

“MAYBE GOODNESS IS JUST MAKE-BELIEVE”:  
OPTIMISM, SELF-DECEPTION AND *RASHOMON*

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I.

When professional philosophers talk about *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950), they usually misread it in terms of the standard epistemological problem of relativism. Occasionally they misread it instead in terms of existentialist notions of radical responsibility. Here I argue that not only is *Rashomon* not interested in epistemology, the film is actually interested in exploring the reasons professional philosophers tend to misread it that way. At the same time we will see that the film also undercuts the implicit optimism of both the epistemological and the existentialist readings.

Through a series of flashbacks, related by a woodcutter and a priest to an unnamed commoner as the take shelter from a storm under the ruins of the ancient Rashomon gate, the film tells the story of the murder trial of a bandit accused of killing a samurai in the forest and raping the samurai's wife. We see the court testimony of several eyewitnesses: the woodcutter who found the samurai's dead body and reported it to the police, a priest who happened to be walking by the scene, the bandit, the samurai's wife, and even the dead samurai himself (whose ghost is channeled by a psychic medium).<sup>1</sup> But the eyewitnesses give incompatible versions of the events, and we are left with the skeptical conclusion that we can never know what really happened. In the opening scene the priest says he may “finally lose [his] faith in the human soul”<sup>2</sup> because of the “horrible” story he has heard – “worse than bandits, the plague, famine, fire, or war”. What does he think is so disturbing? The problem seems to be, in part, that we

can't know what really happened in the forest. But why is that so disturbing? Each witness tells the story so as to make him or herself look good. But note that the reason we can't know what happened is not that the witnesses lied. The problem is that each one *experienced* the situation differently.

For example, in the bandit's flashback, the sword fight between him and the samurai is typical action movie fare. But in the woodcutter's flashback, it is a more realistic farce with both fighters clearly scared out of their minds and falling all over each other. But the bandit was not necessarily lying about how the battle took place. More likely, in the bandit's own mind the battle was much more glorious than it was the way the woodcutter saw it. Likewise, despite the fact that the bandit, the samurai, and the wife give three very different versions of the wife's request that the men fight, these differences could be read as different interpretations of the same event. The bandit says the wife demanded that he and the samurai have an honorable duel for her affection; the samurai says the wife asked the bandit to murder him; and the woodcutter says the wife ridiculed the two other men into fighting over her. All perspectives agree that the woman said something that led the men to fight, but they disagree about how to *interpret* what she said. Was her request honorable, was it a betrayal of her husband, or did it show lack of respect to both men?

Each person involved interprets the request differently. The problem is that they don't *know* that they are interpreting the event. They report their memories as if they were objective facts. The wife's testimony is the most extreme example of this. She remembers neither requesting that the men fight nor the fight itself: in her memory, she killed her husband herself. Presumably she (mis)remembers her husband's death this way due to a feeling of guilt about what she said to instigate the fight. The important point here is that neither she nor any of the

others seems to realize that their memories are being filtered through an interpretive lens. In other words, the implication of the film's conflicting narratives is that even though we all see the world from our own biased perspective, we think our own perspective is the uninterpreted self-evident truth.

## II.

Because of its dramatization of the perspectival nature of memory and experience, *Rashomon* is usually used in undergraduate philosophy classes to introduce the problem of relativism. Thomas Wartenberg's comment on *Rashomon* is illustrative: "it is pretty clear that *Rashomon* presents the philosophical theme of relativism – the idea that there can be multiple, equally (in)valid interpretations of a given event – in a vivid and compelling manner".<sup>3</sup>

Christopher Falzon argues for the opposite perspective on *Rashomon*, but he does so at the expense of textual fidelity. In Falzon's view, "Kurosawa does not want to illustrate the relative character of knowledge but rather is taking a cynical view of the ability of human beings to twist the truth, in order to preserve the idea they have of themselves".<sup>4</sup> This thesis is more or less on track, but Falzon's reading of the film goes wrong in thinking that the woodcutter (Falzon calls him "the eyewitness") is a perfectly reliable narrator: "While the bandit, the bride and the nobleman all present self-serving accounts of what went on, in which they each appear in the best possible light, Kurosawa also includes a further account by the eyewitness, which seems to represent 'what really went on'".<sup>5</sup> From this fact, Falzon concludes that *Rashomon* "can be seen as demonstrating the power of truth over views that are clouded by prejudice".<sup>6</sup>

But, contrary to Falzon's assertion, the woodcutter's narration is certainly not "what really went on". It seems clear that the woodcutter stole the dagger. Not only does he not deny

it when the commoner accuses him of stealing the dagger, but Kurosawa uses cinematic means to tell us that the woodcutter stole the dagger. When the dead samurai is testifying through the psychic medium, Kurosawa carefully composes the frame so that the woodcutter is in the center of the screen. The woodcutter is visibly upset by the samurai's testimony that "someone gently withdrew the dagger from my heart". Then the man's ghost leaves the medium's body, and she collapses to the ground leaving the woodcutter alone on the screen. Kurosawa has told us who the "someone" was who took the dagger. Immediately the scene shifts back to the Rashomon gate where the woodcutter exclaims: "It's not true! There was no dagger. He was killed by a sword." But only the bandit's testimony corroborates this element of the woodcutter's story. All the other witnesses say the samurai was killed with a dagger. And the bandit is clearly untrustworthy here: he has no motive to deny killing the samurai since he faces the death penalty for other crimes, but he does have a motive to claim killing the samurai since it would be a source of pride to have defeated someone skilled in battle. In short, it seems clear that the woodcutter stole the dagger, and it seems likely that he lied about how the samurai died to cover up his theft. Therefore we cannot take the woodcutter's story as the simple truth about "what really went on".

If there is one thing Falzon is right about it is his claim that reading the film in terms of relativism does not fully capture the film's significance. Relativism may be one of the issues raised by the film, but that is not why the priest is so disturbed in the opening scene. Julian Baggini also argues against the relativism reading.<sup>7</sup> In Baggini's reading, the film is not "providing a meditation on or even demonstration of the relativity of truth". Indeed, like Falzon, Baggini sees the film as ultimately offering a kind of argument *against* relativism. Baggini writes:

the specific ways in which the accounts differ point towards a much more subtle conception of truth than crude relativism or perspectivism, but one which nonetheless preserves their basic insights. The crucial point is that even though the accounts differ in various important aspects, they are sufficiently similar for us to be able to see them as recollections of the same event.

Baggini rightly points out that the accounts do not differ much with regard to the events that happened – especially the characters’ outward behavior. Rather the accounts differ with regard to the interpretation of that behavior: “the protagonists are making very different moral assessments of how they and the others behaved, assessments which are in part based on their perceptions of motives and feelings which cannot be fully manifest in behaviour, since they have at least in part a private dimension.” Thus Baggini concludes:

What we are really being shown then is how one event, which in certain respects objectively occurred, since its key details are not even contested by the inconsistent accounts, is nonetheless recalled differently because the participants did not merely experience the events as detached, objective observers, but as participants who saw, in their actions and the actions of others, motives, feelings, and moral commitments that were not simple, publicly observable facts. Hence we are shown how to make compatible a kind of non-relativistic view that there are objective facts with the truth that events are ineluctably perceived differently by each individual.

In other words, Baggini claims that the characters agree about the objective facts and only disagree about the subjective experience of those facts. In particular the characters disagree about the moral interpretation of the objective events.

Now, Baggini exaggerates the degree of consensus about the external events. Who cut the samurai free of the rope, his wife or the bandit? Was there a battle between the samurai and the bandit or not? Who actually killed the samurai? Was the samurai killed with a sword or a dagger? These are all questions about objective facts which are never definitively answered by the film. But let us grant for the sake of argument that the characters differ primarily with regard to the moral significance of their own and others’ external behavior and that they agree on most

of the observable facts about those behaviors. They undoubtedly agree on *many*, if not most, of the facts. If this consensus is supposed to show us how to make objective facts compatible with perspectivism, then why would the priest be tempted to lose his “faith in the human soul”? Far from being “horrible” as the priest proclaims it, Baggini makes the moral of the story sound downright rosy. His reading of the film takes the sting out of relativism. Baggini is right to point us toward psychology and ethics and away from epistemology. But at best all he has shown is that the film should be read in terms of *moral* relativism rather relativism of the epistemological variety. Even on his reading we are left unsure about the proper moral interpretation of the events. For example, we know the woman had sex with the bandit, but was it consensual or was it rape? And, assuming the woodcutter was telling the truth about the bandit killing the samurai, whose fault was the death? The bandit, the samurai, and the woman each interpret him- or herself to deserve the credit or blame.

The cinematic text simply won't support an interpretation of epistemological optimism such as Falzon and Baggini offer. But perhaps it will support an interpretation of *moral* optimism. Robert Castle affirms the standard reading that “there can be no final objective understanding of reality. Human perspectives are pathetically limited. Truth is relative to the individual's understanding of what happens in reality”, though he says he wants “to move outside perspectivist and relativist readings without displacing their importance”.<sup>8</sup> In order to move past relativism, Castle turns to the baby who appears at the end of the film. Like most critics, he interprets the baby as “an optimistic note for the future; a new and open future based on new premises for life”, though he attempts to defend the baby from charges of “sentimentality” and being “awkward and tacked on, a humanistic *infans ex machina*.” In Castle's view the baby is the symbolic “continuation of events previous in the film, in particular, the bandit's rape of the

woman. ... Born out of pain and despair, this baby awaits to live or die.” For Castle the existential challenge of the film is to affirm the baby, not to despair at the loss of objective truth, but to affirm reality as it is and to move forward. He says “The baby in *Rashomon* represents the birth of a new consciousness of the radical reality of life. ... To echo the priest's affirmation of the woodcutter's action of taking the baby, I want to affirm the burden for mankind, symbolized by the child, resides in a new order of life” by which Castle means “life beyond absolutes, beyond ancient objectivity and Cartesian idealism”.

Robert van Es also discusses the baby, and argues that the film challenges us to make an existential affirmation of responsibility in the face of moral ambiguity.<sup>9</sup> The woodcutter is caught between two views of the world: “The commoner represents cynicism and belief in egoism. The priest stands for idealism and belief in altruism. The woodcutter does not know what to think and must come up with something, but has dirty hands himself”.<sup>10</sup> The priest’s idealism does not fit with the empirical evidence of the selfish eyewitnesses, and the commoner’s cynicism does not fit with our *a priori* demand for world we can affirm. So the woodcutter “mediates between [these] conflicting accounts, meanings and value” and “negotiates for himself a new personal order, a compromise of facts and values”.<sup>11</sup> By choosing to help the baby, “he decides to demonstrate a non-selfish act” thereby creating the world the priest blindly believes in.<sup>12</sup> This is essentially the same reading given by Castle. Even if there are no objective moral absolutes, we can create our own values through an existential affirmation of will. This sort of moral optimism fits with the cinematic text than the epistemological optimism of Falzon and Baggini. But, as we will see, this existential reading, too, is ultimately unsatisfactory.

### III.

On my reading *Rashomon* is not so much an affirmation of epistemological relativism as a psychologically-based rejection of the kind of rationality assumed by Cartesian-style foundationalism.<sup>13</sup> Remember that Descartes was responding to the post-Reformation problem of finding a religiously and politically neutral basis for knowledge.<sup>14</sup> He thought he could base the entire structure of knowledge on the “foundation” of human reason. Remember also that Descartes’s proposal was to prove everything using abstract mathematical and logical reason since people can’t agree on philosophy, ethics, politics, or religion but they can agree on math and science. Set amid the ruins of a once culturally important architectural achievement, *Rashomon* dramatizes the collapse of humanistic foundations. But, in my view, *Rashomon* challenges the possibility of basing knowledge on the foundation of universal human reason, not simply because each person reasons from his or her own perspective (though, again, I agree that that is *part* of the point of the film), but also for the more radical reason that humans are not rational. *We repress what we know to be true in order to be happy.* In particular we repress our awareness of human depravity.

In the first line of the film, the woodcutter says, “I don’t understand.” Later, in the final scene, he clarifies what he means: “I don’t understand my own soul.” The problem isn’t that we lie to each other it’s that we lie to *ourselves*. At one point the priest says, “It is because men are weak that they lie, even to themselves.” And when the priest says, “I refuse to believe anyone could be so sinful”, the commoner replies, “But is there anyone who’s really good? Maybe goodness is just make-believe. . . . Man just wants to forget the bad stuff, and believe in the made-up good stuff. It’s easier that way.”

Now, here is where the film gets interesting – and here is where professional philosophers focus on epistemology at the expense of psychology. I believe the film is

constructed so as to demonstrate the fact of self-deception with its own viewers.<sup>15</sup> The film's ending seduces us into forgetting the dark lessons of the trial. Most interpreters criticize the film for its (apparently) overly optimistic ending: an abandoned baby is found in the ruins where the storytellers are, and when the woodcutter (seemingly) altruistically takes it in, the priest says he has regained his faith in humanity. This seems a surprisingly sentimental ending to an otherwise pessimistic film, and most critics see Kurosawa as losing his nerve. As Stephen Prince puts it, “Such a dark portrait was too much even for Kurosawa. . . . Thus, at the last minute, he pulls back from the darkness he has revealed”.<sup>16</sup> It is this (alleged) optimism that tempts some philosophers into reading the film in terms of an existentialist affirmation of human responsibility. But I think the point the film does not in fact end in an optimistic way.<sup>17</sup>

It seems to me that the film includes deliberate hints to undermine its apparent optimism, for it is possible that *it was the woodcutter that abandoned the baby in the first place*. Consider these usually overlooked details:

- The woodcutter already has six children, so it makes sense that he would think he couldn't take care of another one and would feel compelled to abandon a new baby.
- The woodcutter's primary motive for abandoning the baby would be lack of financial resources, but, having stolen the “valuable” pearl knife from the samurai's corpse, the woodcutter has a new source of income.
- The woodcutter is very protective of the baby when the commoner takes the baby's kimono.
- When the commoner calls the baby's parents “evil”, the woodcutter seems offended and defends the baby's parents, saying the commoner is “wrong” to think they simply abandoned the baby after having “their fun”. The woodcutter says instead that the parents

must have “went through” a lot of anguish “to abandon this baby”. He points out that they even left an amulet to “protect the baby”, recalling his original statement to the police in which he says he found an “empty” amulet case.

- The woodcutter does not have an axe with him when he leaves with the baby at the end. Indeed, he does not seem to have an axe with him at all in either the scenes at the Rashomon gate or in the scenes in the courthouse. The only place the woodcutter has an axe is in his own (unreliable) narration in which he claims he “went into the mountains to get wood”. (In contrast, the priest is shown at both Rashomon and in the courthouse with the hat, walking staff, and traveling bag which appear in his narration of the events in the forest.)

When we put these details together, a picture emerges of the woodcutter’s role in the events of the plot. The woodcutter did not have his axe with him, because he was not in the forest looking for wood. He was taking his baby to the Rashomon gate in order to leave him there in the hopes that someone else might find him and take care of him. On the way to Rashomon, the woodcutter passed through the forest where he happened upon the woman’s hat and amulet case. He kept the amulet as a good luck charm for his baby, and then he continued along the path where he saw the tied up samurai. There may or may not have been a battle between the bandit and the samurai at this point – it is impossible to know – but if there was a battle it seems likely that the bandit ran away without killing the samurai. The woman then advanced upon the samurai with the dagger before fainting. The samurai committed suicide with the dagger, and when the woman woke up she assumed she had killed him. After the woman fled the scene, the woodcutter took the dagger. Then he continued to Rashomon where he left his baby along with

the amulet before running off to tell the police about the dead body in the forest and turn in the empty amulet case.

If this reconstruction is right, then the woodcutter is not doing something heroic and selfless by taking the baby in. He is only doing his minimal duty to his own child. He is taking the baby due to a guilty conscience. So the priest's renewed faith in humanity is based on a lie. And if we as the audience share the priest's optimism, we are mistaken, too. Moreover, this unjustified faith in humanity is due to self-deception. It is no accident that the commoner tells the woodcutter "your story seems to be the most interesting". The woodcutter's story is the key to the film. All the evidence is there for us to know that the woodcutter is lying about the baby, but we *do not want to see it* since we want to imagine human beings to be good. And when, on repeat viewings we do finally realize that we have been seduced into easy optimism, we realize that the temptation to self-deception is a reality *in our own hearts*, not a general possibility "out there" in the world.

In this way *Rashomon* takes us to the core of the problem of evil. Is our belief that the world is meaningfully ordered – that justice is possible and life is worth living – simply a form of self-deception? Is faith in goodness, as Woody Allen argues through the film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Allen, 1989), a form of blindness to reality? Thus *Rashomon* contains within itself the seeds of deconstruction – not a deconstruction of itself so much as a deconstruction of a standard but superficial reading of the film – which demonstrates our unwillingness to face the darkness in our own hearts. It's a whole lot easier to turn the film into an exercise in abstract theoretical concerns than to admit that we might prefer happiness to truth.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Notice the way the trial scenes are filmed. We (the audience) are sitting in the place of the judges with the witnesses speaking directly to us (i.e., into the camera). In other words, we are being asked to decide what really happened in the forest – who really killed the samurai?

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *Rashomon* are transcribed from the English subtitles of the Criterion Collection DVD released in 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Wartenberg, Thomas E. *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (Routledge, 2007), p. 9. Wartenberg adds this footnote: “The precise claim to be defended is a matter of debate. I see it more about the relativity of interpretations than straightforward epistemological relativism” (p. 143n8).

<sup>4</sup> Falzon, Christopher *Philosophy Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Routledge, 2002), p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Baggini, Julian. “Alien Ways of Thinking: Mulhall's *On Film*” *Film-Philosophy* 7:24 (August 2003), <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol7-2003/n24baggini>

<sup>8</sup> Castle, Robert. “The Radical Capability of *Rashomon*” *Film-Philosophy* 7:33 (October 2003), <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol7-2003/n33castle>

<sup>9</sup> van Es, Robert. “Persistent Ambiguity and Moral Responsibility in *Rashomon*” in Stoehr, Kevin, ed. *Film and Knowledge: Essays on the Integration of Images and Ideas* (McFarland & Co., 2002)

<sup>10</sup> van Es, p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> I do not claim that Kurosawa had Descartes in particular or even foundationalism in general consciously in mind. I claim only that Kurosawa’s psychological observations present a challenge to Cartesian views.

<sup>14</sup> My reading of Descartes follows Toulmin, Stephen. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (The University of Chicago, Press, 1990), especially p. 72-5.

<sup>15</sup> It is what might be called a self-*confirming* artifact. Compare Stanley Fish’s concept of a “self-consuming artifact”, a text which communicates an inexpressible reality by pointing away from itself in the attempt to lead its audience into a direct encounter with the ineffable. In my usage, a self-*confirming* artifact is the contrast of a self-refuting statement. A self-*confirming* artifact does not necessarily present a self-evident truth, but it is one that, if successful, demonstrates the truth of its claims. It is both an argument for, and an example of, a philosophical claim. The *cogito* is an example. I must exist in order to think about the claim “I exist”, therefore the statement “I exist” is true whenever I consider its truth.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Prince’s essay for the Criterion Collection DVD release is available online at <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/195>.

<sup>17</sup> Even van Es recognizes this: “The film closes with the always hopeful and positive priest rightly seen as a small figure under a huge dilapidated gate. The woodcutter makes his exit bowed, knowing that he still has to pay off his moral shortcomings: for years he has another mouth to feed” (van Es, p. 116).