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It's Not About *The Sopranos*

by

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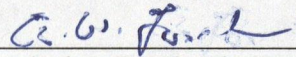
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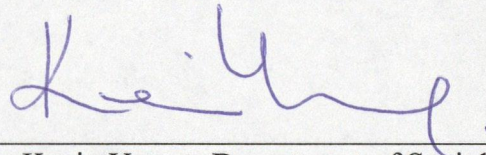
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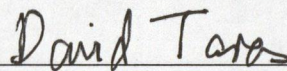
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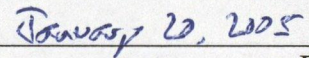
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the acclaimed television program *The Sopranos* reflects the morality of today's world. Richard Sennett's notion of character provides a moral orientation for individuals based on traditional values. Alan Wolfe's concept of moral freedom offers that people today find their morality on a case-by-case basis. This thesis "reads" *The Sopranos* as a source for examples of character and moral freedom. It is suggested that character-based morality underestimates people's ability to make sound moral decisions. Further, within in an environment of moral freedom many decisions will reflect character traits, even if character is not the only decision-making tool.

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Chapter 1 -- Introduction

The television program *The Sopranos* takes up the issue of character in several different settings. It allows for the study of character and promotes a discussion of the possible consequences of the lack of character. By studying how character plays out on *The Sopranos*, I hope to provide insight into how character plays out in contemporary life.

At first it might seem that a fictional Mafioso would be that wrong person to look towards for a discussion of morality; after all, their job is to commit crime. However, the Mob is based on dedication to the values of loyalty, commitment, and trust—at least amongst your peers. These values are difficult to maintain in today's world, wherein changing ways of living make long-term morals difficult to uphold. By looking at the televised struggles of a Mafioso trying to make sense of changing morality, we can better understand our own moral dilemmas.

Richard Sennett on Character

Curiously, Richard Sennett's book *The Corrosion of Character* does not give an explicit definition of character. The stories Sennett presents lay out some essential elements of character, but a proper explanation is never really made clear. However, there is still a level at which the nature of character seems apparent, even without a definition. Perhaps because character is hard to define, it is best examined by looking at stories in which it is represented.

The Corrosion of Character presents the stories of several individuals from varying backgrounds, and discusses how the presumed society-wide loss of character affects their lives. Throughout the book it is never entirely clear just what character is. It does seem to exist above and beyond the individuals, at a structural level of society. The closest Sennett comes to defining the term is expressed early in the book:

Character particularly focuses upon the long-term aspect of our emotional experience. Character is expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end...Character concerns the personal traits which we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued by others. (1998: 10)

Thus, Sennett provides a description of the major traits of character, without a simple definition. However, through the narratives he provides, it does become quite clear what it is. It may be that a story is the ideal method for extracting a definition for the rather amorphous term. *The Sopranos* is therefore a suitable backdrop for this discussion.

Sennett's primary story is that of Rico, a young man whom he encounters in an airport, years after having interviewed his father Enrico. Sennett is struck by the extent to which Rico's life is guided by short-term principles. There is little in Rico's life that suggests his goals and aspirations are made with the long-term in mind. He changes jobs frequently, moves all across the country, and changes social circles regularly. Sennett contrasts Rico's life with that of his father. Enrico has lived his entire adult life in the same neighborhood, and has worked for only one company. Sennett sees in Enrico a much greater degree of commitment and loyalty, two things that seem to be central aspects of character. Whereas Rico is apt to switch jobs when things are not perfect, the

conditions of Enrico's life were such that he would likely stay in the same environment (1998:15-31).

The majority of The Corrosion of Character centers on work-related issues. The workplace seems to be where character is most enabled and reinforced. Sennett discusses Rico's and Enrico's level of commitment to—and commitment from—their respective employers. He goes on to discuss several other cases: Rose, a middle-aged bartender who switches career paths later in life; powerful heads of business who are meeting in Davos, Switzerland, and bakers faced with changing modes of production. The common theme throughout these is loyalty and commitment in the workplace, with that loyalty extending into the worker's everyday lives. Loyalty, or lack thereof, in the workplace will be reflected in the way people live outside of the workplace (1998: 31).

A theme that recurs throughout the book is regret for the loss of character. For both Sennett and the people with whom he spoke there is a sense that the corrosion of character is an inherently negative phenomenon. Rico, the young man at the focus of the problem explains "You can't imagine how stupid I feel when I talk to my kids about commitment. It's an abstract virtue to them; they don't see it anywhere" (Sennett 1998:25). Although Rico is apt to regularly switch jobs and locales, it is troublesome for him. The way he lives his life is not how he would like his children to live their lives. He is aware that the loss of character is occurring for him, but still sees character as a noble virtue.

Sennett goes on to discuss Rose, a middle-aged bartender in New York City. After years of serving drinks she switches jobs, and begins working for an alcohol marketing firm. However, her tenure there is short, as she discovers that the culture

surrounding marketing was not one which she could accept (Sennett 1998:78-79). The culture was driven by immediacy. There was no sense of long-term commitment to anything. Sennett uses this story as a backdrop for a discussion of speed and risk. He argues that workplaces no longer value experience, but favor instead an ability to make quick decisions: “Everything in the office focused on the immediate moment, on what was just about to break, on getting ahead of the curve; eyes glaze over in the image business when someone begins a sentence ‘One thing I’ve learned is that...’” (1998:79-80). By throwing herself into such a foreign environment, Sennett argues, Rose was putting herself at risk (1998: 80). Sennett believes being at risk has a straining effect on the individual:

Being at risk is inherently more depressing than promising...To be sure, in Rose’s case she was not clinically depressed; she seems to have done her work energetically. Rather, she knew a kind of dull, continual worry. (1998: 83)

Lives that are lived at risk cause the individual to worry about their security. The person is never certain about where her life is going. The lack of predictability is scary. Lives that are driven by character will not have this worrying aspect. The individual is not living in constant fear.

Sennett seems very pessimistic about living in a world in which character-driven lives are not the norm. He discusses the case of the workers at a bakery in Boston, whose skilled work has largely been replaced by automation (1998: 65-75). In his early encounters with the bakers, they were an ethnically close-knit group of skilled bakers (1998: 65). However, when he returns to the bakery years later, it is an ethnically-diverse group of largely unskilled laborers (1998: 67). The changes in baking, deskilling and the social diversity, have lead to an alienation of the workers from their work (1998:69).

Interestingly, aside from a skilled foreman who has been there for years, the workers themselves do not feel alienated (1998: 69). Rather, the feeling of distance comes from the outside viewer of the situation, namely Sennett himself: “The detachment and confusion I found among the bakers in Boston is a response to these peculiar properties of computer use in a flexible workplace” (1998: 74). Thus, while Sennett argues that the workers did not express feelings of alienation, he believes alienation was present. For Sennett this lack of character is very troubling. Certainly, he does believe that there is a definite shift away from character, which he posits was the dominant mode of living until recently. His connection may be rather tenuous: it rests primarily on his observation of generation gaps. Further, it is entirely possible that he is wrong about today’s world witnessing a corrosion of character, although it is certainly the case in my own life. Regardless of this, Sennett sees the possibility of this shift as distinctly negative. He associates lack of character traits—loyalty, commitment, and hard work—with risky behavior. Because individuals whose lives are not driven by character switch jobs more, move more often, and have less closely-knit social circles, they are constantly putting themselves at risk.

Thus, Sennett equates the fast pace of life today with negative experiences. On another level he also sees the loss of character as a loss of a moral compass. As individuals have less loyalty to their companies, and vice versa, there will be less loyalty outside of the workplace. There will be a general breakdown of moral orientation. The compass that guides people’s moral behavior will be lost.

Alan Wolfe on Character

Sennett's position can be contrasted with the work of the sociologist Alan Wolfe. In his book Moral Freedom, Wolfe interviewed young people from all across America to gauge how they reach moral decisions. What he found was that people today are still able to make solid, moral decisions about their lives. Whereas in the past the basis for morality was found in one's character, it is now assembled on a case-by-case basis. In quoting one of his interviewees, Wolfe writes that "a virtue is something that comes from within, something deep within that makes you realize what is right and what is wrong" (2001:19). There is less of an influence of institutional normative adherence at work than there may have been in the past (see literature review below). Rather, the individual is making decisions about what they believe to be correct action. Each instance is weighed on its own merits and faults. While the same conclusion may not be reached in each case, as it was more likely to have been in a time dominated by character, there is still a definite influence of morality in modern individuals.

Wolfe notes, much like Sennett, that loyalty is the most significant loss among virtues today (2001:23). However, he shows that the loss of loyalty, if indeed it is lost, is nothing new. He points out that various writers have bemoaned the loss of loyalty since the founding of America. Further, America was founded on the very notion of disloyalty: "Not only was the United States created through a singular act of disloyalty, it has been continually replenished by immigrants willing to break the bonds of family, faith, and community" (Wolfe 2001:25). He goes on to show that the capitalist system that is the central feature of American life is inherently disloyal. Perhaps then, Sennett should not be surprised by the corrosion of character:

Anyone who professes to be shocked by the lack of loyalty Americans display...cannot have been paying much attention to all those other messages that tell Americans to persist by their own effort, move up the social ladder to provide for their children, breathe the free air of the country, worship as they please, exercise their right to speak, and protect themselves as best they can. (Wolfe 2001:25)

Wolfe found that much of the presumed loss of loyalty today stems from corporations being disloyal to the employees, something with which Sennett would likely agree. When asked whether companies are loyal to their workers, Curtis replied “Shit no, hell no, that’s ludicrous...when you can’t produce, you’re toast” (2001: 39). Perhaps not surprisingly, many of Wolfe’s participants viewed corporate disloyalty as an opportunity for their own advancement:

But, like so many of those with whom we spoke, Mr. Farrell believes that workers should turn this around to their own advantage. “I don’t consider that really a form of selfishness,” he adds. “You know, it’s not necessarily something that’s wrong.” What cultural critics bemoan as the loss of this one particular virtue is also lamented by many Americans. But it is not in their character to sit around and cry over their losses. As much as they might prefer to live in a world in which loyalty between employers and employees could be taken for granted, they will do their best, as Ben Farrell puts it, to “make whatever situation is best for them.” (2001: 40)

Time and again Wolfe found that individuals were making moral decisions on the basis of practicality, not institutional expectations. In a discussion of marriage, Hugh, one of Wolfe’s participants, offered “Sometimes I don’t believe that it is right to keep two unhappy people together if it’s going to be damaging to the kids” (2001:45). Rather than try to keep a marriage together, something that is often done for the presumed benefit of children, he believes that the damage will be greater if the couple adheres to the institutional expectation. Wolfe demonstrates the core problem with loyalty is that there are many conflicting things which all require their own loyalty:

The real story about America's divorce culture, therefore, is not that people no longer believe in marital commitment. It is instead that they take the marriage vow seriously, but that they also take seriously other vows that may come into conflict with it. (2001: 49)

Wolfe places individuals on a continuum, wherein they are fiercely and unquestioningly loyal at one end, and "postloyalist," or opportunistic at the other (2001: 59). However, even for those Wolfe deems loyalist in the traditional sense, there are always exceptions to be made: "There is simply no escaping the fact that, whatever loyalty means these days, it does not mean blind acceptance of moral authority" (2001:61).

Wolfe discusses several other virtues in his book, including self-discipline, honesty, and forgiveness. For my thesis, loyalty stands out as the most relevant. It is the central aspect of character in Sennett's work, although the other virtues are certainly included in it. Loyalty is also a central theme throughout *The Sopranos*, making it particularly germane.

The Sopranos

My thesis will use *The Sopranos* as a lens through which to examine Sennett's and Wolfe's positions. *The Sopranos*, created by David Chase and having recently completed its fifth season, is consistently amongst the highest rated and critically acclaimed television shows. This is no small feat, considering its placement on HBO, an American cable channel, means it is seen in only about 30 million households, a far cry from the well over 100 million American households with network access. The fifth-season finale was watched by about 11 million Americans, a remarkable 1/3 of the people

with access to HBO (Nielsen Media Research). As I will discuss in the literature review, a show that is able generate such a rabid following is worth examining further.

The Sopranos focuses on the life of Mafia boss Tony Soprano, portrayed by James Gandolfini, and his struggles to maintain a balance between his two families: his crime family, and his wife and children. There is a great deal of cross-over between the two families, with many of his relatives also being Mob figures. *The Sopranos*, similar to other critically-acclaimed gangster-genre works such as *The Godfather*, makes human figures out of its characters, exhibited in a key element to the show: Tony regularly visits a psychiatrist.

As can be expected from a show in which murder is commonplace, many characters come and go. The central core has survived, literally, for all five seasons with one major exception. His nuclear family consists of his wife Carmela, and two children, Meadow and Anthony Jr. While his mob family has a huge number of minor characters, the key players include Carmela's young cousin and Tony's soldier Christopher Moltisanti, and Tony's capos Paulie Walnuts and Silvio Dante. Stuck in the middle between his relationship with each family are Tony's visits to his psychotherapist Dr. Jennifer Melfi. Through at least the first few seasons his visits to Dr. Melfi were the driving force behind the show. A key figure in the first two seasons, and the primary reason for his visits to a psychiatrist, was Tony's mother Livia. The character was killed off when the actress portraying her passed away before the beginning of the third season.

The reality check and accompanying ironic humor of a mobster requiring psychiatric care provides fertile ground for discussion of any number of ideas. Tony is a divided character in many ways. Most obviously, he is divided between his two families.

However, as I will go on to argue, critical to the show is his division between his old-world ideals and values, and his need to operate in the modern world. While he is “old-school” in his gangster-values, he is constantly faced with modern-world choices. Not the least of these is the decision he makes to visit a psychiatrist. Herein lies a great deal of the value of *The Sopranos* for my thesis: the ironic struggle that Tony faces. He has little character himself yet he bemoans the loss of character in others. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, he occasionally realizes his own lack of character—a rather traumatic realization for somebody in his position. It is perhaps through Tony’s self-realization that viewers are able to connect with him. There appears to be a fairly strong connection between character and nostalgia. Specifically, there is nostalgia *for* character, wherein those people who have been surrounded by character-driven lives—Tony growing up in a Mob household for one—become wistful for a time of character. Simply because they do not lead character-driven lives themselves does not mean that they do not long for character.

Literature Review

Character

There is relatively little sociological literature on the specific topic of character. Character revolves around moral decision making. According to Sennett, in a character-driven life moral decisions are made primarily on the basis of long-term goals (1998: 10). Decisions are rooted in loyalty built up through years of commitment. Provided that all individuals or groups in a relationship have mutual respect, even through disagreement, character will create strong interpersonal ties: “Strong bonding between people means

engaging over time their differences. Rico has had literally too little time in each of the places he's lived to experience community..." (Sennett 1998: 143). The individuality that comes along with the corrosion of character is detrimental to the strength of interpersonal relationships.

The relative lack of work on this specific topic may be related to the dominance of Functionalist writing in the early and mid-Twentieth Century. In it, moral decision making was centered on an adherence to a collective code. As long as all members held the same basic norms there would be little societal strife. Alvin Gouldner writes:

For Talcott Parsons the social world is, above all, a moral world, and social morality is a moral reality. It is not what men actually do that is most important to him; these are merely discrepancies...Rather, it is what the group values prescribe they do that constitutes the perspective from which their actual behavior is viewed. (1970: 246)

Thus, the collective is given total supremacy over the individual. The notion of character is so firmly embedded in social morality that actual behavior is secondary. Referring to Durkheim as well as Parsons, Gouldner notes their assumption that if societal members adhere to the same code there will be fewer social problems: "It was, on the other hand, explicitly assumed that shared moral values were a necessary condition for the stability of a society" (Gouldner 1970: 249).

The production of social order was the goal of morality in the Functionalist tradition: "the truly moral was judged by its consequence, its contribution to consensus" (Gouldner 1970: 252). In this there is a degree of fear of change: "The overt commitment to social order is a tacit commitment to resist any change that threatens the order of the status quo, even when that change is sought in the name of the highest values" (Gouldner 1970: 252). This may point to the difficulty that Sennett and others have in accepting the

corrosion of character: the traditional mode of moral production is inherently biased against change. This change may be both the difference in manner of living as well as the more rapid changes that lives which are not character-driven experience.

The morality to which Functionalists expected members to adhere needed to contribute directly to long-term stability: “a concern to maintain social order *through* a reliance upon *morality* requires a distinctive kind of morality, one that maintains the existent patterns of life chances and the institutions through which they are allocated” (Gouldner 1970: 253, emphasis in original). Thus the maintenance of, and adherence to, a moral code will eventually contribute to social stability in all aspects of life.

Morality was further reinforced by state contributions:

Since the moral code of these nations is gravely attenuated and continuously subjected to conflicting interpretations by those differently advantaged, contention concerning the allocation of gratifications cannot be resolved by direct mutual negotiation. The integration of these societies depends increasingly upon the control and mediation of conflicts at the state level. While the state can and does periodically deplore the decline of ‘moral fiber,’ it can mediate these conflicts with instrumental effectiveness...” (Gouldner 1970: 283)

If the members of a society fail to strictly uphold the moral code there needs to be state intervention. This intervention then has a reciprocal effect: the moral code puts great importance on the state and the state then enforces the moral code. The state is able to strengthen itself in this way, even further contributing to long-term stability. This long-term stability is what character takes as useful. The risks to the state, its institutions, and its people are minimized when a standard moral code is in place.

Beyond the Functionalist tradition there is relatively little sociological literature on the topic of character. However, it does remain to some degree implicit in a great deal of writing. For example, the work of Marx is visible in much of Sennett’s writing on

work. Sociology as a discipline revolves around issues of group interaction, and to have a group requires at least some degree of loyalty. Still, the notion that character is a part of moral decision making appears to be relatively untouched. Sennett and Wolfe, in eschewing the strictly Functionalist version of moral decision making, seem to be bringing forth a new branch of sociology.

The Sopranos

Despite its relatively short history, there has been a relatively large amount of academic work done on *The Sopranos*. This literature has covered many disciplines and approaches. The majority of these works employ one of two approaches. One method is to use the show as a backdrop for a discussion without directly focusing on the details of it. In the other portion of the literature the authors provide a thorough examination of one or more particular aspects of the show from their academic perspective.

Perhaps the most exhaustive work on *The Sopranos* does not really fit either of the above molds. In *The Sopranos on the Couch*, Maurice Yacowar gives a complete literary critique of the first three seasons. Coming from a film studies background, he demonstrates that the show uses all the best elements of the gangster film genre and effectively combines them with cutting-edge drama (Yacowar 2002). He asserts that *The Sopranos* is the greatest television program ever, and can thus be effectively compared to great novels (2002:13).

This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos compiles the works of several authors. Each takes a slightly different approach to the show. The book is divided into sections of similar themes, including several articles each on the media context, gender

issues, narrative techniques, and cultural contexts (Lavery 2002: x). The articles primarily come from a viewer perspective, wherein the relevance for individuals is taken into account. For example, Levinson (2002) examines how the placement of *The Sopranos* on the cable network HBO creates a very different experience for the viewer. HBO allows for nudity, swearing, and violence that cannot be shown on network television. This contributes to a much more realistic feel to the program than might otherwise be possible.

As noted, there are numerous works that take *The Sopranos* as a backdrop from which to explore other topics. Included amongst these are Gabbard's *The Psychology of The Sopranos*, wherein he argues that the psychotherapy shown on the program is highly realistic and can be used as a marker for the discussion of psychotherapy as a whole (Gabbard 2002). In *Tony Soprano's America*, David Simon demonstrates that the political and business climate in America is very similar to the Mafia business style (Simon 2002). He argues that violence, intimidation, and low moral standards dominate Modern American business practices. Tony is taken up as a representative figure for the attitudes of powerful contemporary individuals. Seay (2002) pleads nearly the opposite case. He demonstrates that although Tony is a problematic figure, individuals can take lessons from the show that allow for better living. He offers that Tony's good intentions provide a measure of absolution for his sins.

There is a greater body of work, both directly and indirectly on *The Sopranos*, which is not particularly germane to this thesis. This includes primarily includes writing on the gangster genre (see Warshaw 1962; Rosow 1978; Shadoian 2003). While the gangster genre is clearly a very important segment of cinema and television, it is not

necessarily relevant to my discussion. Although some of the major aspects of the genre—loyalty, commitment, and family, for example—speak to Sennett’s notion of character, the Mafia images shown in *The Sopranos* are highly translatable to many work environments. This makes using the genre studies less necessary than they might be otherwise.

Cultural Studies

Fiske and Hartley argue that it is not possible to study television in the same manner as novels. They argue that as a product of modern culture, there is no fully developed language by which we can study television in the same style as literature (2003: 4). Instead, television must be regarded as a separate entity and studied as such. To properly study television one must look at how certain aspects of it are decoded by the viewer (2003: 5).

My examination of *The Sopranos* will make use of a semiotic perspective. Semiotics is the science of how signs work how people use them (Fiske and Hartley 2003: 22). A sign, for example a photograph, can represent many different things to different people. Semiotics investigates how people decode these signs. The degree to which a sign represents a common experience of different people determines the realism of the sign (Fiske and Hartley 2003: 23). Thus, if an image on *The Sopranos* is understood in the same manner by many people it will be understood as a realistic portrayal. However, Fiske and Hartley note that “the signified to which the signifier relates itself is arbitrary, for the way we see it, categorize it and structure it is a result of

our culture's way of seeing" (2003: 23). Therefore, there will always be a culturally determined aspect to the sign.

The use of semiotics in studying television lies in the similarity between watching a program and communicating in "real life." Because both practices involve the decoding of signs, the demarcation between the two activities is not always clear:

...the way we watch television and the way we perceive reality are fundamentally similar, in that they both are determined by conventions or codes. Reality is itself a complex system of signs interpreted by members of the culture in exactly the same way as are films or television programmers. (Fiske and Hartley 2003: 47)

Thus there is a great deal of relevance to studying television shows, as they are responded to by the viewer in much the same way as are normal interactions. Fiske and Harley go on to note that television has even more immediate relevance than do art films because "its codes relate more closely to the normal codes of perception" (2003: 47). Examining television is useful because it is understood in a similar fashion to reality.

There are many examples of the semiotic study of television, and its inherent relation to reality. Ang (1985) looked at the soap opera *Dallas* and the pleasure its viewers took from it. Fiske (1989) responds to this study by noting how the different contexts from which different viewers approach the show will alter their understanding of it. Ang's study uses Dutch viewers, while Fiske notes American viewers would likely react differently to it: "...their readings may be typical of the dedicated audiences, but they were Dutch, and not American, and so they read *Dallas* under social conditions that were quite different from those of its production" (1989: 44). *Dallas* is produced in America, and thus will be understood differently due to the viewer's situation.

In his study of the semiotics of soap operas, Allen (1983) notes that the open-ended nature of the story lines allows for a high degree of viewer connection to the program. There are more possible moments for a viewer to connect (1983: 100). He goes on to discuss five different codes that are at work in soap operas: Video-cinematic codes, codes of the soap opera form, textual codes, intertextual codes, and ideological codes. Each of these contributes to the viewers understanding of the soap opera in a slightly different, but naturally interrelated, manner. For example, the video-cinematic code of

an unmotivated camera movement, which would probably go unnoticed in the average Hollywood film, is such a departure from the norm in soap opera style that its use immediately privileges the content of the shot for the audience—the viewer “reads” this device as “something is about to happen.” (Allen 1983: 100)

So, certain codes present in the show allow the viewer to understand what is about to happen. They are able to decode the unusual camera movement as an attention-getting device. Codes of the soap opera form involve the use of time and space on the program; for example, the prolonging of events that typically would be resolved in a shorter period of time on other shows. Viewers come to understand certain codes as relating to the form of the soap opera (1983: 100). Textual codes refer to the actions and behaviors of characters within the program. As Allen states, “The knowing wink that Joe gives Mary might escape the novice viewer, but it would carry great significance to the experienced viewer” (1983: 101). In his discussion of intertextual codes, Allen notes “the reader is constantly comparing the text under consideration with the encyclopedia of other texts he/she has experienced” (1983: 101). Thus it is useful to examine a given program as a means of connection to other experiences. Finally, ideological codes invoke the viewer’s

own sense of morality: “The viewer constantly compares soap opera actions with ‘what should’ happen in such a situation—what is plausible, veristic, morally correct, etc., not in terms of the soap but in terms of the viewer’s own world of experience and values” (1983: 101).

There are many examples of semiotic studies of television. Essential is the notion that signs present in the show allow the viewer to make sense of the show and relate it to the “real world.” My thesis will make use of the semiotic approach to examine episodes of *The Sopranos*, with a particular regard for character. I will use episodes from the first four seasons¹ of the program using the DVD releases, and take notes on each display of character or lack thereof. Quotations from the program will be used to support the notion that the characters on *The Sopranos* reflect the ideas presented in Sennett and Wolfe. My study will be focused on the individuals on the shows, rather than on particular episodes. Because each episode follows multiple storylines simultaneously, many of which do not include character as a major topic, it would not be productive to dissect entire episodes here. Following characters will be more useful.

Chapter Overview

Chapter two of my thesis will focus on Tony Soprano. As the central focus of the show, much of the action revolves around him. His character—and often lack of character—is displayed in several settings: his family life, his Mafia life, and in his psychotherapy sessions. I will discuss both his character and his reaction to lack of

¹ At the time of this study season five of *The Sopranos* had aired but had not yet been released on DVD and was thus not fully reviewed.

character in others. The ironic tension between his desire for character and his own lack of it will be discussed.

Chapter three will extend the dilemmas of character to Tony's family. Several issues will be examined. These include Carmela's struggles with marital infidelity—both her own, as well how she deals with Tony's. Further, there is Meadow's difficulty as she gets her father to admit to his line of work. Finally, A.J.'s lack of work ethic and commitment are recurring themes on the show.

Chapter four will look at character through several other people in Tony's life. Mobsters Christopher Moltisanti and his crony Brendan Filone exemplify the lack of character that Tony disdains. I will discuss Dr. Melfi's struggles to maintain a high moral ground after she is brutally raped. Finally, Tony's capo Silvio Dante and advisor Hesh Rabkin have perhaps the firmest grasps on the implications of character of all people on the show.

The last chapter will summarize the arguments of the earlier chapters, and combine them into a conclusion about the state of character. Particular attention will be paid to the situation that presents itself on *The Sopranos*: the potential downside of moral freedom that does not appear in Wolfe's writing. This will bring back a discussion of the corrosion of character.

Chapter II—No Room for the Penal Experience

Character is a central aspect of Tony Soprano's life. This chapter will explore some of the major facets of character, as seen through Tony's eyes. I will look at both the positive and negative aspects of it, as well as some points in which Tony himself displays either character, or a lack thereof.

Early in the first episode of *The Sopranos*, Tony lays out the problem of character:

I been thinking, it's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that, I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over...I think about my father, he never reached the heights, like me. But in a lot of ways he had it better. He had his people, they had their standards, they had pride. Today, whadda we got? (1001)²

Character, at its most basic, is about the values of loyalty, commitment, and hard work. Beyond this, it can be very difficult to define conclusively. Tony indicates in the above quotation that, in the past "they had their standards, they had pride." He refers to people's appreciation for their work, specifically Mafiosi. Tony puts a high value on pride in one's work. Tony is upset because he feels that the younger members of the Mob do not have this pride. He grew up around mobsters, and retrospectively sees them as more committed to their work than his current accomplices.

² I use the HBO production codes to refer to episodes. The first digit refers to the season, and the last two to the episode. Thus, 1001 is season 1, episode 1. 5012 would be season 5, episode 12.

The work in which gangsters take pride is, of course, very different from mainstream work. With Mob work comes a unique set of values. Tony has little difficulty with his criminal activity, and instead is more troubled by transgressions of the code of silence—the *omertà*—by his associates:

Dr. Melfi: Do you have any qualms about how you actually make a living?

Tony: Yeah. I find I have to be the sad clown, laughing on the outside, crying on the inside. See, things are trending downward. Used to be, a guy got pinched, he took his prison jolt no matter what. Everybody upheld the code of silence. Nowadays, no values. Guys today have no room for the penal experience. So everybody turns government witness. Feel exhausted just talking about it.
(1001)

When Dr. Melfi inquires as to whether or not he has reservations about his work, he does not indicate that being a criminal is troublesome *per se*. Rather, he is upset because his fellow mobsters are more likely to turn on one another. He does not respond to Dr. Melfi's question as she likely intended it, perhaps indicating that he really sees nothing wrong with his occupation. Tony was raised in a Mafia household. He was taught from an early age that certain things were acceptable, and others not. His father, like Tony, did not have much trouble with how he made a living. In a flashback, an eleven year-old Tony has just witnessed his father chopping off a man's finger over a gambling debt. Later his father takes Tony on his knee and states:

What you seen today, Anthony, was a very sad thing. You disobeyed your old man, and I oughtta give you the belt. But I gotta say, a lot of boys your age woulda run like a little girl. But you stayed. I know you like Mr. Satriale, we all do, he's a lovely man. But the man is a gambler. He got over his head in debt, he owed me money and he refused to pay. He avoided me. That's why you should never gamble, Anthony. What was I supposed to do? That's my livelihood. It's how I put food on the table. You should never gamble, Anthony. Let this be a lesson to you: A man honors his debts. (3003)

Tony's father imparted upon him that gambling was wholly immoral act, and justifies his own use of horrible violence. He paints the victim as being the transgressor for not honoring his debts. Further, he praises Tony for staying and watching the incident; being a "man." So, Tony was raised to believe that gambling, and the outstanding debts that come with it, is one of most immoral acts a person can commit. Indeed, for all of Tony's other faults, he avoids gambling. The problem here, in terms of Tony's character, is that he is not above promoting other's gambling. He regularly runs card games off of which he makes vast sums of money. He lends money to gamblers, and then turns violent when they are unable to pay him. In a scene from the pilot episode, Tony chases a man with an outstanding gambling debt. After hitting the man with a car and breaking his leg, Tony proceeds to pummel him mercilessly. What is particularly noteworthy about this scene, apart from its brutality, is the focus of his disgust. He does not appear to have any qualms about beating a man to within inches of his life, even with a crowd of on-lookers. Instead, he screams at the man for not paying the respect that Tony feels he is due: "You know what you should get? A cork in your fucking mouth, because you tell people I'm nothing compared to the guys that used run things!" (1001) Further, as he walks away he refers to the man as a "degenerate fucking gambler" (1001). This statement only seems partially directed towards the man, but also to the crowd that has gathered. It is as if Tony is trying to justify his violence by letting people know that the man had gambling debts. His sense of morality is such that being a gambler is more offensive than beating a man.

Tony's attitude towards gambling is indicative of his moral code as a whole. In his view, an individual's moral standing is not based on what they do, but how they do it.

As long as someone operates by a certain code of honor, their actions are forgiven. This becomes clear through Tony's dealings with his high school friend David Scatino.

Scatino incurs a massive gambling debt with Tony. When he is unable to repay his debt, he offers Tony his son Eric's car as partial payment. For Tony, it does not matter that they were once friends. He readily accepts the vehicle, and even offers it as a gift to his daughter Meadow. When Meadow refuses the gift, it leads to this exchange:

Tony: She don't want it? Fine. Don't take it. But I'll eat it before I give it back.
What am I, a sucker?

Meadow: What does Eric have to do with his asshole father? He didn't do anything to you!

Tony: The guy owed me money, and he did the right thing and offered that car up as partial payment.

Meadow: Yeah, right.

Tony (to Carmela): You see this? You see this? This is you talking.

Carmela: Just hope you know his wife is very close to the brother-in-law of the provost at Georgetown.

Tony: Who?

Meadow: Oh great.

Tony: Go ahead, you wanna act holier-than-thou? You go right ahead, but I'm not giving it back. I'm gonna take that car, and I'm gonna sell it to Pussy. Then I'm gonna buy clothes and food and shoes and CD players and all the rest of the shit that I've been buying since the day you were born. Everything this family has comes from the work I do!

Carmela: Alright Tony, that's enough.

Tony: A grown man made a wager, he lost. He made another one, he lost again. End of story. So take that high moral ground and go sleep in the fucking bus station if you want!

(2006)

Tony defends his decision to accept the car on his own moral terms, even as he berates his daughter for her moral stance. Scatino had mended what could have become a serious problem by offering the vehicle in lieu of money. For Tony, that was enough. The offense, in Tony's view, is not the loan sharking that put Scatino in debt. Rather, the debt itself was the offense. This is exactly the morality he was taught by his father.

The situation with David Scatino reveals a duality in Tony's criminal nature. Although Tony is more than willing to accept Scatino's payment, and likely would have been willing to injure him if payment was not made, he had initially tried to keep Scatino out of the poker game that led to the debt:

David: You know me, I like to play a little.

Tony: A little? Forget it. This game's not for you.

David: Nah, uh, it's just, you know, I was just thinking, it'd be a kick.

Tony: David, you're a nice guy, I like you, okay? But trust me, this game's not for you. I don't want to see you get hurt. These guys, they play deep.

David: You know how many jock straps I sold last week?

Tony: Not enough for this game. Okay? Forget it.
(2006)

At first, Tony has no interest in letting a friend incur a debt with him. While the prospect of money is still somewhat distant, Tony is able to keep to a high moral standard. However, when the time of the poker game arrived and Scatino again asked to join, Tony relented. The chance that he may lose a friend is outweighed by his motivation to do business.

Tony's moral positions are based, by-and-large, in the old-school Mafia values that he learned growing up. Thus, he takes the *omertà* very seriously. The Mafia rule

that is meant to ensure that members do not testify against one another seeps its way into other facets of his life. Tony believes that problems should be solved on one's own, with little or no outside interference. The irony is that *The Sopranos* revolves around his meetings with his psychotherapist, Dr. Melfi. Even with doctor-patient confidentiality, sharing stories of criminal activities is clearly a violation of the *omertà*. In his first meeting with Dr. Melfi, Tony explains his respect for silence:

Lemme tell you something. Nowadays, everybody's gotta go to shrinks and counselors and go on Sally Jessy Raphael and talk about their problems. What ever happened to Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type. That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings, he just did what he had to do. See, what they didn't know was once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelings they wouldn't be able to shut him up. And then it's dysfunction this, and dysfunction that, and dysfunction *ah va fungool*. (1001)

In Tony's view, having character includes having the internal strength to deal with problems on one's own. He expresses a feeling that the world—or at least America—would be a better place if people kept things to themselves. Indeed, this is how the Mafia is intended to operate. However, Tony has a certain degree of pragmatism. Despite having one foot firmly planted in a character-driven world, he realizes that he needs professional help. This juxtaposition creates much of both the drama and the humor of *The Sopranos*.

For a character-driven life, it is a sign of weakness to not be able to set aside personal problems. Strong moral resolve—if even to a rather warped moral code—is a central feature of character. As the Gary Cooper speech expressed, it is essential to be strong and silent. I do not think it would be a stretch to say that Tony envisions himself as the white-hatted cowboy, coming to save the day. Note the earlier conversation with David Scatino, wherein he tried to steer his friend away from possible trouble. In the

speech to Meadow regarding the Scatino's vehicle, he portrays himself as the savior of his family thanks to his substantial income. However, a great deal of the appeal of *The Sopranos* stems from this type of situation. Tony believes in character. He feels that rugged individualism, tempered with maintenance and cohesion of the group, is the optimal way to live one's life. Nevertheless, he operates in a world in which character is not always the best plan. The obvious difficulty is that the Mafia is a criminal organization. It is all but impossible to maintain a black-and-white moral sensibility while earning a living via crime. Returning to the Scatino situation, Tony eventually succumbed to David's pressure and not only allowed him into the poker game, but lent him \$45000 (2006). His criminal occupation simply does not permit him to be inflexible. If Tony wants to maintain the lifestyle to which he and his family have become accustomed, he must employ a degree of moral self-justification. His desire to provide for his family directly conflicts with his desire to shelter Scatino. In the end, one must be given moral precedence over the other. Of course, also at play here is a certain amount of simple greed. However, that serves to further reinforce the point of Tony's conflict: he tries to live a morally definite life, in a world that demands situational morality.

The Scatino situation also reinforces Tony's respect for individuals capable of being strong and independent. When David finally convinced Tony to let him join the game, he did not convince him by assuring him he could cover any debts; Tony likely knew he wouldn't be able to. Rather, David addressed the fact that he is an adult, and capable of being responsible for his own difficulties:

David: All kidding aside, I appreciate your position, but c'mon Tony, I'm a big boy.

Tony: What're you holding?

David: Well, I didn't really expect to gamble tonight...

Tony: You need 5 G's just to sit in this game.

David: Ah, c'mon! Can't you float me, you know, short-term?

Tony: Hey, don't say short if you don't mean short. All kidding aside. You understand what I'm saying to you?

David: Yeah, of course. You don't have to explain business to me.
(2006)

Part of character is a willingness to accept responsibility for one's actions. When David assures Tony that he realizes the magnitude of the debt he will be incurring, Tony allows him to play. Tony's appreciation for David's claim that he is "a big boy" reflects his father's praise for not running away "like a little girl" when Tony witnessed the attack on Mr. Satriale. Presumably, if the player in question had not been an old friend of Tony's, he would have more readily allowed him in the game.

The long-term result of the Scatino incident is predictable, if not still disturbing. Tony and his crew take over David's sporting-goods store and drive it into the ground. When Tony discovers David sleeping in a tent in the store, David asks him why he allowed him into the game. Tony replies:

Well, I knew you had this business here David. It's my nature, the frog and the scorpion, you know? Besides, if you woulda won, I'd be the one crying the blues, right?...[David begins crying]...The end, it's declaring bankruptcy. Hey, you're not the first guy to get busted out. This is how a guy like me makes a living. This is my bread and butter. When this is over, you're free to go. You can go wherever the fuck you want. Oh, for Christ's sake. [walks away]
(2010)

After having been friends for years, Tony's resolute belief that he must earn his living override any friendship they once had. Further, David's crying only served to

make him a weaker and more pathetic individual in Tony's eyes. He has gone from sheltering his friend to destroying his life. Yet, at some level, Tony seems to believe there is nothing wrong with what he is doing, and David is actually the one in the wrong: he is a weak man.

Tony's lack of respect for gamblers is tied to his high esteem for hard work. He has little patience for people who are not willing to commit fully to their occupation. In the Mafia, this commitment not only means a strong work ethic, but a devotion that puts the Family above all else—including one's family. While this may be a more extreme situation, it is much the same as Enrico's dedication to his work in The Corrosion of Character. Despite few opportunities for advancement, Enrico stayed at his job his entire adult life. He never sought other positions. Contrast this with his son Rico, who switched jobs on a fairly regular basis. Certainly, some of the difference in the approaches to work between Enrico and Rico can be attributed to Rico's desire to "get ahead." However, a great deal of it comes from loyalty. Enrico showed loyalty to his company, and the company was loyal to him. Rico and his employers display little loyalty to each other, and changing jobs becomes almost routine.

The Mafia demands a great deal more commitment and loyalty than Enrico's janitorial position, but the outcome is much the same: if the individual respects the group, the group will take care of the individual. Tony displays this attitude on numerous occasions. Most often, these issues of loyalty revolve around his nephew, and soldier, Christopher. Coming from a younger generation than Tony, Christopher has not had the lessons of character driven into him to the same extent. Tony sees in Christopher a great

deal of potential, but is frustrated by what he feels is a lack of total commitment to his work. This is displayed in the first scene featuring Christopher, who has just picked Tony up for work in the morning:

Tony [narrating off screen]: I drove to work with my nephew Christopher. He's one in the business. Now he's an example of what I was talking about before.³

Tony: Did you call, whatshisname, down at Triborough Towers, about the hauling contract?

Christopher: I got home too late last night, didn't want to wake the man up.

Tony: Did you get up early this morning and call? He's always in his office by six.

Christopher: I was nauseous this morning. My mother told me I shouldn't even come in today.

Tony [narrating]: Bear in mind that this is a kid who just bought himself a \$60000 Lexus.
(1001)

Tony is put off by what he sees as Christopher's lack of drive and ambition. He views Christopher's nausea as an excuse for not doing work. Later, when Christopher offers to "see what he can do" about the situation, Tony condescendingly asks "You sure, you over your stomachache?" (1001)

Christopher's lack of commitment to work, and its impact upon Tony, is most strikingly viewed through his Hollywood ambitions. Christopher aspires to be a screenwriter. This upsets Tony for two reasons. First, there is the risk of violation of the *omertà*. Christopher wants to write a Mafia story for Hollywood, which could lead to secrets being divulged. Second, his having outside interests shows that he may not be

³ This comment is in reference to Tony's speech quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

fully committed to Tony and his crew. This situation first arises at the close of the first episode, as Christopher is seeking praise for his handling of the hauling contract:

Tony: Alright, enough of this shit. What's wrong with you?

Christopher: You know, a simple 'way to go, Chris' on the Triborough Towers contract would've been nice, that's it.

Tony: You're right. You're right. I have no defense. That's the way I was parented, never supported. Never complimented.

Christopher: You know, my cousin Gregory's girlfriend is what they call a development girl out in Hollywood, right. She said I could sell my life story, make fuckin' millions. I didn't do that, I stuck it out with you.

[At this point Tony physically attacks him]

Tony: I'll fucking kill you. What're you gonna do, go Henry Hill on me now? You know how many mobsters have been selling screenplays and screwing everything up?

Christopher: She said I could maybe even play myself.

Tony: Oh yeah? [releases Christopher, speaks more softly and compassionately] Forget Hollywood screenplays, forget those distractions. You think I haven't had offers? You got work to do. New avenues. Everything's gonna be alright from here on in.

(1001)

For Tony, the mere mention of the possibility of Christopher selling his story sends him into a rage. The idea that he may violate the code of silence prompts him to even utter a death threat, and one that may not be as idle as it seems: in episode 1005 he brutally murders a man who had turned against the Mafia. He goes on to tell Christopher to "forget those distractions...you got work to do." Christopher displays a lack of character by not being fully committed to Tony. Tony reassures him that as long as he commits completely to the Mafia, all his problems will be taken care of. While Enrico's

particular circumstances are certainly different from these, the lesson is much the same: If you are loyal to the company, the company will be loyal to you.

The situation with Christopher and his screenplay comes to a head in the second season, when he meets his cousin Gregory's girlfriend Amy, the development girl he mentioned. Tony learns that Christopher has been in discussion with Amy regarding production of the screenplay. When Christopher arrives late to Anthony Jr.'s confirmation party, Tony confronts him:

Tony: Where the fuck you been?

Christopher [hands Tony an envelope]: This is for A.J.

Tony: I got one son, and you miss his confirmation ceremony?

Christopher: I figure, with all my sins I don't want the church caving in on anyone. [sees his girlfriend, who ignores him] On the fuckin' rag again.

Tony: No, I'm on the rag. She's just wondering where the fuck you are.

Christopher: No lectures, Tony. I'm really not in the mood.

Tony: I agree. I'm gonna go back in there and be with my guests. Exactly ten minutes I'm gonna look up, and if you're not here I'm gonna assume that you went to look for whatever the fuck it is that's calling you out there, and I will never see you again. If you are still here, then I'm gonna assume that you got no other desire in the world but to be with me, and your actions will show me that every fucking second of every fucking day. Now, you understand me? Don't answer me. Take the ten minutes. You think about it.
(2007)

Tony demands and expects total commitment from his men. Any wavering in their loyalty is viewed as no loyalty at all. Because the organized crime world is such an inherently risky business, it requires—or at least Tony requires—its members to display a loyalty above and beyond that of most non-criminal occupations. The above scene closes with Christopher returning to Tony after the ten minutes, and the screenplay is

never an issue again. Christopher learned his lesson in character: loyalty is a virtue. He is rewarded for his loyalty in season three when he is finally “made,” that is, becomes a full-fledged member of the Mafia. The ceremony that Tony conducts to induct Christopher provides a final example of the importance placed upon loyalty. He lights an image of St. Peter on fire and says “As this cards burns, so may your soul burn in hell if you betray your friends in the Family” (3003). For a Catholic, such a statement carries serious weight.

For all of Tony’s other faults, he is fiercely loyal. Other than some unusual situations, such as the Scatino incident, he won’t betray his friends and family. Through all of his problems, he maintains his pride, at least by his standards. For example, he regularly keeps a *goomah*—a girlfriend—on the side. This would seem to be a violation of marriage vows, particularly since he is a Catholic. But he repeatedly denies to his wife having affairs. There is a degree of justification at work here. It is commonplace for the Mafiosi to keep mistresses, and is essentially common knowledge among their wives. However, part of their character insists that they deny it, as though it becomes acceptable when refuted.

There are many other possible examples of Tony’s character, and lack thereof. He lives in the same general area—Northern New Jersey—in which he grew up, although he moved from a middle-class urban area to a wealthy suburb. His friends are the same people he grew up with: as children he, Silvio, and Big Pussy aspired to reach the Mafia together. He puts his family--both biological and Mafia--above all else. Yet, a great deal of the conflict in the show comes from his interactions with biological family members. A striking example of this is his ongoing feud with his mother, which persisted up until

her death. Her negativity and lack of parenting skills were a major reason why Tony entered counseling. Yet, as she became less and less able to take care of herself, Tony continues to try to help her. Eventually he places her, via power of attorney, in a retirement home (1002). She is so upset by this that she attempts to have him killed at the end of the first season. Tony then spends much of the second season uttering “she’s dead to me” whenever his mother is mentioned. Despite all of this, when she dies early in season three, Tony is not only distraught, but feels like a bad son (3002). Regardless of how difficult things become, Tony’s understanding of “having character” is to place family above all else.

In his speech early in the first episode Tony bemoans the lack of pride and standards today. *The Sopranos* is rife with examples of both individuals with character and without. Part of what is appealing about the show is that they are flawed individuals. The characters are well-developed enough that almost everyone displays some degree of moral freedom. They want what is best for the family, over the long-term. They attempt to be committed, loyal, and hard-working. However, examples of the failure of character can be found everywhere. Tony, as the central figure, is the prime exemplar of this duality. He wants a character-driven world, both for himself and for others, but it is not always possible. The difficult situations that he encounters force him to make difficult moral choices. Nevertheless, what matters is that there is still some moral orientation at work. When Tony accepts Scatino’s vehicle as payment, he sees it not as a detriment to Scatino’s family, but as a benefit to his own family. As much as he may come off as a cruel mobster, in the end Tony is usually trying to do the right thing—similar to what Wolfe calls moral freedom.

Tony's moral choices are very similar to moral freedom. However, there is a sense of parody at work. His difficult decisions, which often have brutal consequences display a dark side of moral freedom that can best be termed parody. When moral freedom is the dominant form of moral orientation in a society, there are bound to be individuals making choices that have negative outcomes. The individual may still be upholding their moral code, which may even be very honorable position. As with Tony and Scatino, some sensible moral choices can lead to terrible outcomes. *The Sopranos* takes morally free positions to such an extreme that it becomes a parody of moral freedom. Likewise, character is taken to such an extreme that it too becomes parodic. The Mafia as whole provides an example of this. It is so entrenched in the ideals of character that it is a parody of character. The individualism, strength, and adherence to silence are all over-the-top exaggerations of character.

Understanding much of what is shown on *The Sopranos* as parody opens up our understanding of the relevance of the show for the viewer. By exaggerating the moral issues, *The Sopranos* becomes a vehicle for moral reflection. The viewer can read from the show the implications of moral decisions. Certainly, few people are faced with the types of decisions that Tony makes. However, that is precisely where the parody is useful. It allows people to see striking examples, and use that to consider their own moral orientations.

Chapter III – I Don't Condone It

As character is a central feature of Tony's life, by extension it is a central feature in the lives of his family. A family headed by a patriarch who believes so firmly in character—whatever that may mean—is bound to operate in much the same way. In this chapter I will explore some of the issues of character presented by Tony's biological family members. It is important to realize that it is difficult to extract Tony's biological family from his Mafia Family. Many of his crime partners are related to him: His nephew Christopher, uncle Junior, and numerous in-laws and cousins are all Mafiosi. Likewise, because Tony's work is so ingrained in who he is, his immediate biological family—none of whom are in the Mafia—are drawn into the criminal element. This chapter will focus on his three nuclear family members: his wife Carmela, daughter Meadow, and son Anthony Jr. (A.J.).

Carmela

The interest of Carmela's sense of character revolves primarily around her attempts to hold the family together. Character is based on long-term goals, and is thus well-served by enduring institutions. In many cases, divorce is not a hallmark of character. It is difficult to imagine Enrico divorcing his wife after years of marriage. On the other hand, knowing Rico's life-course, it would not be surprising if he were to get divorced. Carmela's desire to hold her marriage and family together is based largely on her devotion to the Catholic church. The notion that divorce is a sin is ingrained deeply

enough in her that she is often willing to overlook her husband's indiscretions. Tony's criminal earnings and his philandering are both major stressors on Carmela's sense of character.

Throughout the series there are numerous examples of Carmela's awareness of Tony's adultery. Carmela's reaction varies from incident to incident, however there is always a sense of reluctant acceptance. She knew what she was getting into when she married a Mafioso. It is not a surprise to her that he has girlfriends. She only seems to have a real difficulty with them when they intrude into her life. As long as the other women are hidden away from view, it is acceptable. There is, though, an air of suspicion that surrounds all of Tony's interactions with women. Carmela comes to assume that any woman in his life to whom he is not related is a girlfriend. Because of this, Tony hid the fact that his therapist is a woman from her. When Dr. Melfi calls the house to cancel an appointment while Tony is away, Carmela finds out. At the time, the priest, Father Phil, was visiting her. Hanging up the phone, she states:

Carmela: Why does he have to lie? Why couldn't he tell me his therapist is a woman? What is he hiding?

Father Phil: maybe he did tell you, and you didn't hear him clearly.

Carmela: Oh, please. Why wouldn't he tell me his therapist is a woman unless he's screwing her?

Father Phil: Carmela, please.

Carmela: I thought he was changing. Thought therapy was gonna help clear up the fucking freak show in his head.
(1005)

Carmela's assumption is that Tony has slipped again, and is carrying on another affair. However, as this scene plays out, she ends up simply shaking her head and noting

“Ah, shit. Why go into it?” (1005) She knows that Tony is unlikely to change, yet she is unwilling to do anything about it, at least in terms of repairing the marriage.

An interesting point to come out of this scene is that it marks the first in a series of near-affairs. Tony’s adultery is disturbing to her, but not enough so that she is willing to leave him.⁴ Father Phil ends up staying with Carmela after the above incident, and after some wine and a movie, they very nearly kiss. They are halted only by Father Phil’s need to vomit. This episode begins a trend in which Carmela responds to Tony’s indiscretions by pursuing men. Although she is not willing to get a divorce, she is willing to have some sort of payback. There are two significant differences between her infidelities and Tony’s. First, hers are in response to Tony’s; that is, she feels betrayed by him, and is seeking a way back at him. Second, she never actually has an affair. All three times she was attracted to another man something occurred to end it before it started. After Father Phil recovered from his illness, wiser heads prevailed and nothing further occurred. In episode 2010, she kisses a contractor working on the Sopranos’ house. However, when the contractor learns who her husband is, he quickly calls it off. Her final near-affair came when an attraction built between her and Tony’s soldier Furio. It ended before it started: Tony found out about the attraction, and Furio was forced to flee back to his native Italy.

Carmela’s attempts at affairs are perhaps understandable, given her situation. She is woman who believes strongly in character, yet she is in a marriage with a man for whom fidelity is a difficult thing. However, she still strives to remain faithful to Tony. She wants the best for her marriage and her family. A conversation she has with Father

⁴ Note that this changes in the final episode of season four, and continues through most of season five. However, as noted in chapter one, as it was difficult to properly review season five I will not be addressing that situation here.

Phil after their night together reveals a great deal about her attitude towards Tony's girlfriends, and his relationship with Dr. Melfi:

Carmela: What's killing me is that this is a self-inflicted wound. I pushed for it. I could deal with the *goomahs*, I knew I was better than them. As stupid as it sounds, I viewed them as a form of masturbation for him. I couldn't give him what he needed all the time. You're a man, Father, you know that thirst. I was too busy with the house and the kids to quench it. But this psychiatrist, she's not just a *goomah*. For the first time, I feel like he's really cheating, and I'm the one who's thirsty. I'm not gonna stay in a marriage that's—

Father Phil: Shh, shh. Let's not even think about that. Divorce is for the weak, for people who never intended on dying married in the first place. You know Carm, we reap what we sow.

Carmela: What do you mean?

Father Phil: You admit to accepting his dalliances in the past.

Carmela: They meant nothing to Tony.

Father Phil: But you said it's like they were lightening the workload. Providing a wife's duty while you were too busy with the kids and the house. You practically welcomed it.

(1006)

For Carmela, there is a qualitative difference between his affairs with *goomahs* and his relationship with Dr. Melfi, presumably because he confides in his therapist. That is what she finds disloyal: that he would speak privately, and presumably intimately even if not sexually, with another woman. The flaw she sees in Tony's character is not in his rampant libido. Indeed, she simply chalks that up to his being a man. Rather, the character flaw parallels what Tony sees as a character flaw: taking one's problems outside of the smallest group possible. In a similar fashion to the Mafiosi belief that problems should be solved without bringing in outsiders, Carmela feels imposed upon by

Dr. Melfi. While any woman could provide Tony with his sexual release, only one woman seems capable of getting him to open-up emotionally. Naturally, Carmela feels threatened by this.

Another major facet of Carmela's relationship with Tony is her reaction to his criminal activity. Although the subject is not raised particularly often, there are poignant results when it is. She is fully aware that her husband is a vicious criminal. She knows that everything in her lavish home was purchased with ill-gotten gains. However, by-and-large, her desire for a nice home and lifestyle for her family outweighs any misgivings she may have. An excellent example of this comes in episode 1008. Tony learns that there may be Federal indictments coming, so he and all the other gangsters must clear any evidence out of their houses. As Tony is searching the house for evidence, he hands it all to Carmela, who stuffs it into a large bag. As she dutifully fills the bag with cash and firearms, he asks for her jewelry:

Tony: Alright, you better gimme your jewelry.

Carmela: [sighs, and begins to remove earrings] Jesus.

Tony: Hey, they know we can't produce receipts, you want them stealing this shit from us? [He motions towards her ring] C'mon.

Carmela: I'm not giving you my engagement ring, this isn't stolen. [Tony pauses] Is it?

Tony: [clearly lying] No, what do you think I am?
(1008)

Carmela realizes that almost everything their family owns comes from criminal activity. She accepts that, on the basis of her desire for material goods. However, when the prospect comes up that Tony may have stolen her engagement ring, that may be going too far. She wants to believe that there is a line that Tony will not cross; that there is a

some moral standard to which he will adhere. In the end, she turns the ring over with little protest. Not only does she accept that it was stolen, in all likelihood she was aware of it the entire time.

There are times when Carmela has trouble dealing with Tony's crimes. In the episode discussed earlier in which she nearly kissed Father Phil, she cries as she confesses to him:

Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. It has been four weeks since my last confession what am I walking about? That's a lie. I haven't truly confessed in twenty years. I have forsaken what is right for what is easy, allowing what I know is evil in my house. Allowing my children, my God, my sweet children, to be a part of it. Because I wanted things for them. A better life, good schools. I wanted this house. Wanted money in my hands, money to buy anything I ever wanted. I'm so ashamed. My husband, I think he has committed horrible acts. I think he has, well you know all about him Father Phil. I'm the same. I've said nothing, I've done nothing about it. I got a bad feeling. It's just a matter of time before God compensates me with outrage for my sins.
(1005)

Carmela is fully aware of Tony's criminality. She believes that through her acceptance of the proceeds of his crimes, she is a sinner as well. This sums up Carmela's moral conundrum nicely: she wants the best for her family, and is willing to do whatever it takes to get it. This is her dilemma of moral freedom. She is faced with a choice between blood money and the lifestyle she wants, particularly for her children. Were she completely devoid of character, she would probably not experience this as a problem. Instead, whatever is best for her at this moment would be her choice. Instead, she is committed to her family. The possible consequences for her lifestyle—especially the supernatural consequences—weigh heavily on her.

Carmela's confession provides another example of parody on *The Sopranos*. She is giving a confession to drunk priest, whom she is on the verge of kissing. The

ridiculousness of this situation helps the viewer to reflect on his own moral freedom, even as it provides a parody of moral freedom. Carmela has chosen this life for herself in a case of moral freedom. It is left to the viewer to realize the full implication of the choices that are made in everyday life. The consequences of moral freedom are brought forth through parody.

Anthony Jr.

A.J. serves a role very similar role to Christopher on *The Sopranos*.. They both lack character, although A.J. more so. Of all the individuals on the show, A.J. has the least character. Perhaps this should not be surprising, as he is the youngest major role. He has had the shortest time to develop a sense of the long-term. He rarely commits to anything, and rarely works hard. Predictably, this is a thorn in Tony's side.

The difficulty in discussing problems with A.J.'s character is simply his youth. Most of his violations can be considered—and by his father, are—a kid acting just like a kid. There are moments, however, when A.J.'s nascent understanding of his father's occupation is evident. When this occurs it becomes more apparent that he realizes that some institutions are meant to be respected, and that disrespecting those institutions—in this case his father's work—can give him ammunition in a dispute. For example, in 1007 A.J. gets caught after stealing and getting drunk on the sacramental wine from his school. While this is certainly not a good thing, his parents are prepared to write it off as a youthful indiscretion, if not a serious one. However, at the family dinner that night, A.J.'s understanding of the hypocrisy of being punished by a criminal is seen:

Livia: It's a crime, suspending that child from school , with all the money you give them.

Junior: I'll bet that gym teacher shit a brick when your little friend puked on his boots.

Tony: Wanna encourage him Uncle Jun?

Junior: Hey, whatever happened to 'boys will be boys?'

Carmela: He stole from the church. They don't make them any lower than that.

Meadow: What a loser.

Carmela: That's enough out of you

Livia: Oh, his father was the same way. I practically lived in that vice-principal's office.

Tony: Can we not, please?

Livia: You only remember what you wanna remember. Well, I must've had another son who stole a car when he was ten years old. Yeah, he could barely see over the steering wheel.

Junior: He was a hellion, this one. Him and his little crew. They used to steal watches on the boats down on the shore and sell them for a buck a piece down on Bloomfield avenue.

A.J.: Really?

Tony: How many times do I gotta say this, I don't want that kinda talk in front of this kid. That stuff is wrong, and I don't condone it.

A.J. [sarcastically] Yeah, sure. [at this point Carmela and Tony become furious, and dinner breaks up] (1007)

There is a great deal going on in this conversation. Primarily, in the last line is A.J.'s reaction to Tony's anger. He may not be fully aware of the extent of his father's work, but he knows enough to realize that Tony is being hypocritical. Tony provides for the family via crime, yet he claims to not condone it. Interestingly, this may be true. For the rest of this episode he struggles with how and when he should tell A.J. about his business. Although this crisis of character is not A.J.'s per se, it certainly revolves around him. Like Enrico, Tony wants the best for his children. He wants them to exceed

his accomplishments. Although the Mafia has been good to him—after all, they live a lavish lifestyle—he is reticent to have his son follow in his footsteps. This is particularly interesting considering that Tony’s father was a Mafioso. It is not easy for him justify keeping his son out his field when the Mob is so wrapped up in everything Tony does.

A.J. is a teenager. As such, his sense of character is not well formed. However, as a teenager—and one diagnosed as ADD—he is not terribly interested in issues of character. It is this disinterest that is most troubling to Tony. If A.J. displayed any commitment or work ethic, his parents would not perceive a crisis of character. Because he is unwilling, or unable, to maintain long-term commitments, the crises of character are felt by his parents.

A.J. may represent something quite ominous for Tony. A.J. seems to be Tony, completely devoid of character. As noted, he lacks the values with which Tony was raised. He does not value hard work or commitment. Tony finds this so difficult because he sees in A.J. so much of himself. Tony fears what may happen to A.J. as he grows up because to some degree Tony is aware of what he would be like if he lacked character. An example of this awareness comes when Tony and Carmela are finding out from the school psychologist that A.J. may have A.D.D. The psychologist lists off a number of A.J.’s traits: trouble following rules, difficulty weighing consequences, and not thinking before he acts. As each item is mentioned, the camera focuses on Tony shifting uncomfortably in his chair (1007). Both Tony and the viewer are aware that all of these things apply to him as well. The psychologist may as well be listing off Tony’s traits. Tony wants the best for his family. It is very scary for him to realize that his son is so like him, but may not have character.

Meadow

Meadow is a contemporary college student, raised with old values. As such, she provides both a contrast to the sometimes-archaic values of the rest of the family, while reinforcing those values herself. Her role on the show is therefore quite unique. She is disgusted by her father's old-school views, particularly his racism. Like her mother, she is willing to overlook her father's flaws when it comes to money. Her tastes are not as lavish as her parents, but she does attend Columbia University. She has no qualms about accepting tuition and spending money from ill-gotten gains.

Her acceptance of Tony's work goes back to when her suspicions about it were first confirmed. On a car trip to see various colleges she might attend, Meadow confronts her father:

Meadow: Are you in the Mafia?

Tony: Am I in the what?

Meadow: Whatever you wanna call it, organized crime?

Tony: That's total crap. Who told you that?

Meadow: Dad, I've lived in the house all my life. I've seen police come with warrants, I've seen you go out at three in the morning.

Tony: You've never seen Doc Cusamano go out at three in the morning on a call?

Meadow: Did the Cusamano kids ever find \$50,000 in Krugerrands and a .45 automatic while they were hunting for Easter eggs?

Tony: I'm in the waste management business. Everybody immediately assumes you're mobbed up. It's a stereotype. And it's offensive. And you're the last person I would want to perpetuate it.

Meadow: Fine.

Tony: There is no Mafia. Alright look, Mead, you're a grown woman. Almost. Some of my money comes from illegal gambling and whatnot. How does that make you feel?

Meadow: At least you don't keep denying it, like Mom. Kids in school think it's actually kinda neat.

Tony: They seen *The Godfather*, right?

Meadow: Not really. *Casino* we like, Sharon Stone, the 70's clothes, pills...

Tony: I'm not asking about those bums. I'm asking about you.

Meadow: Sometimes I wish you were like other dads. But then, like... Mr. Scangarelo for example? An advertising executive for big tobacco. Or lawyers? So many dads are full of shit.

Tony: Oh, and I'm not.

Meadow: You finally told the truth about this.
(1005)

Meadow is remarkable unconcerned by her father's profession. To a large extent she was already aware. Still, she remains unfazed when he confirms her suspicions. What is interesting is her pragmatic response. She compares her father's work favorably with that of Mr. Scangarelo. In her view, an advertiser for tobacco is worse than a Mafioso. Indeed, Mr. Scangarelo is probably responsible for more deaths than is Tony. The difference of course is the legitimacy of the respective work. Tony's falls outside of the law, which would typically make it the less acceptable occupation. However, Meadow is able to look past the surface and see that Tony's profession may actually less offensive than the tobacco promoter.

In a more character-driven moment, she is impressed by her father's candor. As she was mostly certain of his Mafia connections beforehand, all she really wanted from this encounter was confirmation. When she gets it she is happy, and compares him

favorably with Carmela. Her mother's denial bothers her, and her father's admittance satisfies her. This displays the character she has: She respects honesty to such a degree that her father's profession doesn't upset her.

Meadow's moral stance is the closest to moral freedom of any of the Sopranos. She bases her decisions on what the most appropriate morality is for a given situation. As in the above discussion, she finds her father's job less offensive than that of a tobacco advertiser. On the other hand, there are many instances in which her moral freedom turns her away from her family. The third season features an ongoing battle between Tony and Meadow, propagated on her dating an African-American man, Noah. Tony's racism leads to him insulting Noah, driving a wedge between Meadow and her father. She refuses to speak with him for some time. However, she is still not above accepting tuition money from him. The value she places on her education is greater than her outrage.

One of the most interesting examples of Meadow's morality comes up in the incident with David Scatino. After Scatino has given Tony his son Eric's car, Eric confronts Meadow:

Eric: I thought you were my friend.

Meadow: I am, I can't stop my father from selling it.

Eric: Your Dad is a fucking asshole, you know that? A real lowlife fucking asshole!

Meadow: Oh, and I suppose yours is innocent in all this? For your information, he gave it to my Dad, it's not like my Dad stole it.

Eric: You know what Meadow? Fuck you, fuck your gangster father, and fuck this!
(2006)

When it comes time to defend her father, she takes on his sensibilities. She tries to turn Scatino's gambling into the issue, just as did Tony. Her morally-free position has led her right back to the character-driven position. She may not respect her father's decision to accept the car, but she agrees that gambling was the root of the problem.

Meadow has enough respect for her family that character rubs off on her. By-and-large, her decisions comes from a position of moral freedom. Her stance thus differs from that of A.J., who is generally without a moral orientation whatsoever. Her college education—unique within her family—allows her to see the problems with character. She sees the constraints character puts on their lives. For example, Tony's racism is seated in a character-driven belief that a person should remain with those with whom they share a heritage. Indeed, almost all relationships on *The Sopranos* are between Italians. Meadow realizes the constraint that this character trait has on the family. Her moral freedom sets her apart.

Chapter IV – Business Was Not Discussed

This chapter will focus on character, as it pertains to several significant players in Tony's life. Most of the examples will draw upon individuals who are connected with the Mafia. One example will include Christopher and his friend Brendan, as well as Christopher acting on his own. I will also look at examples from Silvio Dante and Hesh Rabkin, two of Tony's top advisors. Finally, I will also discuss a crisis of character fought by Dr. Melfi.

Christopher and Brendan

To survive in the Mafia, an individual requires a certain degree of character. The rules and principles behind the organization require loyalty and commitment. Impulsive, short-term behavior can lead to dangerous situations. The younger members are taught these values. Still, there are times when this teaching fails. Elsewhere in this thesis I have discussed several examples of a lack of character in Christopher. However, as Tony's closest protégé, Christopher does display character on occasion. Because he is young and ambitious enough that he will sometimes make very poor decisions, when he takes the time to consider the outcome of his actions he usually makes the right choice.

Brendan Filone, a friend and associate of Christopher's, does not have character. His behavior is marked by impulsive, rash decisions that display little respect for the chain of command. Although he only appears in a few episodes, they are the first broadcast. Thus he provides a striking contrast to Tony and the other gangsters, for

whom character is such a key element. Perhaps not surprisingly, Brendan's lack of character leads to his being executed by Uncle Junior.

The incident that leads to Brendan's murder centered around the hijackings of some delivery trucks. Christopher and Brendan stole a truck that was under the protection of Uncle Junior's crew. After being reprimanded and forced to pay a "tribute," the two young men are bitter and angry, and consider stealing another truck belonging to the same company:

Brendan: My boy at Comley [Trucking] said there's a truckload of Italian suits.

Christopher: Those unload fast. Mario'll take the whole load.

Brendan: Says shipment moves Thursday at 6am.

Christopher: Give me one good reason I should not jack this truck.

Brendan: Hey, don't feel bad. It's Junior's own fault. He's gives us no choice except to do it again.

Christopher: Taking that outrageous fuckin' tribute.

Brendan: It's like, not only does he shit on our heads, we're supposed to say 'thanks for the hat.'

Christopher: It's not like I'm getting somewheres playing by the rules. Fuck Tony.
(1002)

The instinct for them is to violate the rules of the Mafia. They are aware that hijacking a second truck is a serious transgression, as evidenced by Christopher's statement about "playing by the rules." Their initial reaction does not take into account loyalty or commitment at all. However, when the time comes to commit the second theft, Christopher has a change of heart:

Brendan: Yo, money, we said we'd meet out front, and you're not even dressed.

Christopher: I'm taking a pass.

Brendan: What? It's Italian suits, Christopher!

Christopher: There was a time in my life when being with the Tony Soprano crew was all I ever dreamed of. So what am I doing?

Brendan: This is some fuckin' note here!

Christopher: Shh, don't wake her up.

Brendan: Come on, it's 5:15.

Christopher: Maybe one reason why things are so fucked up in the organization these days is guys running off, not listening to middle management.

Brendan: Fuck Tony. That's a quote.

Christopher: We have to stick together. Why be in a crew? Why be a gangster?

Brendan: Hey, coach? Suck my dick.
(1002)

Christopher, given time to consider the situation, reveals his understanding of the importance of character. He sees the long-term implications that the theft would hold. What is most interesting here is the perspective from which Christopher looks at the transgression. He does not discuss the possibility for personal retribution, either in the form of paying another tribute, or worse. Instead, he takes an organization-wide perspective. When he notes that "one reason things are so fucked up...is guys running off, not listening to middle management," he is showing that he is not just concerned about his own inevitable punishment. Rather, he is interested in the long-term well-being of the Mafia as whole. Of course, there are numerous instances in which Christopher breaches this, including his handling of the hauling contract discussed earlier. However, it seems that for an individual to have a character-driven life, it is not necessary for that person to display character at all times. What matters is that the individual is aware of

the implications of non-character-driven actions. They have to know that making short-term decisions will lead to the eventual breakdown of institutions. The occasional lapse is acceptable, or even expected. A comparison to Tony can be drawn here. He is one of the foremost proponents of character on *The Sopranos*, yet he too often slips. This scene demonstrates that although Christopher may sometimes slip, he knows that without character, the Mafia as he knows it would be doomed.

The same cannot be said for Brendan. Even as Christopher explains to him why they shouldn't hijack the truck, Brendan can only berate him. He is completely unaware of the rules that precede his entry into the group, or at least he doesn't care. The other Mafiosi, however, realize the seriousness of this transgression. There is certainly the element of insult to Uncle Junior: Brendan goes on to steal "his" truck. The real problem for them is that, if Brendan was willing to steal the truck after being warned not to, what else might he be willing to do? Having individuals in the group that refuse to abide by the mandates of the group may lead to its breakdown. Christopher understood this; Brendan did not. His ignorance cost him his life.

Christopher appears to understand the importance of character. However, like Tony, he lives in a world that calls for moral positions that may be contradictory. At times, he chooses courses of action that seem completely morally bankrupt, at least within the Mafia moral code. This was seen in the incidents surrounding his screenplay. At other times, he is forced to make moral choices that may *seem* immoral, but are in fact incidences of moral freedom. He makes the type of difficult choices that today's world demands.

A prime example of this occurs when Meadow comes to him asking for drugs. She and her friend are studying for SATs, and want some methamphetamines to help them stay awake. Knowing that Christopher deals drugs, they come to him. At first he turns them down flatly, noting that “your father will put a bullet in my head” (1003). He doesn’t make mention of the issue of selling drugs to a teenager. However, his answer does demonstrate a certain degree of pragmatism. After Meadow leaves, Christopher comes to realize that if he doesn’t sell her the drugs, she may go a dealer on the street. His girlfriend Adriana offers that “isn’t it better she gets it from you, with all that poison that floating around?” (1003) Christopher relents, and eventually gives her the drugs. When he gives it to her, his speech is very telling:

If anyone ever finds out you got this from me...look at me, this is no joke. I know you and me don’t always get along, but I don’t think you wanna see me dead...Hey, I’m serious. Just this once ok, I’m no drug dealer, I just don’t wanna see you get poisoned. If your father ever finds out...
[Carmela enters the room, and the conversation ends]
(1003)

Although he has given crystal meth to a child, Christopher has actually displayed a willingness to take a high moral ground. He decided that the risk of his own life, should Tony find out, was less than the risk of Meadow’s life should she get the drugs off the street. This decision epitomizes moral freedom. If he were to take a morally absolutist position, he would have refused her request. The character-less individual, Brendan for example, would have refused out of simple fear for his life. Someone who strictly adheres to character may have refused because they felt it was wrong for her to have the drugs at all. Christopher was able to see the realistic conclusion to the situation: she would have gotten the drugs somewhere else. If he gives them to her, at least he knows she will be relatively safe. His decision shows that, while he does have character,

he is able to set it aside when the situation demands. When he needed to, he violated the rules, knowing that the consequences would be severe. Character truly shines through when the individual is able to set it aside.

Silvio and Hesh

The Sopranos is rife with individuals that lead character-driven lives at least some of the time. Although there are many crises of character, in the end character is what drives most of the people. However, there is a pervasive sense throughout that the people do not know *why* they have character. They do not understand what would happen should character slip away. Certainly, they are aware that there would be negative consequences, but they don't seem to understand that there is an unwritten set of rules, beyond the explicit Mafia code. They do not realize that there are rules that exist above and beyond the tangible level. When Christopher muses that about people not listening to middle management, there is no sense that he realizes that the rules extend beyond just "people not listening to middle management." There are two people on the show that do seem to understand this, though: Tony's two closest advisors, Silvio Dante and Hesh Rabkin.

Silvio is Tony's *consigliere*, his right-hand man. As such, his role within the Family is to be the level-headed advisor, who often talks Tony out making rash decisions. He tends to be far more rational and calculating than the other Mobsters. Certainly, he too has lapses of judgment. However, these are few and far between. On the whole, he is far less likely than the others to jump into anything. This role provides a vantage point that allows him to see the consequences of actions. His "big-picture" outlook helps him

to understand the rules that govern his group. These rules go beyond the cut-and-dried ones, such as the *omertà*. They include such things as strength, manliness, and individualism—all things that Tony feels are disappearing. What makes him particularly interesting is that not only is he aware of the rules, he understands that they may be better off without them. An example of this comes about when Tony realizes he must tell his crew he is seeing a psychiatrist:

Tony: Okay. I need to tell you something and I want you to hear it from me, not from some asshole on the street. About four, five months ago I started seeing a psychiatrist. I was passing out, and they couldn't find nothing. She's been helping me with that... Okay, c'mon, give it to me. Give it to my face. C'mon.

Silvio: Well, I'm sure you did it with complete discretion. And speaking for Pussy, if he's still alive, I'm sure he would agree.

Tony: Business was not discussed, no names were mentioned. Junior knows. He's decided to use it against me. Ask now. 'Cause we're not discussing this again.

Paulie: It's not the worst thing I ever heard. I was seeing a therapist myself about a year ago. I had some issues. Enough said. I learned some coping skills.

Silvio: Look, this thing of ours, the way it's going, it'd be better if we could admit to each other these painful, stressful times. But it'll never fucking happen.

Tony: What about you? You got a problem with this?

Christopher: It's like marriage counseling?

Tony: Yeah. Like that. Sort of, yeah. [Christopher storms out the room in frustration]
(1013)

All of the players in the room are aware of what is at stake. It is a massive violation of the *omertà* for Tony to be visiting a psychiatrist. Each man provides a different reaction. Paulie is quite accepting of it, as he admits that he too was seeing a therapist. Christopher has a somewhat surprising reaction. It is perhaps the most strictly

character-based of all the reactions. By storming out, he is showing an inflexibility to the situation. He is also openly disrespecting his boss. However, the others seem to forgive his actions, given that they are based in character.

Silvio's reaction is the most interesting. First, he is primarily concerned with Tony's discretion. He gives him the benefit of the doubt, while making it clear that even Tony is not above the *omertà*. In his second statement he exhibits how well he understands the restrictive hold that character has placed on their lives. By noting that it would be nice if they could talk about their feelings and emotions, he is placing himself squarely in today's world. He can see the value of open discussion. Despite this, he knows that their character is too ingrained for that. Too many generations of Mafiosi have taught each other that they must be the strong, silent type. Whereas Tony wishes for a return to a Gary Cooper-type of life, Silvio sees that it never really left. Even with minor transgressions from time to time, the Mafia is still dominated by a demand for silence. Even a boss going to a therapist does not indicate to Silvio that there is a corrosion of character across the group. It is simply Tony's crisis of character.

Hesh Rabkin is a Jewish advisor to Tony and his crew. He has been associated with the Family since the 1950's. However, being Jewish he was never able to receive membership. Still, his advice is widely trusted, and Tony often takes his problems to Hesh for an answer. Like Silvio, Hesh's position as an advisor on the outskirts of the Family allows him to have a clear vision of how things operate. Because he is not directly involved in the day-to-day dealings, he can maintain a level head. He does not allow his understanding of the situation to be clouded by irrational decisions. This

situation can be seen when Uncle Junior made the decision to “tax” Hesh for a massive back payment. Because he is such a respected advisor, Hesh was allowed to operate for years without having to make the usual payments. When Junior decided to ask for a tax, it was a massive sum. Hesh then went to Tony to discuss the situation:

Tony: He’s taxing you? Did you tell him that you operated for years without any tax? That my father loved you, and respected you, and that ten cents out of every dollar that goes into his kick is directly related to your shylock business? What’d you tell him?

Hesh: I told him the truth: that it’s a reasonable request, but an unreasonable figure.

Tony: Hold on, back up for a minute. What do you mean ‘it’s a reasonable request?’

Hesh: He’s the boss now Tony. He can call the tune, we all dance to it. That’s the way it’s always been done. You can either respect what was done in the past, or change the rules.
(1006)

Tony’s reaction to this seems to be very character-based . He is appalled at Junior’s taxing, because it does not respect the long-standing arrangement. He wants to maintain the old tradition and show respect to his father’s friend. These are very character-based traits. In Tony’s view, keeping the old arrangement intact will help ensure the long-term health of the entire organization. However, Hesh takes a slightly different view, and one that demonstrates a better understanding of character. He points out that Junior, as the new boss, has every right to change the arrangements. As the boss, apparently Junior may change the taxation structure; it is his prerogative. If he ends up making enemies over his choices, that is his problem. What matters is that he is allowed to do it. Tony is a little too short-sighted to see this. Hesh, on the other hand, understands that the rules of Mafia are more than just a strict adherence to tradition.

Instead, it is adherence to tradition that is conditional on acceptance by a single person: the boss.

Understanding character, and its use within a group, is difficult from within. It may require a position outside of the core of the group to see its full implication. Hesh and Silvio both understand that character is multi-dimensional and situational. Different times call for different applications of character. However, at the same time they themselves are caught up in the boundaries of character. Even as they see how character is malleable, its relatively strict guidelines affect their behavior.

Dr. Melfi

The final individual I will discuss is Tony's therapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi. She occupies a unique role on *The Sopranos*. She is one of the main characters; in fact, one could argue that she is second in importance only to Tony. However, relatively little is known about her. The vast majority of her screen time occurs in her sessions with Tony. Certainly, she is shown having a life away from Tony: She is divorced, has a son, and visits a psychologist herself. But her life away from Tony is not the focus of her screen time.

As Tony's therapist, she often deals with his moral dilemmas. They have long conversations about his relationships with his mother, his wife, and his coworkers. Occasionally, Tony's crises create crises for her. Indeed, she suffered a fairly severe crisis of character in episode 1013. After an attempt was made on Tony's life, he informed her that she was in danger: the hit on him came because he was seeing a psychiatrist. He feared that it may lead to retribution on Dr. Melfi. Tony advised that her

to leave the city for her own safety. This created a difficult situation for her, as she had patients that may be suicidal if they can't speak to her. In the end, she came to a similar decision to the one that Christopher made with Meadow: the patients would be worse off if she died than if she left town for a couple of weeks.

However, the situation that led to her most striking crisis of character did not arise directly from her meetings with Tony. In episode 3004 she was brutally raped as she walked to her car. She returned after a few days away from work, telling Tony that she was in a car accident. The rapist was arrested shortly after, only to be released on a technicality. Her crisis of character arose when she learned the rapist's name and place of work. Through her acquaintance with Tony, she was afforded a rather unique opportunity: she could get revenge. Throughout the episode, Tony and Melfi's meetings were punctuated by her extreme discomfort, both physical and emotional. In a meeting with her own therapist, she described a dream she had in which a dog attacked her rapist. She came to the realization that the dog represented Tony, and she could have Tony go after her rapist. Noting her therapist's concern, she offered, "Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to break the social compact. But that's not saying there's not a certain satisfaction in knowing that I could have that asshole squashed like a bug if I wanted" (3004). Although she stated that she would not pursue having Tony take revenge, her words seemed to belie this. She was obviously tempted by the possibility.

The final scene of the episode is striking. She began to cry during a session with Tony. After he managed to calm her down, he realized something was very wrong with her. He returns to his seat and asks "What? You wanna say something?" There was a long pause, with the camera focused directly on Melfi's bruised and agonized face. After

several seconds she recomposed herself, and simply states “No” (3004). This is the end of the episode.

Dr. Melfi, despite her temptation otherwise, has remained true to the institutions of society. She avoided stepping outside the boundaries of the judicial system. Many people would have accepted the opportunity to send a killer after a rapist. However, Melfi clearly believes that even if the justice system fails, there is still room for belief in institutions and their associated moral codes. Proponents of complete moral freedom would point to a situation such as this as the perfect time for moral freedom. There has been a horrendous act committed. The perpetrator only got away because of a technicality; there was proof of his guilt. In a morally free world, Melfi might put aside the failings of the judicial system, and decide for herself what must be done. Of course, this may or may not be having him attacked. Indeed, the argument could be made that she *has* exhibited moral freedom by *not* having him killed. Within some institutions, not the least of which is the Mafia, an eye for an eye would be meted out. Regardless of the reasoning behind her decision, Melfi has avoided slipping away from the moral ground to which she subscribes. It may not be the same as everyone else’s, as it would be in a strictly character-driven world. It is, though, an instance in which moral freedom was suppressed for her own benefit: she did not want to go down that road. She may have come close, but her sense of ingrained societal standards kept her from doing it.

This incident represents one of the few moments of *The Sopranos* not being a parody. The entire incident comes across very “straight,” with little humor or irony. The lack of parody is part of what makes this episode so powerful. There are countless scenes of violence on *The Sopranos*, most of which do not instill the same sense of revulsion for

the viewer. For example, the pilot episode scene in which Tony strikes the gambler Mahaffey with a car, and then proceeds to beat him. The whole scene has a ridiculous air to it: first, Tony chases the man through a crowded park, with passersby jumping out of the way as if it were a video game. Then, the beating takes place in front of an HMO, affording Tony the opportunity to make a witty remark. Dr. Melfi's rape has none of this. The parody has been removed from it. The lack of parody then becomes the element from which the viewer can learn. Whereas in the majority of the scenes, the viewer can draw moral lessons from the parody, in this scene the striking lack of parody provides a contrast that further enables self-reflection.

There are many other possible examples of character from different individuals on *The Sopranos*. There are several instances of people violating the *omertà*, to varying degrees of seriousness. The strongest example of these would be "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero. He was a close friend of Tony's, and a made man, who informed to the FBI. Not surprisingly, this led to his being killed. There are two crises at play here: Pussy's struggle with turning against his friends, and Tony's decision to kill Pussy. In the end, Pussy's desire to continue to provide for his family and stay out of jail led him to inform on the Family. Likewise, Tony's hatred for informers outweighed his love for his friend, and he himself kills him.

Regardless of the examples discussed, it holds true that the individuals on *The Sopranos* lead dual lives. Their lives are character-driven, but in a morally free world. This leads them to difficult moral decisions, in which they must weigh their respect for the old ways against the practical realities of the situation. The viewer can see this as a

reflection of their own life. While they may not be able to relate to the gangster violence, the viewer is faced with moral crises of his own. Part of the appeal of *The Sopranos*, and any television show is being able to understand what the people are going through. The crisis of character is something to which most can relate.

The parodic nature of the show provides both entertainment value, as well as an opportunity for moral self-reflection. Silvio exists mostly as a parody of the strictly character-driven Mafioso; Brendan is a parody of character-less Mafioso. Dr. Melfi seems to be one of the only major characters who is not a parody. As a non-parody, she provides a sort of grounding for the viewer. She brings the viewer back to reality. The viewer is able to use the parodies to see the ridiculous side of character and moral freedom, and then return to non-parody to consider those elements.

Chapter V – Conclusions

The Sopranos provides fertile ground for a discussion of morality. As a well-known, extremely popular, and critically acclaimed television show, it has broad appeal. There is obviously something about the show that resonates with the viewers. They are able to connect with the individuals on the show, despite the subject matter. When the concepts of character and moral freedom are used to study *The Sopranos*, one of the reasons for its popularity emerges. The moral conundrums in which the individuals on the show are placed allow the viewer to reflect on his own morality. These opportunities for moral reflection help create an attraction to the show that goes beyond the witty dialogue and rich cinematography.

The story of Tony Soprano is much closer to the story of the average person than it might seem at first glance. He is a wealthy gangster with a vast criminal network. He lies, cheats, steals, and kills people. However, beneath all this he very much an everyman. He worries about how his children are performing in school. His water heater explodes. He visits a therapist. He changes his own tires. Tony's everyday experiences are very generic. He could be anyone on the street—until he goes to work. We can relate to Tony's moral dilemmas because we know him well: We are Tony, minus the killing.

***The Sopranos* and The Viewer**

Throughout its history, *The Sopranos* has consistently been amongst the most popular television programs. There is an attraction to the show that keeps people watching all through its rather brief seasons, and waiting impatiently for the next season to begin. When the sometimes-repulsive subject matter of the show, and its placement on

a cable network, are taken into account, there must be something very special about *The Sopranos* to be able to maintain high numbers of viewers. There is something about the show that attracts people to a violent, misogynistic, racist, opportunistic, and criminal individual. Something about the show, and its characters, keeps people coming back.

Popular culture, and in particular *The Sopranos*, can allow for moral reflection for the viewer. Television programs can provide a way for the viewer to understand his morality. Fiske and Hartley write that “the way we watch television and the way we perceive reality are fundamentally similar, in that they both are determined by conventions or codes” (2003: 47). We make use of signs to help understand our world all the time. What people come to know derives from the interpretation of signs and symbols. In this way, witnessing a moral, or amoral, incident on the street is no different than watching it on television. Fiske and Hartley write:

In short, television is one kind of reality, and the culture to which we belong is another. But we perceive both of them in a similar way, and as a result they interact with each other. Furthermore, watching television shares with everyday life the characteristic of being a familiar and casual activity which most of us engage in without feeling the need for elaborate analysis. But as Levi-Strauss (1973) has suggested, 'understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to another.' Television 'reduces' cultural experience to another (no less valid) form of reality. (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 48)

Thus, the viewer understands a television program in the same way they understand ‘real life.’

The Sopranos depicts moral choices. The individuals on the show are given agency to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes, their choices do not turn out well. More often than not, they make the morally ‘correct’ choice, that is, they make the choice that more closely adheres to character. However,

they do have the ability to choose. This lends a great deal of credence to the show. The choices that people on the program make, and the outcomes of the choices, are qualitatively similar to those made by the viewers. The viewers are probably not making choices about to which friends they should offer short-term loans. They are, though, faced with decisions that do not have a ready answer. Character struggles to provide an answer for a situation in which two values come into conflict. On *The Sopranos*, character breaks down when this happens, just as it might in the viewer's life. The viewer relates to the show through the shared value conflicts.

In this way, *The Sopranos* provides a rich window into morality for the viewer. Complex moral dramas are played out, with their consequences. The viewer is given the opportunity for their own reflection, through the exaggerated morality of the show. The viewer is rarely faced with decisions regarding robbery or murder. However, in much the same way that parody can reinforce points, so too can exaggeration.

We can understand *The Sopranos* because it shows us who we are, or more ominously, who we might become. It brings forth moral issues that the viewer may not otherwise consider. Importantly, it presents the darker side of morality. Moral choices are not always cut-and-dried. They can be very difficult. They can include choices between two seemingly immoral positions. Sometimes, the wrong choice will be made. But, *The Sopranos* provides an opportunity for the viewer to explore these issues. They can come to an understanding of their own moral orientation, by witnessing the actions of some morally-questionable individuals. It is often easier to understand things by observing their difference from other things. This is how the viewer can understand his own morality through *The Sopranos*.

The Corrosion of Character and Moral Freedom both explore issues of morality in today's world. *The Sopranos* performs much the same task. It seeks to present the moral dilemmas of a contemporary person. This is not very different from Sennett's story of Enrico, or Wolfe's interviews. They all seek to explore the moral fabric of society and how it is changing. They explore the problem of societal change. The theme of nervousness over the loss of character runs through all three works. Narratives are used to help the reader explore and understand his own morality.

Returning to Wolfe

Alan Wolfe's conception of moral freedom suggests that people today are, for the first time in history, able to make moral judgments based on their own values (2001:199). Institutional guidelines are no longer the primary sources of morality. Since the 1960s, moral authority has moved away from the group level, and moved to the individual (Wolfe, 2001:211). People are now more likely to base their moral choices on the circumstances of a given situation. The moral orientation is formed on a case-by-case basis.

Wolfe writes, "The ultimate implication of moral freedom is not that people are created in the image of a higher authority. It is instead that any form of higher authority has to tailor its commandments to the needs of real people" (2001: 200). He is conveying a sense that under institutionalized morality, people were removed from the equation. Morality was something that came from above and beyond the people. It was simply handed-down, with little questioning. Certainly, over time morality could change, but not at the level of the individual. Moral freedom brings "real people" back into morality. It

allows for the individual, as someone with agency, to make a choice. People are given a moral voice with which to speak.

Moral freedom can contrast sharply with character. Character is rooted in the moral authority of the group. It desires, and emphasizes, long-term stability. It believes that moral judgments should be passed down through generations. Moral freedom, on the other hand, implies that morality is flexible. The correct moral choice for one situation may not be the correct choice for another. Morality can change over time. This may lead to the type of risk-filled life that Sennett sees as problematic. The reduction of choice, while it takes away the agency of the individual, also reduces the chance of something going wrong. In Tony's situation, he aims to keep his underlings in line through an adherence to a long-standing code. They are provided little freedom with which to develop themselves. When moral freedom enters into the Mafia, the boss loses some control. There is a chance that his soldiers may do something that threatens the integrity of the group. This puts Tony at risk.

The assumption made by proponents of character is that in the absence of an enduring, widely adhered-to moral code, people will not make moral choices. As the Functionalist tradition presumed, institutionalized moral standards are required for societal maintenance. However, what Wolfe found in his study is that people still make good moral decisions, even without society-wide adherence to the same standard. People are still able to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. Further, the decisions that people arrive at are often very similar to the ones they would have made in a time where character did dominate. When Christopher asks Brendan, "We have to stick together. Why be in a crew? Why be a gangster?" He is making a decision that reflects

the same values as character, in a life that is lacking in character. Certainly, he is part of an environment that promotes character over moral freedom. However, character does not guide his life in the same way it does Tony's. The essential difference is that he is not overwhelmed by a sense of needing to have character in his life. He is not nostalgic for a time when character dominated. This is the essential feature of moral freedom: the ability to choose a morality for oneself, even a morality that is similar to character.

Moral freedom does not imply amorality, or even values that are different from those found in character. It implies that people are able to select those values for themselves.

Moral freedom takes into account that values may come into conflict with one another. It is not always possible for an individual to maintain all of their values at the same time. Certain choices must be given precedence. Wolfe points out that the rising divorce rate is not necessarily indicative of amorality or a lack of respect for marriage. Instead, it is a sign that people are choosing one situation over another. They feel that it would be a less moral act to remain together in an unhappy situation (2001: 49). The blind adherence to the institution is replaced with the ability to choose the lesser of two evils. Similarly, when Tony allows Scatino to join the poker game, he is making a morally free choice. Two of his values have come into conflict. He wants to protect his friend from a gambling debt, but also wants to maintain his family's lifestyle. In the end, his obligation to his family wins out—along with his scorpion nature.

Christopher experiences a similar conflict of morality when Meadow asks for drugs. It is certainly an immoral act to give methamphetamine to a child. However, Christopher decides that it is less immoral to give her the drugs than it is to let her risk her life getting them off the street. Moral freedom allows people to make these types of

decisions. In earlier times, the solution to Christopher's dilemma may have been prescribed: you cannot give drugs to a child. Now, he has to make the choice.

There is a persistent feeling that moral freedom will lead to a breakdown of civility. Wolfe writes, in a discussion of Western thinkers' views on moral freedom as problematic, "What, in the absence of binding moral rules, would prevent me from deciding, after you had given me possession of the car I agreed to buy from you, that I ought to keep my money after all?" (2001: 201) What has been shown is that civility just doesn't break down. There is not rampant backstabbing and treachery, despite a lack of a moral code. Regardless of Tony's worry, his world is not on the verge of collapse. Some situations may require a reworking, or at least a rethinking.

Moral freedom is a rather frightening concept, so much so that it is mostly avoided by theorists:

Moral freedom is so radical an idea, so disturbing in its implications, that it has never had much currency among any but a few of the West's great moral theorists....Indeed, the most common position among most Western thinkers has been to argue the necessity for moral constraint as a precondition for freedom in all other aspects of life. (Wolfe 2001:200)

It was thought that if people were to have other freedoms—speech, assembly, and so on, some moral constraint was needed. Otherwise, people would be reduced to some base instinct that would put them at each other's throats. This may be why Tony has a difficult time accepting moral freedom. He believes that without character, all civility will break down. This includes the warped form of civility that dominates his life. He longs for character, less because of the positive aspects of character, but because he fears moral freedom. He fears being put at risk. What Tony fails to recognize is that even with moral freedom, the values inherent to character are mostly still visible. People are still

loyal, at least to those that they feel are worth being loyal to. Character, on the other hand, would have people being loyal regardless of the situation. It would not matter if a person felt that a company was not worthy of their loyalty, character mandated that they should be loyal.

Moral freedom gives agency to individuals. People are able to make choices about right and wrong, without prescription from an institution. This may lead to some people feeling as though they are at risk. They long to return to a time when character dominated. However, even setting aside the argument as to whether things work fine in moral freedom, the corrosion of character may not be worth being troubled over. Whether moral freedom is good or bad, it is, as Wolfe subtitles his book, the way we live now. It is not necessarily better or worse, it is just different.

Returning to Sennett

Character, as it is developed by Sennett, provides a moral framework for its adherents. It provides a common basis for morality across a society. In this way, a degree of social cohesion develops. Through their common values, members of a group form bonds that may endure over time. Similar to the Functionalist tradition, Sennett believes that without the common ground of character, social order may break down. People will be focused only on satisfying their personal, immediate needs. There will be little regard for long-term goals and group objectives.

The difficulty with adherence to character is that it appears that societies do not break down in its absence. Even when individuals do not live their lives in a strictly character-based manner civility is maintained. As I have demonstrated in my

examination of *The Sopranos*, as did Wolfe in Moral Freedom, groups are able to operate with little disruption, even when character is lacking. Despite Tony Soprano's worry, his Mafia is still functioning. He is still able to provide his family a lavish lifestyle.

Interestingly, even when individuals do not live their lives with long-term goals in mind, much of their interaction may be guided by character-based principles. As Christopher shows on *The Sopranos*, character-type attributes can appear, despite a lack of long-term vision. He is concerned about "guys running off, not listening to middle management" (1002), even though he is morally free to worry about from whom Meadow is getting drugs. Likewise, Dr. Melfi's refusal to sic Tony on her rapist demonstrates an adherence to social norms. The respect for the *omertà* within the Mafia further indicates that character is not lost. If the loss of character were as severe as Sennett implies it to be, there would be virtually no moral adherence by group members. People would only look out for themselves, with no regard for those around them. Without the moral guidance that character provides there would be nothing to stop individuals from doing as they please. But, as I have shown, as did Wolfe, character-type morality can survive even when it is not the overarching morality. Even if people are moving around and switching jobs, their interaction with others remains moral.

The problem with an adherence to character seems to lie in its simplicity. While character-driven morality may be useful for many situations, it is not always appropriate. A more pragmatic approach that takes into account the particulars of a situation seems necessary. Although a situation may call for character, it may not. As it did with Christopher and Meadow, a situation may require consideration of circumstances. Tony

longs for character, and it often guides his behavior. However, his actions often reflect a much broader scope of possible moral choices.

Character is a desirable way of living; one that people tend to long for. It represents stability over time, with a reduction of risk. If character were the dominant moral orientation, there may be a return to long-term goals. Presumably, the rapid life changes documented by Sennett (1998) would be lessened, and along with it the worry associated with risk.

Character does influence moral decisions today. However, it is not able to cover all situations. Moral freedom may incorporate the same traits as character, and further allows for individual's own interpretation of a situation. Character is often how we live, but not necessarily. Through *The Sopranos'* character of Tony, viewers can reassess their own dilemmas of character.

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