

SEEING THE LIGHT: EXPLORING ETHICS THROUGH MOVIES

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There are at least two things about introductory philosophy textbooks that can generally be taken to be true: firstly, their chapters will feature readings chosen more for their comprehensive breadth of content rather than their depth of explanation, and secondly, only a precious minority of any given class will actually read them. In the last fifteen years or so, perhaps motivated by such pedagogical concerns, a number of publishers have produced introductory texts that incorporate a new tool for the teacher looking to liven up a classroom: approaching philosophy through a variety of popular films. While a cursory glance might suggest that Wanda Teays' *Seeing the Light: Exploring Ethics Through Movies* is simply the latest in a growing sea of such works, this book has positioned itself at the nascent edge of what promises to be a useful new tool indeed. Not only is it specifically focused on a single facet of introductory philosophy, but it has been carefully constructed to value examples over explanation, placing *Seeing the Light* among the first of a new take on textbooks entirely, for it seems to be written not only for those readers new to the study of moral philosophy, but for those new to the teaching of the subject as well.

Taking more than a few cues from Aristotle, Teays divides her book after the triplicate pattern of dramatic stories that dates back at least as far as the Philosopher's *Poetics*. Unit One lays out a case that moral philosophy is necessary by demonstrating several of the commonplace ethical decisions that are made on a daily basis. This establishment of the need for Units Two and Three trades heavily on the matters that plague existentialist schools of thought, bringing in the examples of more than two dozen films to discuss questions of authenticity, identity, autonomy, and inner courage. Unit (or, perhaps, "Act") Two offers something like a "rising action" when Teays presents seven different chapters that each focus on specific systematic moral theories. Although every chapter here is tuned to a different theory, with another diverse collection of films used as examples, Teays consistently reminds the reader throughout the entire unit of the expository case she made in Unit One for the necessity of some form of systematic method of reasoning

through difficult questions. The climax of this effort comes, as usual, in Act/Unit Three when Teays presents several practical concerns about the process of ethical decision making and offers several methodological suggestions for future action. This unit is certainly the least traditional of the three and offers several new observations about realistic situations that will undoubtedly appeal to newcomers to the discipline.

Indeed, that appeal is one of *Seeing the Light's* greatest strengths: Teays has written a book that explicitly expects no familiarity from the reader whatsoever with either the philosophical subject matter or even the desire to study said material. Whereas a defense of ethical theories *qua* theories might seem out-of-place in an ethics textbook, Teays clearly has a wider potential audience in mind and wants to welcome readers who might be skeptical of the need for such a book (or a class that would assign readings from such a book). Certainly there is no shortage of such "Philosophy for the Every person" material available, but the specific focus of *Seeing the Light* on ethics affords the opportunity for more space than normal for a deeper and more nuanced discussion of philosophical content, since there is no need to include chapters on epistemology or metaphysics. Still, within its discipline, this work covers a good deal of ground and touches on each of the ethical theories that one would expect to discuss in an introductory ethics class (indeed, with full chapters on egoism and feminist ethics, it actually offers a few additional, less predictable theories).

However, this is not a long book and much of its page count is devoted not to that philosophical content, but to the exposition of the many movie plots on which it relies for its examples. Curiously, although so much space is given to describe events and characters from the many films, those case studies will likely come off as unhelpful unless the reader has personally viewed each film in question. Despite the book's claim to the contrary, it was repeatedly evident during this reviewer's reading that various sections would likely be more sensible if he had spent more time at the cinema. This may also be due to the book's inconsistent focus on the philosophical content, with several chapters consisting almost entirely of what would otherwise appear to be a film review, save for a few references to a philosophical school or a quote from a philosopher at the end of a section in a manner that sometimes felt more like a dropped name than an educational point. Consequently, because of Teays' tendency to assume that a simple description of some movies will suffice to get a reader thinking philosophically, it seems hard to imagine that this book would succeed as a stand-alone text for even an introductory-level course.

In sum, it comes off more as an anthology of readings (or, in its case, viewings) rather than a textbook that explains those readings in detail.

That is not to say, though, that *Seeing the Light* is not without considerable merit as a textbook, particularly for a professor preparing new lessons or looking for new ways to discuss old ideas. In each chapter, Teays offers multiple films as illustrations of the concepts up for discussion, but to varying levels of scrutiny. Whereas some movies are dissected in-depth over the course of several pages (what she calls “Spotlights”), others are given only a few paragraphs (under the “Short Takes” and “Outtakes” subheadings). This allows for a reader to select a case study with a degree of analysis appropriate for the need at hand (Teays says explicitly in her introduction that the book is designed to be read in any order) – precisely what a professor looking for an in-class example might need. And although the vast majority of the films discussed in the book come from the United States, effort towards internationality is evident. At any rate, extensive lists of works cited, online resources, and discussion questions (with several robust indices at the back) make this book particularly useful for classroom preparatory work.

But for the student, whether self-directed or at university, Unit Three will likely be the most notable section of the text, for it is here where a more unusual offering is made. Whereas book chapters with the name “Ethical Dilemmas” often dive into specific questions of topics like genetic manipulation or animal rights, *Seeing the Light* instead follows the work of Anthony Weston and attempts to map the process of ethical decision-making itself. With chapters (filled with cinematic examples) on boldly confronting dilemmas, encountering evil, and reflecting on one’s decisions after the fact (with a valuable chapter on the importance of perspective in between), this unit wraps up the existential threads that began the book by placing them now personally in the hands of the reader.

While details about Teays’ philosophy of film are debatable (for example, she seems easily willing to equate full-cinema-features with candid videos uploaded to Youtube), such issues are largely irrelevant: this is not a book on the philosophy of film, but a book on the philosophy of *teaching with* film – something it offers several unique ideas towards. Although it may not be sufficient as a sole assignable in-class text, this introductory work may well assist many fledgling students and teachers in years to come