



## **“THAT AIN’T LEGAL EITHER”**

Rules, Virtue, and Authenticity in  
*The Big Lebowski*

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The Big Lebowski: What makes a man,  
Mr. Lebowski? . . . Is it being prepared to do  
the right thing, whatever the cost? Isn’t that  
what makes a man?

The Dude: Mmm . . . sure. That, and a pair of  
testicles.

### **Tumbling Tumbleweeds, What Have You, and Being “Very UnDude”**

Like many of the Coen brothers’ films, *The Big Lebowski*  
numbers among its concerns the question of what makes a

man. If, as the Dude slyly points out, "being prepared to do the right thing, whatever the cost," is not sufficient to make a *man*, we might at least think that it has something to do with what makes one a *good person*, someone who takes morality seriously.

We want to suggest that the Dude possesses an insight into the nature of morality that no other main character in the film, and certainly not Walter, has managed to grasp. In the morally corrupt world of *The Big Lebowski*, the Dude emerges as a beacon of integrity, authenticity, and virtue. It is in this sense that the Dude really is, in the words of the Stranger, "the man for his time and place."

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) proposed that answering the question "What does it mean to be a good person?" requires an understanding of a kind of human excellence, or "virtue." The only way to define virtue is in terms of what a morally good or virtuous person would do. For Aristotle, virtue is to be found not in strict adherence to rules but rather in a kind of *activity* that both flows from and structures one's character.

According to Aristotle, cultivating such a virtuous character necessitates a kind of active habituation, such that "it makes no small difference to be habituated this way or that way straight from childhood, but an enormous difference, or rather *all* the difference."<sup>1</sup> We don't know much about the Dude's upbringing, but we do think that his approach to life represents an understanding of virtue in line with Aristotle's. To come to an understanding of the Dude's virtues, we will proceed by exploring three moral vices, moral character flaws that the film suggests are "very unDude." The first and the central focus of this chapter is a kind of *rule rigidity* exemplified by Walter. The second is really a pair: *inauthenticity* and *hypocrisy*. These are personified by the Big Lebowski, by Walter, and by others. The third, *exclusionism*, is instantiated by almost all of the film's central characters, with the exception of the Dude himself. It is by avoiding and rejecting all three of these character flaws that

the Dude manages to serve, for those who have eyes to see it, as a manifestation of virtuous authenticity.

### Rule Rigidity 1: “Am I the Only One around Here Who Gives a Shit about the Rules?”

Some people think that being good is a matter of following the rules that determine good behavior. This is what we often tell our children: do what we tell you to do, or you are a bad child. Of course, being a good person is not simply a matter of following just any old rule; the *moral* rules are the ones that matter. One thing that is special about moral rules is that they apply to you—that is, they have authority over you, whether or not you have agreed to them.

Compare this with the rules of bowling. If you have chosen to engage in a game of bowling, then you have reason to follow the rules. For instance, you have reason to make sure that when you roll, your foot does not cross the foul line. Notice, however, that this is true only if you have *chosen* to play the game. If you were engaged in some other activity—cleaning the lanes, chasing an escaped marmot, or fleeing a scissor-wielding nihilist—you would not hesitate to cross the foul line. After all, there is no *intrinsic* reason not to cross the foul line. It isn’t as if something bad happens when you do—unless, of course, you are bowling, in which case something bad does happen: namely, you are penalized.

The distinction we are discussing is closely related to the distinction drawn by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) between hypothetical and categorical rules (or, in Kant’s terms, “imperatives”).<sup>2</sup> *Hypothetical* rules are applied relative to certain goals or perhaps to certain roles or identities:

Drink some warm milk (*if* you want to get a good night’s sleep).

Don’t cross the foul line when throwing the ball (*if* you want to bowl properly).

Don’t drive on Shabbas (*if* you are an observant Jew).

Note that these rules do not apply to you if the parenthetical conditions are not met: if, that is, you are not trying to go to sleep, not bowling, and not an observant Jew.

*Categorical* rules, on the other hand, are supposed to apply to everyone, even people who have not specifically accepted their authority in any way and who would rather exempt themselves. Moral rules are usually seen as categorical, as are legal rules. You don’t refrain from murdering innocent people (or peeing on their rugs) solely because you desire to achieve some end, for example, staying out of prison (or wanting the rug to continue to really tie the room together). The categorical rule says: don’t murder innocent people, *period*.

Let’s suppose, for the sake of argument, that in *The Big Lebowski*, Smokey’s toe does cross the foul line when he bowls his eight. If so, then Smokey has (unintentionally) violated one of the hypothetical rules that defines bowling, and Walter is right to complain. Walter is *not* right, however, to back up his complaint by brandishing a firearm and threatening Smokey with violence. There are categorical rules (both moral and legal) against that—categorical rules that are weightier and more compelling than any hypothetical rule Smokey may have violated.

In acting this way and in shouting, “*Am I the only one around here who gives a shit about the rules?*” Walter shows that in fact he does not *understand* the rules—he does not understand which rules are truly important and which less so. He does not understand that, as we noted, there is nothing *intrinsically* wrong with crossing the foul line, so he does not understand that, as the Dude reminds him, bowling is “just a game.” There is a sense in which this shows that Walter takes morality seriously: he is “prepared to do the right thing . . . whatever the cost.” But this rigid willingness to obey and enforce relatively trivial rules at all costs is not admirable.<sup>3</sup> It is in fact a moral flaw, as the Dude, in a remark that implicitly draws the contrast between virtue-based and a rigid Kantian approach to ethics, observes:

Walter: . . . Am I wrong?

Dude: No, you're not wrong—

Walter: Am I wrong!

Dude: You're not wrong, Walter, you're just an asshole.

## Rule Rigidity 2: “Okay, but How Does All This Add Up to an Emergency?”

The issue of whether and how to *enforce* rules is closely connected to the question of when we should make *exceptions* to rules. The good person is not someone who follows (or, for that matter, enforces) all rules rigidly and mindlessly. Rather, the good person is someone who follows the rules *when following the rules is appropriate* but who also knows when following the rules is not appropriate.

Let's return to Kant. According to Kant, there are principles that define what morality requires, and these principles have no exceptions: lying, for instance, is not only *typically* morally wrong (something most of us probably accept) but is *always* wrong, regardless of the situation. One could not lie, according to Kant, *even to save a life* (by, say, misleading a Nazi as to the whereabouts of Jews he intends, in accordance with his murderous ethos, to kill).

Kant's position is even more extreme than Walter's. Walter recognizes that rules have exceptions, can come into conflict with other rules, and sometimes simply need to be ignored. The rule against driving on Shabbas, for instance, may be suspended in the case of a genuine emergency. All available evidence, though, suggests that Walter insists on seeing those exceptions as being themselves rules—or rather, *meta*-rules that tell us when ordinarily binding rules need not be followed.

Rule 1: Walter may not drive on Shabbas.

Rule 2: Walter is allowed to drive in cases of emergency.

Rule 3: In cases of conflict (an emergency on Shabbas), rule 2 has priority over rule 1.

But there is a problem with thinking that such a maneuver can keep the set of moral rules as rigid and stringent as Walter would like them to be. For what constitutes an emergency? If Walter is right that it must be rules all the way down, then there would have to be a rule that tells us how to distinguish emergencies from nonemergencies. It seems very unrealistic, however, to expect that we should be able to formulate a comprehensive set of rules that could decide every such question. As Aristotle noted, ethical and other practical questions are not as precise as this. The reasonable person, he wrote, “is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits.”<sup>4</sup> To decide what constitutes a genuine emergency and what does not, a person cannot appeal to some further rule. Rather, he needs to appeal to something that Walter has very little of: good judgment.

To see the importance of the idea of judgment, consider the way that it is built into our legal system itself—a system that it is very natural to think of as being composed of rigid laws. In a criminal trial, the defined standard is that the defendant’s guilt must be proved “beyond a reasonable doubt.” There is no attempt to give a precise and comprehensive definition of what “reasonable” means in this context: the best we can do is say that it is what a reasonable person would think. (Notice the connection here with the virtue-ethical claim that good behavior is defined in terms of what a good person would do.)

Yet Walter is quite incapable of feeling “reasonable doubt.” Once he makes up his mind that someone is guilty, he allows himself to become completely convinced, and almost nothing can dissuade him. Moreover, the effect of his certainty is always the same: to prevent him from feeling compassion for

others. At various points he is convinced, on the basis of speculation and very little evidence, that Bunny kidnapped herself, that Larry Sellers stole the million dollars, and that the Big Lebowski is faking his disability. (“I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life,” he tells the Dude.) It is on these occasions that Walter’s rigid approach to morality and to life is most obvious—and most disturbing.

### Rule Rigidity 3: “Dude, Chinaman Is Not the Preferred Nomenclature”

Without a hostage there is no ransom. That’s what ransom *is*. Those are the fucking *rules*!

—Walter

To see how the virtuous person of good Dudelike character fits into this scheme, picture a continuum with Walter at one end and the nihilists at the other. At Walter’s end, there exist rules for everything, while at the nihilists’ end, there are no rules at all, nothing is right or wrong, nothing is better or worse than anything else. True virtue, according to the Aristotelian idea of the Golden Mean, exists at the point of moderation between the two extremes (of excess and deficiency). It is at this point that we find the virtuous person, who acts in the right way with the right motive at the right time to the right extent.

Near the beginning of the film, we witness the first President Bush’s famous statement that “This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait.” It’s a statement, along with its accompanying talk about drawing “a line in the sand,” that is later parroted both by Walter and by the Dude. The idea is that there are some things that good moral persons will not abide, the implication being that if we refuse to draw such lines, then we are taking a nihilistic “anything goes” attitude. In a completely nihilistic world there are no rules, no values,

and no firm identities or hard boundaries. Because there are no rules, there are no rules for language—no right and wrong way to use words—so that every utterance is as true (or as false) as any other utterance; any name can be applied to any thing. The attempt to give something its proper name—a project we see Walter engaged in more than once—is like the attempt to draw a line in the sand: it is an attempt to put things into categories, to define their essences, and to separate the permissible from the off-limits. No wonder Walter is so desperate to find a set of rules—any set of rules—to give him some kind of standards and sense of meaning to cling to.

Walter: And, also, let’s not forget—let’s not forget, Dude, that keeping wildlife—um an amphibious rodent, for uh, you know, domestic—within the city—*that ain’t legal either.*

Dude: What’re you, a fucking park ranger now?

No wonder Walter is so concerned with using “preferred nomenclature”: it is precisely by drawing lines and accepting what would otherwise seem to be arbitrary rules that Walter has constructed his identity or, rather, identities. Yet precisely because his identities are, in large part, constructed—as the Dude protests at one point, “You’re not even fucking Jewish, man. . . . You’re fucking Polish Catholic!”—Walter’s personhood is fragile, precarious, and largely inauthentic, which seems to be the source of a good deal of his anxiety. Moreover, the nihilists reveal their inauthenticity, as well. They turn out to be quite rule-bound themselves, insisting that because the girlfriend gave up her toe (because she thought, mistakenly, that they would get the million dollars), such an outcome is just “not fair”—to which Walter quite properly (for once) responds, “Fair! *Who’s the fucking nihilists around here!*”

Walter’s apparent rugged individualism belies a lack of *real* individuality—a quality the Dude has in spades. This lack is

masked by his self-identification as a Jew and a Vietnam vet and as a defender of various and sundry classical and neoliberal individualistic rights, including the rights to free speech, to self-identify, and to bear arms and engage in vigilante justice. As is apparent to nearly everyone but himself, though, Walter's commitment to these values is relatively shallow. For instance, despite his insistence that others adhere to "preferred nomenclatures," Walter himself frequently makes use of racial epithets and ethnic slurs, including "krauts" (Germans) and "camel fucker" (the Iraqi Saddam Hussein), as well as referring to Bunny as a "strumpet" and paraplegics as "spinals."

The insults and accusations Walter hurls at other people tend to reflect his deep-seated fears about himself. His deepest fear is that he is without identity or without a meaningful world in which to find an identity. We sense this fear in the angry outbursts he directs at Donny, whom he accuses of being "out of [his] element" and of having "no frame of reference." "You're like a child," he says, "who wanders into the middle of a movie and wants to know—" (at which point he is interrupted by the Dude).

As the contemporary philosopher Rick Furtak wrote,

It is one thing to admire another person, and quite another to admire oneself admiring. In the latter case, the emotion has been cut off from its outward foundations and has become inauthentic or sentimental. . . . The sentimental or inauthentic person, in other words, wants to have the effect without the cause, to experience an affect without having to deal with its grounding conditions. . . . This is how emotion frequently becomes inauthentic: one misrepresents the world in order to feel the way one wants to, noticing only those details that justify a pleasant response (or an unpleasant response, if that is what one is seeking). This kind of selective attention is a form of self-deception.<sup>5</sup>

We see this kind of “selective attention” in Walter’s insistence on finding, in nearly every conversation or event, a justification for flying into a rage about Vietnam (the unpleasant response that he constantly seeks).

Walter: Those rich fucks! This whole fucking thing—  
I did not watch my buddies die face down in the muck so that this fucking *strumpet*, this fucking *whore*, could waltz around—

Dude: Walter, I don’t see any connection to Vietnam, man.

Walter: Well, there isn’t a literal connection, Dude.

But given Walter’s fear of meaninglessness, it is little wonder that he has trouble distinguishing between the hypothetical rules of games and the compelling categorical rules of morality. He lives in a society that has eroded that distinction by placing an absurd degree of significance on artificial social roles—roles that are a matter of appearance, rather than reality, and whose main functions are to protect the wealth and power of the privileged and to assuage people’s fear of nihilism by giving them a sense of meaning.

### **The Big Lebowski’s Hypocrisy: “Every *Bum’s* Lot in Life Is His Own Responsibility”**

All of this is especially apparent in the case of the Big Lebowski. The narrative offered by both Brandt and the Big Lebowski regarding the latter’s character is one of philanthropic service and personal achievement in the face of hardship and adversity, virtues by any measure. Yet as Maude reveals, the truth about the Big Lebowski is that he is a failed and inept businessman, a fraud and a bum himself (“he has no money of his own”), whose “weakness is vanity.”

No number of plaques, awards, or keys to cities can make the Big Lebowski the kind of achiever that he imagines and

portrays himself to be. He is both perpetrator and victim of a particularly harmful kind of self-deception: an inauthenticity that exists beyond his own conscious awareness of it, wherein he adopts modes of dress, of speech, and even of dwelling that suggest an identity he does not truly occupy. Even what should be the most important relationship in his life, his marriage to Bunny, is part of the sham: as the Dude comes to realize in a moment of enlightenment, the Big Lebowski “no longer digs her. It’s all a show!”

Though all outward signs suggest that he is an achiever, the truth is that he has achieved very little; he himself is a living counterexample to his own claim that every “bum’s lot in life is his own responsibility.” Similarly, when he says to the Dude, “Condolences! The bums lost!” his utterance is doubly ironic: first, because he is condemning himself as much as or more than he is condemning the Dude; and second, because his unearned social status shows that some of the “bums”—the ones who were able to hide the fact that they are bums—did not, in fact, lose.

The Big Lebowski draws what appear to be clear lines, using them to make moral distinctions that distinguish good persons from bad, bums from achievers, and “real” men from cowards and bullies, constructions that create for him an identity that can inhabit the “right” side of such boundaries. In the penultimate scene we see the Big Lebowski collapse under the weight of his own body, a metaphor for the collapse and unraveling of the inauthentic, fraudulent identity he has crafted for himself.

### **Exclusion: “Donny, You’re Out of Your Element”**

Modern moral thinking shows a consistent trend toward equality and inclusion. “Taking the impartial element in ethical reasoning to its logical conclusion means, first, accepting that

we ought to have equal concern for all human beings,” the philosopher Peter Singer wrote in his book *The Expanding Circle*.<sup>6</sup> But most of the characters in *The Big Lebowski* show little interest in expanding their circles. They display the very unDude vice of moral exclusion: they refuse to see other people as morally significant, to treat them as persons, or to welcome them into their communities.

Democracy is a conversation, as Al Gore once observed. Shutting people out of a conversation is, then, implicitly and sometimes explicitly a political act, an exercise of power. Consider how Donny is repeatedly excluded from conversation by Walter’s belligerent verbal attacks. Or how the Dude is shut out of the apparently hilarious joke shared (in Italian) by Maude and video artist Knox Harrington. Or how the nihilists who claim to have kidnapped Bunny express their displeasure at the Dude’s failure to show up alone to the drop by hanging up the phone. Consider, too, the extent to which young Larry Sellers completely shuts out Walter by uttering not a single word under interrogation. (To quote Walter, we have a “little language problem here. Little prick’s stonewalling me.”) And consider, of course, the Big Lebowski’s reluctance to waste any of his allegedly valuable time speaking with the Dude and his bullying, “Hello! Do you speak English, sir? *Parla usted Inglese?*”

In contrast to this, the Dude himself shows no desire to dominate or exclude. He moves in and out of various circles and seems comfortable in nearly every setting and milieu—a talent no one else in the film seems to possess. On first leaving the Big Lebowski’s mansion, he responds jokingly to Brandt’s obviously insincere semi-invitation, treating him, ironically, as if he were being sincere.

Brandt: Well, enjoy, and perhaps we’ll see you again sometime, Dude.

Dude: Yeah sure, if I’m ever in the neighborhood, need to use the john . . .

The Dude is open, inclusionary, and flexible, allowing people to address him in any number of ways: the Dude, His Dudeness, Duder, El Duderino (“if, you know, you’re not into the whole brevity thing”). It is no accident that his most prominent attempt to exclude people—by wedging a chair between a nail-studded piece of wood and the door to his apartment—ends in utter failure, because it goes so deeply against his nature. As the private eye Da Fino observes, the Dude excludes no one: he is “in bed with everybody.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Virtues of Perspective: “No Funny Stuff”**

We began this chapter by suggesting that a good person is one who takes morality and, in a sense, life itself seriously. One need not, though, be solemn about it. Indeed, it is worth remembering that unlike nearly everyone else in this very funny film, the Dude has a sense of humor. He shows an appreciation for the absurdity of the behavior of those around him and of the situations in which he finds himself embroiled. (“It’s, uh, down there somewhere, let me take another look.”) If the nihilists’ motto is “no funny stuff”—a motto that would be endorsed by nearly every character in the film—the Dude’s philosophy of life would seem to be very much the opposite.

There is, we should note, one other character who shares both the Dude’s sense of humor and his philosophy of life. After visiting Maude, the Dude is returned to his home in a car. The car’s driver, Tony, tells him a joke (the punch line is: “You know me. I can’t complain”), following which, the two have this philosophical exchange.

Dude: I gotta tell ya, Tone, man. . . . earlier today I was  
really feeling shitty, man, really down in the dumps.  
Lost a little money—

Tony: Hey, you know what? Forget about it, huh?  
 Forget about it.  
 Dude: Yeah, fuck it, man! Can’t be worrying about that  
 shit. Life goes on, man!

The “little money” referred to, of course, is the million dollars the Dude believes to have been in the stolen briefcase, and for someone as poor as the Dude to be able to think of this as “a little money” and to be able to say, “Fuck it! Can’t be worrying about that shit!” shows an admirable, if not astonishing, sense of perspective.

One’s sense of humor is rooted in one’s sense of perspective, and many of the vices we have discussed (and their implied corresponding virtues) are connected with perspective. The Dude’s ability to see people for who they really are and not be taken in by pretension or illusion; his good judgment in knowing when rules are to be applied and when they should be ignored; his ability to forgive (Walter, in particular) and to show compassion and sympathetic concern (for Bunny, among others); and his acceptance of an imperfect world, shown in his willingness to say, “Fuck it,” and walk away from bad situations, rather than clinging to futile and counterproductive ideals, all of these are expressions of his ability to see the world from a reasonable and realistic perspective, to respond to what is there and not to what he wishes were there, and to avoid being deluded by self-protective or megalomaniacal fantasies. We won’t say the Dude is a hero. ‘Cause what’s a hee-ro? What he is, though, is an authentic human being and a man of compassion, integrity, humor, and perspective. Far from being a loser or a bum, the Dude really is “the man for his time and place.”<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

1. Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1103b23–1103b25.

2. Immanuel Kant, “Transition from Popular Moral Philosophy to Metaphysics of Morals,” *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1998.

3. For a nice discussion of Walter’s rule adherence, see Matthew K. Douglass and Jerry L. Walls, “‘Takin’ er Easy for All Us Sinners’: Laziness as a Virtue in *The Big Lebowski*,” in Mark T. Conrad, ed., *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 147–162.

4. Aristotle, 1094b25–1094b27.

5. Rick Furtak, “The Virtues of Authenticity,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2003): 423–438.

6. Peter Singer, *Ethics: The Expanding Circle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 119.

7. Given this, it’s ironic that the Dude’s behavior toward Da Fino is uncharacteristically uninclusive. He rejects Da Fino’s invitation to “pool our resources [and] trade information” and shows a level of irritation that almost amounts to hostility. Then again, given what the Dude has suffered to this point, the fact that his encounter with Da Fino immediately follows his realization that the Big Lebowski has been playing him for a fool, and the fact that Da Fino has been anonymously stalking him for some time, it is not surprising that he might be feeling a bit out of sorts.

8. Thanks to Mark Balaguer and Deena Skolnick Weisberg, whose comments on earlier drafts really helped tie the essay together.