*Raffaele Ariano**

# Ethics and the Other in Long-form Television Series: Two Case Studies**

> It is, therefore, the especial characteristic of this Art, that, since it deals exclusively with men and women, it not only requires of its followers, but also creates in readers, that sentiment which is destined to be a most mighty engine in deepening and widening the civilization of the world. We call it Sympathy
> H. James, *The Art of Fiction*

**Abstract**
In this article, I develop a philosophical interpretation of two television series, *The Man in the High Castle* and *Better Call Saul*, in light of the ethics of alterity articulated by Stanley Cavell and Richard Rorty through their reflections on the conceptual pairs acknowledgment/avoidance and solidarity/cruelty. The general problem is framed by Rorty's thesis that, in a post-foundational philosophical era, narratives can reach where moral theories cannot. The analysis of *The Man in the High Castle* will emphasize the differences between the series and Philip K. Dick's novel, particularly the introduction of a negative hero as the protagonist. In the case of *Better Call Saul*, special attention will be given to the relationship among the characters of Saul, Kim, and Howard. The analysis of the two series will allow for a complication and cross-reading of Cavell's and Rorty's reflections on the theme of the Other, and will suggest – through brief references to series such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men* – some generalizations on the pervasive presence of the negative hero in American long-form television.

**Keywords**
Acknowledgment, Solidarity, Perfectionism, Alternate-history, Holocaust.

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## 1. Introduction

A U.S.-based tradition stretching from *The Art of Fiction* by Henry James[1] to *This Is Water* by David Foster Wallace[2], passing through literary critics such as Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom (in *How to Read and Why*[3]), conceptualizes the ethical relevance of literature – and more broadly, of fictional works – in terms of some variation on the idea that such works bring about an expansion in the spectrum of our awareness, both intellectual and emotional, of what it means to be human. This expansion, according to this tradition, refines our understanding of ourselves and of others, de-ideologizes our views of the world, and makes us more sensitive – through the exercise of our capacity to empathize with the experiences of fictional characters – to the experiences of actual human beings.

American authors and scholars have variously developed this conception within philosophical discourse – among them Martha Nussbaum, Robert Pippin, and Cora Diamond. But particularly notable and influential are the contributions of Richard Rorty, who focused on the novel, and Stanley Cavell, who concentrated mostly on theater and cinema. In what follows, continuing along a path already begun by others[4], I will attempt to extend this line of reflection to the "serious" television seriality of the last few decades: the long-form television that emerged after the phenomenon of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007). In particular, I will argue that some central narrative developments in two widely acclaimed series – *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon Prime Video, 2015-2019) and *Better Call Saul* (AMC, 2015-2022) – stage moments of *moral agnition* that can be fruitfully interpreted in terms of the ethics of alterity that Rorty and Cavell locate at the heart of the narratives of the novel, cinema, and theater.

## 2. Facing the *Ur-Problem* of the Other: the Holocaust

What would have happened if the Axis powers had won World War II? How would people have adapted to living under the National Socialist invader? These are some of the questions raised by *The Man in the High Castle*, a dystopian alternate-history television series based on the

[1] H. James, *The Art of Fiction*, Cupples and Hurd, Boston 1884.
[2] D.F. Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life,* Little, Brown and Company, Boston 2009.
[3] H. Bloom, *How to Read and Why,* Scribner, New York 2000.
[4] See for instance, P. Donatelli, *An Ethics of TV Series*, in "Iride. Filosofia e discussion pubblica", 96, 2, pp. 296-87; P. Marrati e M. Shuster (eds.), *Philosophy and New American TV Series*, in "MLN", 127, 5, pp. vii-ix, pp. 981-1095.

1962 novel of the same name by Philip K. Dick[5], set in an alternate 1960s America divided in two, with the East Coast under the direct control of the Reich and the West Coast a protectorate of the Japanese Empire. In what follows, I will attempt to bring out what I see as the core of the television series, starting precisely from an analysis of its similarities and differences with the literary source material.

Both stories unfold from a narrative device that offers a brilliant meta-referential distillation of the alternate history genre and the dialectic between utopia and dystopia. While we, as readers or viewers, are engaging with a story set in a world where the Nazis have won, within the story itself the plot revolves around a clandestine novel (in Dick's book) or reels of clandestine documentary footage (in the television series) that tell or show a world in which the war was won by the Allies.

Is this our world – the world of us viewers/readers? The television series does not offer an explicit answer to this question, whereas the novel, in a typical example of Dick's labyrinthine-paranoid imagination, actually gives a negative one: it is eventually revealed that in the world narrated by Hawthorne Abendsen's novel (nomen omen) – the novel-within-the-novel – the Allies did indeed win the war, but the British Empire was then turned by Winston Churchill into a dictatorship and became a new oppressive global hegemon. In the end, then, the novel-within-the-novel in Dick's book concludes with yet another nightmare. The television series, by contrast, is in a sense more optimistic and mostly follows the trajectory contained in the early part of Dick's narrative: in a dystopian world in which the Nazis have won, the authorities have every reason to try to eliminate the reels of footage that show an alternate reality in which the Allies were victorious, because those reels, those cinematic fragments, truly carry hope – they are, indeed, utopian testimony, reminders that democracy and freedom are possible; thus, they serve as powerful fuel for the activism of partisans and political dissidents.

Consistent with the typically paranoid and postmodern pessimism of its author, the novel opts for a meta-literary solution: after consulting the I Ching, Dick's protagonists realize that the real world is the one narrated in Abendsen's novel, the novel-within-the-novel – they are, in other words, fictional characters. No revolution, no utopia: only the further nightmare of insubstantiality, of the postmodern simulacrum realizing it is one. The television series, by contrast, takes a more literal path: in its final episodes, the arrival of *travellers* from parallel dimensions, from the multiverse, marks the rupture of reality as it is and the incursion of the hope that History might finally take a new direction.

[5] P.K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, Putnam, New York 1962.

For the purposes of my discussion, however, there is another difference between the television series and the novel that is even more significant. The series invents entirely from scratch a new character: John Smith, a cold and ruthless American who at the beginning of the narrative is a local SS officer, but whose ambition will lead him first to become Reichsmarschall of the North American colony and eventually Führer of an autonomous (though still Nazi) American Reich. It is telling of the moral reflection underlying much American television seriality that, although *The Man in the High Castle* presents an ensemble narrative, the character of John Smith becomes increasingly central as the seasons progress. This character, absent from the novel, shifts over time from being, in the first season, a mere antagonist – the enemy of the rebels – to something increasingly resembling a protagonist: a negative hero of the kind to which television seriality has accustomed us, through complex and fascinating yet morally and psychologically corrupt figures such as Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*), Walter White (*Breaking Bad* – AMC, 2008-2013), Don Draper (*Mad Men* – AMC, 2007-2015), Frank Underwood (*House of Cards* – Netflix, 2013-2018), and Nucky Thompson (*Boardwalk Empire* – HBO, 2010-2014).

More and more, then, the story of the TV series *The Man in the High Castle* becomes the story of John Smith – the American everyman (once again, *nomen omen*) turned Nazi official; the story of his political rise and moral corruption, but also, in the end, the story of his tragic recognition of that corruption. And that recognition cannot but concern the *ur-problem* of twentieth-century ethical reflection on the Other: the extermination camp.

In another alternate-history narrative in which the Nazis won the war – Robert Harris's novel *Fatherland*[6] – the Holocaust is, in the 1960s, still a state secret, completely unknown to the general public. In *The Man in the High Castle*, by contrast, everyone more or less knows how things went: perhaps they are unaware of the details (what exactly did they do to African Americans and to the populations of Africa after colonizing them?), and they certainly do not speak of it openly, but essentially, they know. Which means that, essentially, they repress. They repress, they tell themselves lies, invent justifications, or simply avert their attention just to keep going, to survive.

John Smith did the same. A former American soldier, he had just found out his wife was pregnant with their first child on the very day the Germans dropped the atomic bomb on Washington, thus suddenly winning the war. After weeks of hunger with a pregnant wife, many would have accepted the same compromise he did: joining the SS. After all, he was a

[6] R. D. Harris, *Fatherland*, Hutchinson, London 1992.

soldier – that was what he knew how to do. On the other hand, regardless of the violence and purges during the transition – the harsh months and years of National Socialist consolidation in America – it is clear that the technological and economic power of Nazi Germany eventually ended up benefiting even the American Reich, which is in fact depicted as a far more prosperous and orderly place than the West, colonized by Japan. John Smith thus had the opportunity to make something of himself: he lives in a beautiful suburban house with an elegant wife and three beautiful children, and as it happens, a certain talent of his is propelling him rapidly up the career ladder. The game seems worth the candle – even the extreme candle of becoming complicit in the most heinous of crimes.

But what would happen if one day John Smith and his wife Helen – these modern-day Macbeths – discovered that one of their children was afflicted with a genetic condition that, according to the Reich's eugenic laws, condemned him inexorably to euthanasia? Such a revelation could overturn the whole table, could make the thought of alternative realities more tempting than ever, and above all could bring back to the surface everything repressed – all the horror at the horror of which they had been complicit.

## 3. Acknowledgment and Solidarity: The Other in Cavell and Rorty

There are some significant parallels between the reflections of Cavell and Rorty on the ethical potential of literary, cinematic, and theatrical narratives. For both thinkers, this potential unfolds along two interconnected lines. The first sees fictional stories as a tool not only to dramatize but also to teach the reader a process of moral growth, which Cavell characterizes in terms of what he calls "moral perfectionism" or "Emersonian perfectionism"[7], and which Rorty instead encapsulates through his notions of "irony," "redescription," and "private perfection"[8]. Whether it be a Hollywood "remarriage" comedy such as *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, USA 1941)[9], or classics of modernist literature like Marcel Proust and the already mentioned Henry James, narrative works function as "spiritual exercises"[10], as tools of individuation and the pursuit of wisdom.

[7] See S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersionian Perfectionism*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1990; Id., *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2004.
[8] See R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.
[9] See S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1981, pp. 45-70.
[10] See R. Rorty, *Redemption from Egotism. James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises*, in "Telos", III, 3, 2001, pp. 243-263.

The second line, connected to the first but more directly relevant to the theme of this article, concerns the ethics of the relationship with alterity. This is what Cavell articulates through the conceptual pair of "acknowledgment" and "avoidance," and what Rorty investigates through the notions of "solidarity" and "cruelty." Both use these conceptual pairs to summarize a dimension of ethical life that they are convinced lies more, or even exclusively, within the reach of narrative arts; and both keep in the background of this conviction a reflection on the limits of an ethics grounded essentially in rational and discursive terms, which they respectively justify in Wittgensteinian (Cavell) and pragmatist (Rorty) frameworks.

In texts such as *Knowing and Acknowledging* and the *Part One* of *The Claim of Reason*, especially the discussion of the notion of "criteria"[11], Cavell uses the passages in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* dedicated to the topic of other minds (e.g., §§ 244, 246, 283, 387) to argue that our attribution of moral personhood to other human beings cannot be considered the result of a cognitive process, something for which we could, if we wanted to, provide criteria in a well-grounded and universally applicable way. Such attribution is rather the product of a set of shared natural-cultural reactions, of the agreement – always fallible and mutable – within what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life" – "a thin net over an abyss," as Cavell describes them at one point[12]. Who is our moral Other? Who is included in the "circle of altruism" famously discussed – albeit from a different perspective – by Peter Singer[13]? Only members of our family? Members of our ethnicity? Or also members of other animal species? According to Cavell, we would be deluding ourselves if we thought we could give theoretically rational justifications to these questions; rather, these are answers that our culture, but also our unconscious and our imagination, give for us. For this reason, at the base of our moral life there will always be, according to Cavell, an imaginative act – intellectually unfounded – of identification with an other who is recognized as *our* other. It will not be a matter of *knowing* the other (theoretically) as a human being, but of *acknowledging* them (practically and imaginatively), with the corollary risk of *avoiding* them: this is the moral of passages in *The Claim of Reason* such as the one in which Cavell investigates the nature of the relationship between the slaveholder and his slave[14], or of an

[11] S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*: *A Book of Essays. Updated Edition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002 (1969), pp. 220-245; Id., *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, pp. 1-125.
[12] S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, cit., p. 217.
[13] P. Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981.
[14] S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, cit., pp. 376-378.

essay such as the one dedicated to King Lear's inability to acknowledge his beloved daughter Cordelia[15].

The pragmatist path chosen by Rorty is less existentialist and less epistemological than Cavell's, and more overtly historical-philosophical and meta-philosophical. In texts such as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Consequences of Pragmatism*[16], Rorty argues that the outcome of the pragmatist revolution in philosophy – carried forward by figures of classical pragmatism (Peirce, James, Dewey), by exponents close to the pragmatism of post-positivist analytic philosophy (Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, Davidson), and by figures of continental philosophy that Rorty interprets as pragmatists in nuce (Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida) – is to make us suspicious of the idea that ethics can be something grounded in strictly logical-discursive terms. Pragmatism, in fact, distances us from the conviction that philosophy consists in "asking questions about the nature of certain normative notions (e.g. "truth", "rationality", "goodness") in the hope of better obeying such norms", in the idea that it is possible "to believe more truths or do more good or be more rational by knowing more about Truth or Goodness or Rationality"[17].

According to Rorty, it will not be rational reflection on duty, utility, or virtue that makes us more dutiful, more capable of maximizing our own and others' pleasure, or more in line with goodness and virtue; in short, it will not be moral philosophy that offers us truly compelling reasons to live a moral life, to prefer solidarity over cruelty. If not philosophy, then what? According to Rorty – in Cavell one could find a fully analogous argument, though here, since Cavell's treatment on the topic is scattered across a multitude of texts and references, we must set it aside – the function that moral philosophy can no longer fulfill is today, in the contemporary world, assumed by narrative. Whether ethnographic studies, journalistic reports, films and comics, novels or television series, it is narrative-based expressive forms, whether fiction or non-fiction, that serve, in our culture, to make us sensitive to the suffering of others, to help us form a wider *us* and a "larger loyalty"[18].

This task can be pursued in two ways, the first exemplified by socially engaged realist novels such as those of Charles Dickens, the second by novels which, like Nabokov's *Lolita*, feature sophisticated but self-cen-

[15] S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003 (1987), pp. 39-123.
[16] R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979; Id., *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1979.
[17] R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, cit., p. xv
[18] R. Rorty, *Justice as a Larger Loyalty*, in Id., *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 42-55.

tered protagonists who end up showing themselves deaf to the suffering they themselves inflict on those around them. Rorty writes:

> This process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them" is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel. Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright give us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves. That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress.[19]

In the second category mentioned by Rorty – of narrative works that explore the forms of cruelty, or of Cavellian avoidance, of which we ourselves are capable – one certainly finds the story of John Smith told in *The Man in the High Castle*; and likewise, one finds in several central and often climactic passages the stories of negative heroes such as the aforementioned Tony Soprano (consider his relationship with his nephew Chris Moltisanti), Nucky Thompson (his relationship with his disavowed lineage, Jimmy and Tommy Darmody), Don Draper (his relationships with Peggy and nearly all the women in his life, and with the unfortunate colleague who dies by suicide, Lane Price), and finally Walter White and Frank Underwood (and all those unlucky enough to cross their paths). One final example, less obvious than the ones just mentioned, will help suggest how widespread this theme has been in American television seriality.

## 4. Jimmy Breaks Bad: between cruelty and avoidance

Can a fundamentally good person – or at least someone not evil or inhuman at their core – be cruel to others? How is it possible that someone, in the pursuit of personal growth, individuation, and self-legitimation – the moral perfectionism discussed above as a common feature of Cavell's and Rorty's ethics – ends up being inattentive to the humanity of those around them? The Nazi official John Smith and Nabokov's pedophile-aesthete Humbert Humbert (analyzed by Rorty[20]) are extreme cases of this possi-

[19] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, cit., p. xvi.
[20] Ivi, p. 141-168.

bility, whereas Jimmy McGill, a.k.a. Saul Goodman, the protagonist of the acclaimed series *Better Call Saul*, is perhaps a more accessible example, one with which it may be easier to resonate psychologically and emotionally.

A prequel to *Breaking Bad* directed by its own showrunner Vince Gilligan, *Better Call Saul* tells many intertwined stories. One is the broader story of how a small-time con artist named Jimmy McGill transformed first into a lawyer and then into Saul Goodman, the brilliant yet morally ambiguous fixer that audiences had previously encountered in *Breaking Bad*, as sidekick to Walter White – the now-famous high school teacher turned ruthless drug lord. Incidentally, the two series by Gilligan thus trace similar arcs of moral dissolution – what we might call an inverted Cavellian perfectionism, or perhaps a Cavellian perfectionism realized in Nietzschean terms through the protagonists' suppression of their own moral sense. A second story is that of how the loving relationship between two brothers, Jimmy and his older brother Chuck McGill, was gradually transformed into a tragic fraternal war, crushed under the weight of affective ambivalence, unspoken grievances, and unconfessable envies born of an old unconscious competition for their parents' love.

Both narrative arcs bear a direct relation to what Cavell calls "avoidance" and Rorty calls "cruelty," but the third arc is more directly relevant for our purposes. It involves three characters: the protagonist Jimmy, his colleague and later wife Kim Wexler, and their boss at the law firm Hamlin, Hamlin & McGill, Howard Hamlin.

The relationship between Jimmy and Kim is a story of love and complicity in which, not unlike the couples in remarriage comedies analyzed by Cavell[21], the two lovers act as exemplary agents of Socratic provocation and Aristotelian virtuous friendship for one another – roles that, according to the American philosopher, are structurally central to moral perfectionism[22]. Underdogs with difficult pasts, they push each other to grow and support one another, acknowledging the affirmative nature of their respective ambitions and even working together to ethically socialize them: for example, while in season one Jimmy takes on indigent clients as a public defender only because he has no better professional options, by season six Kim is handling similar cases pro bono for distinctly civic-minded reasons – and she is able to do so in part thanks to Jimmy's support.

Yet there is a darker side to their bond. They fight to succeed in the respectable, rule-bound world of legal practice, striving for the favor of bosses and wealthy clients, but at the same time they harbor a growing desire to aggressively transgress that very world – its hierarchies, social norms, and laws. It is as though, as in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew,* as

[21] See S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, cit., pp. 1-42.
[22] S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, cit., p. xxxii.

interpreted by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* and by Trilling[23], the two feel that their next stage of spiritual self-consciousness must involve abandoning the "honest consciousness" – the one that maintains a sincere and grateful relationship with power and wealth – in favor of what Hegel calls the "disrupted consciousness," which "obeys only with a secret malice, and is always on the point of revolt"[24].

Some flashbacks suggest that their psychological motivations may differ: Jimmy seems to want resolutely to distance himself from the ghost of a kind but inept father, martyred by his own goodness; Kim, on the other hand, may unconsciously want to integrate into her adult life as a successful attorney the model of a mother who lived by her wits and taught her that survival requires rule-breaking. In any case, their love story is sealed through a series of cons and schemes, each more dangerous and elaborate than the last. While the two are often motivated by consciously moral aims – essentially, protecting each other from professional injustice or a vulnerable client from a poor legal outcome – it becomes clear that they are also drawn to illegality and intoxicated by the feeling of power unlocked by successfully executing plans outside of the conventional legal system.

In the sixth and final season, Howard Hamlin – their former boss – becomes their (final) victim. On paper, Howard is perfect for the role. A polished man in his fifties, with Scandinavian features, blue eyes, a prominent jaw, and a smile that tends to seem fake even when it is genuine, Howard inherited Hamlin, Hamlin & McGill from his father. Born into wealth, success, and the legal profession, Howard is, in the eyes of Jimmy and Kim, someone who has received everything in life without deserving it – a white-collar hypocrite who, to them, encapsulates all the flaws of the respectable society they both long to join and secretly despise. Thus, the decision to devise a plan to ruin Howard's reputation and career in order to win a legal dispute appears to them as a natural step.

Yet Gilligan and his team of writers scatter subtle but unmistakable clues throughout the narrative showing that Howard is, in fact, none of the things Jimmy and Kim accuse him of being: he may have inherited the firm, but he is also a capable and passionate lawyer; he may have had good fortune in life, but he, too, bears his share of pain – a divorce, depression. The way he takes responsibility for Chuck's death, while Jimmy ostentatiously brushes it off, and the depth of guilt Howard seems to

[23] D. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and First Satire*, translated by M. Mauldon, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009; G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, pp. 306-321; L. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1972, pp. 26-47.
[24] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, cit., p. 305.

feel, convince us that he is far from being a heartless hypocrite. He is, ultimately, *a good person* – albeit not a perfect one.

Jimmy and Kim, however, despite all evidence, do not take in any of these signs. This is one sense of the concept of *avoidance* as discussed by Cavell – namely, the absence of an acknowledgment which is *not just knowledge*, but "goes beyond knowledge […] in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge"[25]. No amount of evidence can correct their attitude towards Howard. His humanity – his complexity and multidimensionality – disappears behind the theatrical mask they have imposed upon him. Indeed, as Cavell argues, avoidance often relies on a "theatricalization of others"[26]. Reversing Rorty's phrase above, we might say that for Jimmy and Kim, Howard is not "one of us" but "one of them"[27], and therefore the cruelty they inflict on him can be psychologically naturalized and morally neutralized.

In one final masterstroke, akin to what Cavell identifies in Shakespearean works like *King Lear* and *Othello*[28], Gilligan also implicates the audience in this avoidance. We, too, have had all the necessary evidence before us to correct the negative image of Howard – we *know* he's a good person. And yet, we can't help but root for Jimmy and Kim in their latest prank: perhaps it is their charisma, perhaps it is natural to side with the protagonists of a narrative that has accompanied us for nearly fifty hours; perhaps, as entertainment-hungry viewers, we can't help but hope that such a well-orchestrated – and carnivalesque, even lubricious – scheme succeeds. One way or another, we side with Jimmy and Kim.

So when their successful plan leads – perhaps unexpectedly, but entirely logically – to the most brutal and tragic of consequences, we are struck by at least part of the shock and dismay that seizes the two protagonists. Their awakening – their moral agnition, which is once again the return of the repressed – will destroy them as a couple and leave them with a single chance for redemption: the abandonment (first by Kim, then by Jimmy) of any hope of a life devoted to ambition and self-improvement.

## 5. Conclusions

When placed alongside *The Man in the High Castle*, *Better Call Saul* allows us to foreground an economic and social dimension of the ethical problem of the Other that might otherwise escape our attention

[25] S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, cit., p. 257.
[26] S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, cit., p. 78.
[27] See R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, cit., p. xvi.
[28] See S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, cit., pp. 39-142.

– although Rorty (more than Cavell) had already taken it into account: from the *Ur-Problem* of the Other – the Holocaust – we move, in a certain sense, to its ontology of the present, namely, the risks posed to the acknowledgment of alterity by life in a competitive and individualistic society such as that of advanced capitalism. The fact that all the other examples of anti-heroes from long-form television mentioned above – from Tony Soprano to Don Draper to Frank Underwood – are invariably gangsters, businessmen, or politicians, only reinforces this generalization.

From a more strictly theoretical point of view, moreover, *Better Call Saul* has the merit of forcing us to complicate both Cavell's and Rorty's philosophical formulations of the problem. With respect to Rorty, it allows us to object that if even we spectators – the omniscient viewers of this long and intricate choral narrative – could be deceived all the way to its tragic conclusion, then a "detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like"[29] might not always be sufficient to guarantee solidarity, as the neo-pragmatist philosopher would hope.

With respect to Cavell, conversely, it allows us to raise an objection that had in fact been a starting point for Rorty. Cavell always seems to presuppose that, even in the more modern and pluralistic – or "Emersonian" – variants of perfectionism, the old Platonic conviction remains valid: that educating the individual and bettering the community must be seen as one and the same movement, with no internal contradiction[30]. Rorty, by contrast – and the story of Jimmy and Kim would seem to confirm his view – is convinced that, despite all of philosophy's efforts since Plato to merge private perfection with public solidarity, "the old tension between the private and the public remains"[31]. Reversing the perspective, however, *Better Call Saul* could also be seen as supporting Cavell's position, provided that we take the moral of Jimmy and Kim's story not as evidence of an inherent incompatibility between private perfection and community, but rather as a reminder that not every form of personal change qualifies as Cavellian perfectionism – particularly not those that take the narrow shape of professional advancement or social success – unless such change places at its center self-knowledge and self-revelation: a coming to terms with one's own moral motives. What Jimmy and Kim's trajectory lacks in order to be truly described as perfectionist, then, is precisely what Cavell expresses in the following passage from *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*:

[29] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, cit., p. xvi.
[30] S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, cit., pp. 6-7.
[31] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, cit., p. xiii.

> Moral Perfectionism's contribution to thinking about the moral necessity of making oneself intelligible (one's actions, one's sufferings, one's position) is, I think it can be said, its emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself, as if the threat to one's moral coherence comes most insistently from that quarter, from one's sense of obscurity to oneself.[32]

Since its core lies in a form of blindness, in a lack of self-intelligibility, the story of *Better Call Saul* – despite the mixed tone of the series – would therefore find its true counterpart more in the tragedies and melodramas studied by Cavell[33] than in the comedies. The same could be said of all the other television series mentioned above.

[32] S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, cit., p. xxxi.
[33] In addition to the texts already cited, see S. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.