holly, the hero who must reluctantly take matters into his own hands; Harry, the villain; Anna, the woman who has been left bereft by the villain’s perfidy; and so on. Major Calloway views Holly as an American caricature, prone to idealizing Wild West values. One of the film’s many ironies is that Calloway needs to rely on Holly’s independent sense of justice to finally snare Lime.

In the above segment of dialogue between Holly and Anna, Holly brings in the theme of rough justice. A distinction can be made between justice proper and “rough” justice. When a person has been accused by the authorities of a crime, that person will go through a process—like a trial—in order that guilt or innocence be determined, and then also that a fair sentence be imposed if the person is found guilty. The outcomes of the process—that is, the finding of guilt or innocence, and the sentencing—are independent of the process itself. Thus, we can make a distinction between procedural justice and outcome justice. Procedural justice occurs when the correct, legitimate procedures have been followed in determining guilt and/or sentencing. Outcome justice occurs when the correct finding and/or the correct sentence have been imposed. Rough justice occurs when the just process or procedure is bypassed, and a finding and sentence are imposed independently of the legitimate procedure. Rough justice can be compatible with outcome justice, but not with procedural justice. In iconic western novels—such as The Quick and the Dead—when somebody wrongs you, and there’s no effective authority to appeal to—rough justice is what’s left.
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Maybe, Holly begins to think, death was what Harry really deserved. Those watching this scene in the film for the second time will appreciate its prescience. Holly will kill Harry. When Holly does kill Harry, however, it does not conform to the rough justice model. He will not kill Harry because he thinks Harry deserves to die. This view of their relationship seems to run counter to another natural viewing of the film, one discussed by Noel Carroll. Carroll maintains that Holly kills Harry Lime because their friendship has been utterly dissolved by Holly’s knowledge of what Lime has done. Carroll sees the representation of the friendship as Graham Green’s counterexample to the E. M. Forster claim that “When loyalty to a friend conflicts with loyalty to a cause, one ought to choose in favor of the friend.” I agree, in a limited way, with Carroll’s claim that Holly violates Forster’s maxim. When Holly informs Calloway of Harry’s faked death, and when he agrees to set Harry up at the end of the film, in instances he chooses loyalty to his duty as a human being. This is not the choice he is making when he shoots Harry, however. Carroll is mistaken in his more expansive interpretation of Holly’s betrayal. Harry is trapped. Harry is doomed whether Holly shoots him or not. There was certainly betrayal, but, at the very end of the film, how the betrayal was fully realized was influenced by norms of friendship. We will explore this further, later in the essay.

After leaving Anna, Holly finally finds Harry—or, rather, Harry finds him. Harry cannot resist spying on Anna and Holly. One of the most brilliant scenes in the film is his being discovered, lurking in a doorway, by Anna’s cat and, subsequently, by Holly himself. At that point Holly knows the truth about Harry and about the supposed accident. It was a fake, and Harry himself is the third man. Holly informs Calloway that Harry is still alive. He also tries to meet with Harry—and they do meet, at the amusement park where Harry delivers the infamous cuckoo-clock speech. This is a major climactic scene in the film.

Calloway’s exposure of Harry’s true character to Holly forces Holly to re-examine his loyalty to Harry. Holly has to weigh the value he places, personally, on his friendship against the harm Harry has done and might continue to do. He also has to weigh how a betrayal of Harry to Calloway could help to balance the moral books a little bit by neutralizing Harry’s own betrayal of Anna. Holly’s decision against Harry ultimately leads to another climactic scene—the scene in which Harry flees the authorities through the sewers of Vienna, only to be shot, and die, in them.

No documentary on The Third Man would be complete without these scenes. One reason is that these scenes focus on the pivotal relationship—friendship—within the movie, and they raise issues surrounding the moral norms one associates with friendship. Harry Lime is Holly Martins’ friend, an old friend from school, and someone Holly has looked up to as a kind of charming facilitator. The shock to Martins comes when the charm is seen not as a sign of Harry’s virtue anymore. Either Harry has changed, or, more likely, transplanted to an entirely different context, his amorality has been amplified. His smooth, confident
disregard for the “dots” below is devastating, and one can see in Holly’s face during the scene atop the Ferris wheel, a transformation in his view of Harry.

Holly’s reached a point at which he needs to make a practical decision about what to do. What are the limits of friendship? Holly resists evidence of Harry’s evil because he is Harry’s friend. When he first agrees to help Calloway, it seems he does so primarily out of affection and pity for Harry’s former girlfriend, Anna. He agrees to exchange his cooperation for their influence in helping Anna evade the Russians. Since she is a Czech citizen, the Russians have claimed her. Anna wants none of Holly’s help, however, at least under those circumstances. She does not want her freedom to be bought with Harry’s life. Ultimately, she tries to prevent Lime’s capture. She is the figure bound by unconditional romantic love, love that does not engage in critical reflection of its object. Her line “A person doesn’t change just because you know more” seems to justify unwavering love—Harry is who he is, she loves him, and if she finds out horrible things about him that may affect whether she would stay with him, that does not affect the love itself and her desire for his well-being. She seems to think that she can only change her feelings for Harry if Harry himself changes, not if her knowledge or her perception of Harry change. It is almost as though her view of love is that when one loves, one loves the person’s essence, somehow, and not anything having to do with his properties, or qualities. Thus, when one’s perceptions of the person’s qualities changes, that’s irrelevant to love. As Holly notes, however, it’s not that Harry is simply afflicted with “occasional bad manners”—he has killed innocent people. This isn’t a superficial quality, like hair color. The magnitude of his wrongdoing does speak to something of Harry’s very nature. Even more so, his own approval of his actions, his lack of remorse, his personal betrayal of Anna and others, his attempts at justification of the deaths he has caused—Green piles it on, and, even so, Anna remains firmly the romantic, uncritical heroine who chooses love over humanity.

Anna warns Harry as he steps into the café to meet Holly. She mocks Holly as a “police informer.” Again, it isn’t that she’s unaware of the extent of Harry’s crimes. She simply doesn’t give them the weight they warrant—at least, if justice is taken seriously. She hasn’t, at least as far as we can tell, gone through the struggle that Holly has.

The café scene marks the beginning of the film’s extraordinary ending. Lime tries to escape the authorities, and Holly, by running through his familiar haunt—the sewers. This is a Harry we haven’t seen before, truly desperate to escape Calloway. A murderer, Harry faces prison and execution. In the end, as Harry clutches at a sewer grate, trapped, it is Holly who shoots and kills him.

The film’s final ending is as its beginning—at Harry Lime’s funeral. Calloway gives Martins a lift from the cemetery. As they are driving down a long stretch of road, Holly sees Anna walking behind them. He insists that Calloway stop and let him out. He would like to wait for Anna, to walk with her. Calloway is skeptical, but does as Holly wishes. Yet, on the long stretch of road framed by tall trees, Anna walks determinedly by Holly. She doesn’t stop, she doesn’t look at him. Holly remains in place, lighting up a cigarette as the film closes.
The ending is bleak and uncompromising. It’s interesting that in Graham Greene’s initial plans for the script, Holly and Anna leave the funeral together, reconciled. It was David Selznick, the American producer, who insisted on the bleak ending. He felt strongly that Anna’s love for Harry had to be so deep that there would not have been any room for Holly.

### iii. friendship

One of the central struggles of the film is Holly’s internal struggle regarding what he ought to do about his friend Harry. It is usually taken to be central to friendship that friends care for each other, and they want what is good for each other. Friends are loyal to and supportive of one another. Aristotle believed that there were instrumental friendships based on utility and pleasure, but he also thought that the best sort of friendship involved two virtuous persons who helped each other reinforce their good traits—so that they were, in some sense, mutually dependent on each other. If one friend wavered in his virtue, then that would provide some reason to end the friendship. The friendship then might constitute a threat to the virtuous person’s continued virtue.

One of the often noted shortcomings of the Aristotelian account, however, is that it doesn’t recognize a deep friendship even when the friends, or one of the friends, is lacking in virtue.

To be friends with one another on the basis of pleasure and usefulness is, accordingly, also possible for bad people, just as it is for good men with bad, and for one who is neither good nor bad with any kind of person at all. But it is clear that good men alone can be friends on the basis of what they are, for bad people do not find joy in one another, unless they see some material advantage coming to them.

There are many modern writers on friendship who find Aristotle’s view plausible. Nancy Sherman, for example, articulates an Aristotelian picture in which the best friendship—between virtuous individuals—is necessary for our happiness as human beings. The value of friendship in its best sense is not instrumental—rather, it has intrinsic value, value in and of itself. It seems at least initially plausible to also hold that the sort of friendship that has intrinsic value is the best sort of friendship.

While it seems true—in fact, almost trivially true—that the best friendship is one that exists between the virtuous, it doesn’t follow that this is the only kind of deep and strong affection, or friendship, that is not instrumental. Further, this very plausible view that the best sort of friends are those who are virtuous rests on an ambiguity that will be explored later in the essay.

Their friendship might be characterized as one of mutual dependency—but not of the sort that Aristotle praised in the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle believed...
that perfect friends reinforced each other’s virtue. They would even live together
to benefit from each other’s company and example. The sort of mutual depen-
dency one sees between Harry and Holly, however, has more to do with each one
lacking something he wanted, or believed that he needed. In school, Harry was the
charming one, and that was where his talents for “facilitation” were being put to
use. Holly depended on Harry for things like status and a kind of vicarious social
standing. Harry depended on Holly, too—for an external source of respect and
validation.

This is probably what prompts Harry to send for Holly, in fact. He needs that
external source of approval very much in Vienna. The people who do seem to at
least not disapprove of him in Vienna—people like his fellow racketeers Kurtz and
Popescu—are not people he can respect. He would like to have back his uncritical
friend, his source of emotional support. Anna, his girlfriend, would have assumed
this role for a time. Even before Holly arrives in Vienna, however, Anna has
become for Harry something he can bargain and deal with, something he can give
to the Russians for protection. He needs Holly. This view of Harry Lime may be
idiosyncratic—Harry is certainly a terrible human being, but terrible human be-
ings do, sometimes, form affections of sorts for others. David Hume believed that
sympathy for others was a universal sentiment in human beings. It could be coun-
tered by selfishness and malice, but it was there nevertheless. When a person’s
self-interest is in no way affected by the cruel or selfish act, his view was that all
humans would feel some sympathy—the degree could vary dramatically, of
course, but it is still there. How does this affect action? Hume writes:

Let us suppose a person ever so selfish; let private interest have engrossed
every so much his attention; yet in instances, where that is not concerned, he
must unavoidably feel some propensity to the good of mankind, and make it
an object of choice, if everything else be equal. Would any man, who is
walking along, tread as willingly on another’s gouty toes, whom he has no
quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement . . . We surely take into
consideration the happiness and misery of others, in weighing the several
motives of action, and incline to the former, where no private regards draw
us to seek our own promotion or advantage by the injury of our fellow-
creatures. . . . The degrees of these sentiments may be the subject of contro-
versy; but the reality of their existence, one should think, must be admitted
in every theory or system.\textsuperscript{13}

One could certainly disagree with Hume’s theory of human nature. One could
also hold that Harry Lime is not the normal sort of human being. Harry Lime is
some sort of sociopath, perhaps, someone who is so abnormal and twisted, psy-
chologically, that he really does lack any fellow-feeling, to the point at which he is
even incapable of personal friendships. I don’t see his characterization in The Third
Man to be like this, however. The film is set in the aftermath of WWII, in a Vienna
of the horrors described in the previous section. One of the shocking and profoundly disturbing aspects of the war and the events leading up to it was the revelation that ordinary people were capable of extraordinary evil when their own self-interest was at stake. Hannah Arendt noted that profound evil arose from the most ordinary of individuals. She noted that a psychiatrist who had examined the war criminal Adolph Eichmann found Eichmann’s “whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was “not only normal but most desirable.” There were evil individuals who caused massive loss of life and yet who often had families and friends, and seemed to engage in loving relationships with others. This is one of the horrific features of the war that Arendt chronicles, and that many people had difficulty coming to grips with after the war. Who among those we know and love are capable of being Eichmanns? Of course, Harry Lime was not following anybody’s “orders.” He was, however, living in a city without a centralized authority, where sheer self-interest seemed a common standard.

I view Harry Lime’s character as evil. His profound evil does not make him, unfortunately, a totally abnormal freak—particularly when viewed in the context of World War II. Harry is capable of friendship and attachment to others. I think that this view is also supported by the events of the film itself. Why would Harry send for Holly Martins? Vienna was full of unemployed and desperate people. Why would Harry, otherwise, spy on Anna and Holly himself, rather than have one of his cronies do it? Why would Harry agree to meet Holly in the café after Holly has already betrayed him by revealing to Calloway that he is still alive? These events strike me as evidence that Harry had an attachment to, or an affection for, Holly. It was certainly not absolute and overridable. He would have killed Holly if that were the only way to save his own life, but he was willing to give Holly a chance that he would not have been willing to give others. Having said this, however, none of my other claims in this essay hinge on the fact that Harry himself is capable of friendship. All that is necessary is that Holly is capable and considers himself a friend of Harry’s. I do, however, just as a matter of interpreting the details of their relationship, believe that Harry Lime had some affection for Holly.

It is quite true that there are ways in which Holly’s friendship with Harry is asymmetrical. Holly was the weaker of the two socially. He lacked Harry’s wit and intelligence. In fact, these are the qualities that make Harry Lime a dangerous sort of anti-hero, someone of whom Plato would have deeply disapproved. Plato proposed that in the ideal state, censorship would be needed to keep poets from corrupting other citizens by portrayals that encourage damaging emotions. His primary example is that of grief. In tragedies grief in suffering is encouraged, though, Plato notes, someone who so indulges in real life would be viewed by others with disgust, as unable to control his emotions. Attractive evil would presumably have the same damaging impact. Perhaps Graham Green and Orson Welles were thinking of the damaging impact of the übermensch ideology in Europe when they fashioned Harry Lime.
What Orson Welles does is convey beautifully Harry’s fascination as well as his contempt for others around him. While being disgusted, and yet fascinated, by Harry Lime we also admire the performance. What Holly sees on the Ferris wheel is just an echo of that fascination. A world war has intervened and either hardened or utterly changed Harry Lime. His feigned pity for Anna, the damage he has done to others, his indifference, the casual threats aimed at Holly—these were all factors that intruded into Holly’s deliberations.

Even though Harry had intelligence and social skills that Holly lacked, there was something in Holly that Harry responded to. Harry sent for him. He wanted Holly in Vienna working with him. I think that what Harry wanted was what was missing from his other relationships in Vienna. He wanted someone he could rely on, whom he could count on, someone not at all like himself—his old friend from America.

So, it was not a friendship between men of perfect virtue, nor a friendship between equals, as Aristotle understood that term, but it was a strong dependency, and affection—of the noninstrumental sort—that also characterized the friendship. For some friendships, the basis is one of sentiment. Friends care about each other. This attachment can flow through a variety of sources. In the case of Harry and Holly, it seems to have arisen out of a shared history before the war. Things like affection and a shared history don’t account for what’s really distinctive about friendship as opposed to other sorts of relationships, however. Jeannette Kennett and Dean Cocking argue that one thing that is distinctive about friendship is that friends are “directed” by each other’s interests.17 This certainly seems to feature at least in Holly’s relationship to Harry. Holly is directed by Harry’s interests. He comes to Vienna at Harry’s invitation. He resists Calloway’s claims about Harry until the evidence becomes extremely convincing. What of Harry? Does he allow himself to be directed by Holly? Less is presented in the movie that reflects Harry Lime’s states of mind. Harry does agree to meet Holly at the café, however, and it seems unlikely that he would have made such an agreement under those circumstances with someone not his friend. At that point he would have been safer without Holly than with him.

The power of the sort of friendship between Holly and Harry has the same power as Aristotle’s best friendship, but it has the power to produce viciousness rather than moral virtue.

Friendship (as the ancients saw) can be a school of virtue; but also (as they did not see) a school of vice. It is ambivalent. It makes good men better and bad men worse . . . It will be obvious that the element of secession, of indifference or deafness (at least on some matters) to the voices of the outer world, is common to all Friendships, whether good, bad, or merely innocuous. . . . The danger is that this partial indifference or deafness to outside opinion, justified and necessary though it is, may lead to a wholesale indifference or deafness.18
C. S. Lewis focuses on the potential damaging effect of loyalty in friendship. Holly is on the edge. His attachment and loyalty to Harry could have made him get on the plane and leave Vienna, allowing Harry to escape justice yet again. Or, in helping the authorities as he did, he’s forced into an act of disloyalty. Either way, he is doing something he doesn’t feel right about, that is in some way bad. The question is, which alternative is worse?

Loyalty can involve a rejection of impartiality, and many moral philosophers have focused on this issue, using it to demonstrate that there is a facet to ethics that cannot be captured in an impartial system that requires individuals to treat all persons the same. This runs against the common assumption that impartiality is a crucial aspect of ethics, that, for instance, to be a just and fair person, one needs to be impartial and not display favoritism. Yet, one is not impartial with respect to friends, and that is considered entirely appropriate in a variety of contexts. Lewis, however, was noting that this kind of favoritism, and the shutting out of others, is one of the dangers of friendship. When both friends are flawed, they can exacerbate each other’s flaws; when one friend is flawed, he can have a damaging effect on his friend’s character. This is part of the background in The Third Man. The loyalty and partiality that Holly feels towards Harry at first leads to his shutting out Major Calloway. As other philosophers have noted, however, simply because some degree of partiality may be appropriate in friendship, this does not imply a wholesale rejection of critical reflection. It is the rejection of critical reflection, I think, that Lewis finds dangerous. Sometimes in being a good friend one is led into activities that are not morally good. Because of the ties of affection, and because of the willingness to be directed by one’s friend, a constraint is imposed on critical reflection in friendship. It may be that in becoming friends with someone one already has made a choice to defer, to some extent, in order to keep the friendship going.

Others have noted the dangers. Kennett and Cocking have noted that the Aristotelian conception is overly moralized because of its insistence that friendship be morally good and morally enriching. They note that Gandhi, whose views on friendship were discussed by George Orwell, observed that friends are dangerous because one can be led by a friend into doing something wrong. Orwell writes, “The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty . . . .”19 Friends will often do things for each other that violate the norms of morality. It does not follow that because the norms of morality are violated, the norms of friendship are, as well. Kennett and Cocking discuss the case of a man who accidentally kills someone and then gets his friend to help him dispose of the body. In helping him, his friend violates the law in a variety of ways and harms the victim’s family by lying to them.20 He is a bad person, perhaps, but a good friend. In their view, a good friend need not be a good person. This picks up on the ambiguity that I referred to earlier. We use the word “good” in a variety of ways. Sometimes we mean that something is morally good, but other times we might mean that something is simply
good of its kind. For example, I may judge that Jimmy Carter would make a terrible evil dictator. He would not be a good evil dictator in the sense that he lacks the necessary skills and dispositions to exemplify excellence within the kind “evil dictator.” This, however, has no impact on evaluating Jimmy Carter as morally good—indeed, it may be that we view him as incompetent in the evil-dictator field precisely because we view him as morally good. In the same way, to hold that someone is a good friend does not commit one to the view that he or she is a morally good person.

In helping Calloway, Holly chooses to be a good person but to violate the norms of friendship by betraying his friend. He views Harry as his friend, and there is some evidence that Harry views Holly as his friend. What is crucial for my interpretation of the film, however, is simply that Holly is Harry’s friend, even if the relationship is not reciprocal, even if it turned out that Harry cared not a whit for Holly. Holly is concerned about Harry’s welfare, however, and it is this concern that Calloway has to relentlessly undermine with the proof of Harry’s disregard for the value of human life.

This nonmoralized conception of friendship runs counter to the view one sees adopted by writers inspired by Aristotle. These writers hold that to be a genuine friend, one needs to be virtuous. Again, though, as Kennett and Cocking point out, this Aristotelian view leaves too much out. Those who resist the view that Harry Lime was Holly’s friend, I think, may be appealing to the moralized Aristotelian conception. Harry is evil, and an evil man cannot be a good friend, or any friend at all. My claim is not that Harry was Holly’s good friend. He was, however, Holly’s friend, even though he was lacking in moral virtue. Holly was not a good friend to Harry, either, but he was Harry’s friend and acted on that friendship in the end.

Another complicating factor has to do with Holly’s own personal code of ethics, which may be affected by his writing. He writes Westerns. The Western genre is characterized by a code of ethics in which honor, loyalty, and redemption are held in high regard. If one considers novels like Shane or The Quick and the Dead, both icons of the genre, the Western hero is one, again, who fills a moral vacuum. When Holly arrives in Vienna and begins to question the circumstances of Harry’s death and the police’s seeming indifference, at first he must have felt that Vienna, too, had become corrupt and morally empty. His job, at first, was to set things right by Harry before leaving town.

The plot did not play out like the standard Western, however. Harry was the bad guy, not a good man whose death had failed to be taken seriously by the police. The “hero” is portrayed as a drunk who stumbles onto the truth. He doesn’t get the girl—but not for noble reasons. He doesn’t get the girl because she doesn’t want him.

There was still the issue of redemption, and the Ferris wheel scene is pivotal for that as well—it is there that Holly realizes that Harry cannot be redeemed. In novels in which redemption is a theme, the “bad guy” has some goodness that
hasn’t been utterly undermined, a sense of goodness that can lead to a change of heart at the end, and redemption. Holly wants Harry to give himself up for Anna, or at least not to actually sacrifice Anna. But the Ferris wheel scene makes clear this is not the ending of Harry Lime’s story. There is no ambiguity left in the that scene, no hope that Harry has any bit of goodness left, and Holly’s feelings of obligation toward Harry, to a large extent, dissolve. It may be that the crucial difference between Holly and Anna, who remains utterly devoted to Harry, is that Holly actually confronts Harry and is able to see his response. Anna never sees the Harry Lime of the Prater.

Through this debate it has become quite clear that even if one is partial towards one’s friends, there are moral limits. Even though I ought to act in certain ways toward a friend in ways not owed to strangers—such as, perhaps, helping him move his furniture, or helping him with his homework, etc., it doesn’t follow that proper loyalty demands one act in any way whatsoever to help one’s friend. One shouldn’t, for example, help one’s friend violate the rights of others. Friendship, then, is subject to critical reflection. A friend can think about what a friend wants him to do and whether it is something that does or does not violate moral norms. A friend’s immorality is reason to dissolve the friendship. It is Holly’s first-hand witnessing of the effects of Harry’s actions that leads to this critical reflection—he sees the damage Harry has done to innocent people and even to his own girlfriend, Anna. For Holly, the bond to Harry created by friendship is dissolving, but it is not utterly destroyed. This is important to understanding the movie’s penultimate scenes.

In Holly we have a friend who is willing, though reluctant, to critically reflect on the friendship and, again reluctantly, reject that bond. In Anna, we have someone who loves Harry unconditionally, it seems, and is not able or willing to engage in that critical reflection. Anna hardly seems the paradigm of loving virtue. She is more of a vicarious moral monster—the sort of loving support that has encouraged and aided the morally compromised individuals we see throughout history. Critical reflection in romantic relationships is sometimes considered distasteful—indeed, it is sometimes considered completely unromantic. This really depends upon what the critical reflection is about. The moral character of the beloved is an appropriate object of such reflection. Even if one viewed love as something that appropriately resists such reflection, one could still consistently hold that acceptance should not. Anna is corrupt in continuing to accept and support Harry Lime after she knows what he is.

Throughout this essay I have maintained that Holly did not cease being friends with Harry. His disillusion with Harry weakened their connection. Holly felt he needed to betray Harry to try, in some small way, to set some of Harry’s sins right. In setting Harry up he chose moral goodness over being a good friend to Harry, but this didn’t mean that he was no friend at all to Harry. In the end it was friendship, and the pity this generated for Harry, that led Holly to shoot and kill Harry Lime as he looked at him trapped, chased down, in the sewers.
This was a scene that might well not have made it into the film. The Production Code censors initially objected to it since it looked like a mercy killing, and they were unwilling to let anything on the screen that seemed to condone such killings: “With regard to the ending of the story, Martins’ shooting of Harry will be on a direct shouted order from Calloway, and there will be no flavor of either mercy killing or deliberate murder.”

Fortunately, though, Carol Reed ignored the censors on this point, and the scene remained. It is important to a full understanding of the relationship between Harry and Holly. Charles Drazin writes:

Harry’s death in the film would completely defy the censors’ requirements. Wounded and cornered in the sewers, he gives his old school friend a piteous and pleading look. With a nod, he gestures to be put out of his misery . . . The mercy killing had to remain a mercy killing to be true to Greene’s original intention. The moment in which a friend kills a friend contained so much of what the film is about.

One might look at this scene and judge Holly to be engaged in a kind of “rough justice” of the sort that pervades Western novels. In this view, he is a good man in the wilderness faced with a difficult choice and forced to kill the villain who refuses to surrender. It is not that at all, however. It’s true that Holly killed Harry so
that Harry could avoid the process of a trial and sentencing and then, very likely, an execution. Rough justice, however, generally occurs when people have no faith in a just procedure actually being available. There is either no working system of justice, or they think the system in place is corrupt. This, however, was not Holly’s worry at all. Holly was doing this for Harry. He was not doing it out of a basic desire that Harry avoid the just procedures. He shot Harry because that’s what Harry wanted. It was a mercy killing, and that mercy was prompted by friendship, not by hatred or rage. Holly betrays his friend out of duty, but kills him out of friendship.

NOTES
I would like to thank Ward Jones and Samantha Vice for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
1. This quotation has been transcribed from the film. All quotations to follow are taken from the screenplay, The Third Man, by Graham Greene.
3. Ibid.
4. On p. 340, Glover quotes from William Shirer’s Berlin Diary, 1934–41, 92: “We had been told that the Jews had been made to scrub out the toilets with the sacred praying bands, the Tefillin.”
5. Ibid, 338.
6. Some would deny this, arguing that rough justice is not justice at all. That is, it is necessary for an outcome’s justice that it result from a just procedure.
7. Here is a characteristic section:

The stranger picked two slices of bacon from the skillet. Without looking up he said, “You ever kill a man, McKaskell?”

“Kill a man?” McKaskell was startled. “Why, no I haven’t.”

“You walk into that settlement with that gun an’ you better figure on it.”

“I don’t think . . . ”—“

“You walk into that place without bein’ ready to kill an’ your wife’ll be a widow before the hour’s gone.”

“That’s nonsense. I’ll go to the law.”

“Ain’t none. Folks out here generally make their own.”

“I can use the rifle. I’ve killed a dozen deer . . .”

“Was the deer shootin’ back at you? Mister, that outfit figure on you comin’ in. They want you to. Why do you s’pose they left all them tracks? They figure to kill you, Mister.”

From Chapter 1, The Quick and the Dead, by Louis L’Amour.
9. As quoted in Ibid., 10.
10. Drazin, In Search of the Third Man.
12. See, for example, her discussion at the beginning of “Aristotle on the Shared Life.”

15. Both Joseph Cotten and Orson Welles had made movies prior to *The Third Man* in which a similar theme is present in the plot—the theme of evil discovered among loved ones; the theme that evil can be uncovered even in those who seem so totally normal, charming, intelligent, and attractive. In 1943, Alfred Hitchcock made *Shadow of a Doubt* starring Joseph Cotten as Uncle Charlie—an ordinary family’s beloved uncle who turns out to be a serial killer. In 1946, Orson Welles directed and starred in *The Stranger*, playing Professor Charles Rankin, the respected member of a small Connecticut community who turns out to be a Nazi war criminal. In both of those films we have female characters quite different from Anna in *The Third Man*—agonized by the growing realization that the person they love is evil and yet choosing rejection in the end.

16. For example: “Can that praise in the theatre be right? To see a man behaving as one would not deem it right to behave oneself, indeed, as one would be ashamed to behave, to enjoy and praise the spectacle and not be disgusted by it?” (*Republic*, 250).

17. Kennett and Cocking, “Friendship and the Self.” Kennett and Cocking also add that friends “interpret” each other, and allow themselves to be influenced by one another’s interpretations. If Ann makes a comment about Sheila’s lack of athletic prowess, Sheila will be inclined to take this seriously and reflect on this feature of herself—and perhaps change, but at least become self-conscious about it. Thus, she is being influenced by a friend’s interpretation. I don’t believe this analysis does the work that Kennett and Cocking wish in differentiating friendship from other relations of affection—for example, students are often directed by teachers and open to their interpretations. True, this is not characteristically reciprocal, but for Ann to be friends with Sheila it need not be reciprocal either (so, she may be Sheila’s friend even if Sheila is not her friend). Further, the interpretation condition seems puzzling to me. Laving aside the issue of the exhaustivity of the account, however, Kennett and Cocking have focused on some important features of friendship and ones that shape the relationship between Harry and Holly.


20. They take this case from the film *Death in Brunswick*; see ibid. 279.


22. Drazin, *In Search of the Third Man*, 42.