CHAPTER I

Rules and Virtues: The Moral Insight of The Decalogue

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The Ten Commandments are often taken to represent a prototypical rule-based approach to ethics. What the Commandments are supposed to provide, on this interpretation, is a set of rules for evaluating the status of actions as right or wrong. They are thus taken to be similar in their goals to modern moral theories such as Kantian ethics or utilitarianism. I will call this the “moralizing interpretation” of the Commandments, which goes hand in hand with a single-discipline conception of moral inquiry. According to this conception, serious moral inquiry is the task of philosophy alone. Other disciplines may be able to feed information into the philosopher’s calculations, but the task of rendering that information morally relevant in the form of precise, universally applicable moral principles is the philosopher’s special charge.

There are nevertheless philosophical reasons for rejecting the moralizing interpretation of the Commandments in favor of a more holistic alternative. That alternative is illustrated by the films of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Decalogue. The ten episodes display how the Commandments are best understood not as rules along the lines of those proposed by modern moral theories, but as descriptions of patterns of thought, feeling, and action.
that can influence human well-being for better or for worse. The focus of the Commandments, on this interpretation, is not on discrete actions that ought or ought not to be done, but on human life as a whole, and how various patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting can enable us to live well or prevent us from doing so.

The philosophical reasons that motivate the holistic interpretation of the Commandments also motivate a multidisciplinary conception of moral inquiry, for if the Commandments concern not abstract rules, as the moralizing interpretation would have it, but the rich tapestry of human life as a whole, then nonphilosophical disciplines do more than simply feed information into the philosopher’s moral calculus; their input becomes essential to the very process of creating moral understanding. In line with this conception of moral inquiry, the films of The Decalogue show us vividly how the Commandments are woven into the tapestry of human life in ways that often escape our notice. Given their focus on attitudes and patterns of behavior—as opposed to discrete actions extracted and isolated from the lives in which they can only exist as parts—attempts to identify concrete, datable occurrences that either violate or conform to a rule often fail. By contrast, abandoning those attempts in favor of the holistic alternative often leaves us wondering whether the various strands of human life could consist of anything but the Commandments.

Perhaps above all the films movingly highlight two aspects of human life. First, they highlight the pervasive character of human failure and frailty, the way we can all strive for love, freedom, security, fulfillment, esteem, and yet fail in our best attempts to achieve them. Second, the films highlight the enduring character of human hope—hope in the possibility that our ultimate fate will not be determined by our past failures, hope that we might rediscover love and freedom even in the midst of tragedy and loss.

Rule-Based Ethics and the Moralizing Interpretation of the Commandments

Modern ethical theories are typically concerned with articulating a principle or principles for evaluating the moral status of actions. The job of ethics, as they conceive of it, is to formulate abstract principles, rules, or guidelines that can be applied to the concrete actions of concrete individuals in order to determine whether those actions are good or bad, right or wrong. The application of these principles typically takes the form of a
calculus or decision procedure. Kantian ethics and utilitarianism are the most popular representatives of rule-based ethical thinking.  

Utilitarians take the rightness or wrongness of an action to be determined by its consequences, whereas Kantians take it to be determined by the principle on which the agent acts. Even though they differ on what constitutes the rightness or wrongness of an action, utilitarians and Kantians share a commitment to three ideas. First, they both claim that ethical theorizing aims at articulating rules or principles that can be applied to particular actions (or in some cases principles) in order to determine their rightness or wrongness. Second, they both take moral evaluation to consist in an abstract cognitive procedure: trying to conceive the universal application of the agent’s principle in the Kantian case, and calculating the net gain or loss of pleasure that results from an action in the utilitarian case. Finally, both take the ultimate focus of ethical theorizing to be discrete actions—even forms of rule utilitarianism, which look to evaluate moral principles, take the latter to be right or wrong in proportion to their tendency to result in right or wrong actions.

The moralizing interpretation takes the Commandments to be in the same business as modern moral theories. It claims that the Commandments represent a premodern attempt to do more or less the same thing that Kantians and utilitarians are doing. The Commandments articulate principles to which discrete actions must conform if they are to count as morally permissible, and moral evaluation consists in determining whether particular actions violate any of the principles.

Understood in this way, however, the Commandments are problematic for well-rehearsed philosophical reasons. I will mention just three.

1. The problem of generality versus specificity: Rule-based ethical theories must articulate moral principles that balance the demand for generality (the demand that they apply to all people in all circumstances) with the demand for specificity (the demand that they be applicable to specific agents in specific circumstances). Many attempts to formulate universal ethical principles fail to satisfy one requirement or the other. The Commandments, in particular, fail to satisfy the specificity requirement, for they are so general that they do not tell us what to do (or to think or feel), but only what not to do. As a result, they lack content specific enough to tell us how to live.

2. The problem of justification: Every rule-based ethical theory must provide some justification or grounds for why its particular set of principles is the set according to which we should live. Why, for instance, must we
avoid killing? Why should we not covet our neighbor’s goods? Why not steal? Answering these questions can often be very difficult without invoking contentious metaethical and metaphysical theses.

3. The problem of accounting for rule-following or rule-breaking: Rule-based ethical theories must provide a general account of the costs and benefits for human life of following or breaking the rules they endorse. Suppose, for instance, that someone is unable to follow the principles—the way an alcoholic might be incapable of following the principle “Do not drink to excess.” A rule-based ethical theory must give an account of the significance of this type of case. Moreover, what in general are the implications for human life of following or breaking a moral rule? The fifth commandment says, “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” But what if I do? We are all aware that killing might have legal or social implications, ones that could be dodged with sufficient ingenuity. But are there any implications for my life that cannot be dodged? Perhaps I will become an immoral person, one that constantly breaks moral rules. But why should I care about that? If being moral amounts simply to obeying certain principles, why should I care about being moral? Why should I think that being moral is a good thing? Any rule-based ethical theory has to be able to answer questions of this sort. It must situate its principles within a broader account of rule-following and rule-breaking and their significance for human life. Again, this is a difficult task to accomplish without invoking contentious metaethical and metaphysical assumptions.

Human Striving for the Good Life and the Antimoralist Challenge

The third of the aforementioned problems with rule-based ethical theories is especially important for our discussion. It raises the question of whether human behavior is capable of conforming to abstract principles and what implications this might have for human well-being. Concrete human life is gritty and imperfect, unpredictable and indeterminate. It does not lend itself easily to the imposition of strict principles. One reason for this is that human nature is inherently limited in so many ways. Even if I judge that following a certain moral principle is for the best, I might still be unable to follow that principle in practice. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is inevitably weak. A more important reason to doubt the possibility of human life conforming to abstract principles derives from an account of human striving.

Human life is fundamentally driven by desire. Part of being human is precisely the desire for certain goods: for life, love, pleasure, joy, freedom,
security, power, health, wealth, status, and esteem. We are constantly striving to live well, to get as much out of life as we can. Our day-to-day existence is an exercise in trying to achieve such goods—strategizing about how to secure them and negotiating obstacles to their realization. Seen against the backdrop of human striving, the Commandments can look like a system of principles that inhibit our natural inclination to achieve these goods. They can appear as a force of alienation, something that arises not from human nature but rather against it as an impediment to human fulfillment. The upshot is that a life based on the Commandments or an analogous set of principles could only be one that ends up crushing rather than liberating the human spirit. An antimoralist view of this sort has often motivated various diagnoses of traditional moral theories in terms of class struggle, or power, or some other form of social control. Since the imposition of abstract principles on human striving could only inhibit human well-being, antimoralists argue, traditional morality could only be an instrument used by some to dominate and oppress others.

The founding assumption of this type of antimoralist view is that abstract ethical rules are at best orthogonal to human flourishing and are at worst impediments to it. There are at least three ways of responding to this worry. Naïve antimoralists jettison traditional morality without exploring the possibility of alternative ways of understanding its content. Naïve moralists, on the other hand, endorse the content of traditional morality without attempting to respond to the charges of antimoralists. A third option is to articulate an understanding of traditional morality that clarifies how its content fits into a more general account of human flourishing. This option endorses the content of traditional morality while yet responding to the charges of antimoralists. This is the view, I want to suggest, that is represented by Kieslowski’s *Decalogue*. Its depiction of people and the circumstances in which they find themselves shares the antimoralist’s skepticism that human life can conform to abstract principles, and yet it also shares the moralist’s conviction that traditional morality is deeply important to human well-being. In what follows, I will develop this idea by appealing to an ethical theory based not on rules but on the creative exercise of human abilities.

**Virtue Ethics**

The films of *The Decalogue* generally resist attempts to identify concrete datable occurrences as violations of a rule. They instead situate the actions of the characters within a broader fabric of thoughts, feelings, attitudes,
dispositions, and personality and character traits. Consequently, the films suggest an interpretation of the Commandments different from the moralizing one. In what follows I will propose an interpretative strategy based on an ethics of virtue or virtue ethics.

The original philosophical architects of virtue ethics were Plato and Aristotle, but other representatives include Augustine and Aquinas, and more recently Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, and, I would suggest, Krzysztof Kieślowski. The Decalogue provides moral theorists with resources to develop a virtue-ethical interpretation of the Commandments, an interpretation it expresses in flesh-and-blood terms using the medium of film. From the standpoint of virtue ethics, meditating on the films of The Decalogue proves more useful for developing one’s moral understanding than attempting to formulate abstract principles of the sort that characterize the endeavor of modern moral philosophy.

An ethics of virtue takes its starting point from unremarkable observations about human life. We are animals who have evolved in response to a range of environmental pressures largely beyond our control. As a result, we have physiological, social, and spiritual needs, which we are constantly trying to satisfy. In general, we strive to live well, to achieve lives filled with as many good things as we can: love and security, pleasure and joy, health and freedom, wealth, power, status, and esteem. The central idea of virtue ethics is that we cannot achieve human goods, especially those distinctive of human life at its best, by following abstract rules, but only by carefully cultivating certain patterns of thought, feeling, and action. Living well involves the practiced balancing of a range of desires and demands that constitute the raw material of human life. It involves learning how to weave the various strands of human existence together into a well-proportioned whole. Those strands include making decisions about what to do and how to feel and act; managing hardship; dealing with other people; managing sensual pleasures; estimating and evaluating people’s abilities and knowledge; managing self-exertion, one’s attitudes and behavior toward truth; the relationship between time and tasks; anger, sadness, and other emotional states; humor, one’s physical appearance; managing conversation; managing trust placed in others and in oneself, one’s intellectual skills; managing failures and mistakes; managing sexuality and one’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

According to an ethics of virtue, there are better and worse ways of managing these aspects of human life. What makes the better ways better is that they enable us to flourish. They enable us to achieve the goods that we desire—the physiological, social, and spiritual needs we demand—in a
way that does not disfigure life as a whole with imbalance and disproportion. Traditionally, these better patterns of thought, feeling, and action have been called “virtues.” Virtues are character traits or dispositions—patterns of thought, feeling, and action—that enable us to live well. Vices, on the other hand, are patterns of thought, feeling, and action that if cultivated will inevitably damage and disfigure human life. Consider some simple examples.

Eleanor wants to learn to play the piano. In order to achieve that end and its associated goods, she is going to have to work hard; she will have to practice. Practice involves hardship, and hence it requires the ability to exert oneself and channel one’s energies to accomplish the task despite hardship. If Eleanor manages hardship well, if she has discipline and fortitude, then she will be able to achieve the goal of playing the piano and thus secure the goods associated with it. If, on the other hand, she does not have fortitude—if, for instance, she is disposed to quit in the face of hardship and is unable to channel her energies in the face of it—then she will not be able to achieve what she wants. Musicianship and the goods associated with it will remain beyond her grasp. This is true not just of musicianship, but of many other things as well: dancing, mathematics, writing, speaking, and athletics, as well as the management of friendship, marriage, health, wealth, and countless other things. All of them involve dealing with hardship in one way or another. The fortitude that enables Eleanor to succeed in one area will enable her to succeed in others. Possessing the ability to channel her energies and stick to a difficult task despite its difficulty will help her achieve the goods associated with a range of activities. Conversely, lacking that ability will hinder her achievement in a range of activities.

Consider another example. Eleanor's efforts will be greatly assisted if she is able to benefit from the advice and constructive criticism of others such as her piano teacher and fellow students. If Eleanor is able to take constructive criticism for what it is worth, if she has the humility to do so, she will be much better off than if she lacks it. If she is arrogant and dismisses the evaluations of others, or if she lacks self-esteem to the point of being crushed by constructive criticism, then, as in the case of fortitude, it is not just Eleanor's piano-playing that will suffer, but many other aspects of her life as well: her friendships, her relationships with coworkers, her marriage, and so on.

Given their widespread impact on the potential for human well-being, character traits such as fortitude and humility count as virtues; and conversely, arrogance, laziness, and weakness of will count as vices. A human life that incorporates the virtues will end up being better than a life that
incorporates the vices. The virtues enable their possessors to achieve the goods that characterize human life at its best; they are precisely the patterns of thought, feeling, and action that enable us to live lives with love, freedom, security, and joy. Vices, on the other hand, have the opposite effect; they diminish our capacity to achieve these goods; they are the patterns of thought, feeling, and action that prevent us from being loving, free, secure, and joyful.

What is important to recognize about the virtues is that they are not rules but abilities. Each has two components: (1) the ability to make accurate judgments about what contributes to living well under the circumstances, and (2) the ability to think, feel, and act in accordance with those judgments. Temperance, for instance, involves the ability to judge accurately how to indulge in sensual pleasures in a way that contributes on the whole to living well, combined with the ability to indulge in sensual pleasures in just that way. The person who is temperate with regard to drinking, for instance, knows what to drink, how much to drink, when to drink, and with whom to drink, and he or she drinks in accordance with those judgments. The temperate person's abilities to make accurate judgments about drinking and to think, feel, and act accordingly cannot be codified in an abstract set of principles any more than, say, Michael Jordan's ability to play basketball could be codified in an abstract set of principles. Both involve concrete abilities acquired by concrete individuals in response to concrete circumstances—abilities that continue to be concretely exercised in concrete situations. Life presents us with complexities, and we determine who we are in coping with them, in trying to navigate through them, in trying to resolve the tensions among the competing demands that arise in trying to live well. In these kinds of concrete circumstances, character is both formed and expressed; in them we manifest concretely our potential for good or evil, as Zofia (Maria Kościałkowska), the professor of ethics, says in *Eight*. Attempts to formulate abstract principles to express what the exercise of those abilities amounts to could provide approximations at best, and distortions at worst, of what the virtues are.

Because the virtues have this concrete, ability-driven character, and because they have a direct bearing on our ability to live well—they are character traits that enable us to live well—it turns out that, on a virtue-ethical theory, being moral is less like following an abstract algorithm and more like producing a work of art, or engaging in musical or athletic performance. There might be constraints that mark the bounds of intelligibility, or aesthetic appreciation, or what counts as a legal move in a game, but on the whole engaging in these activities is a creative and dynamic process.
that involves the exercise of concrete skills that were learned and that are now exercised in concrete situations.

A Virtue-Ethical Interpretation of the Commandments

What do the Ten Commandments mean in the context of a virtue theory? To someone who endorses the moralizing interpretation of the Commandments, it is unclear whether the Commandments are compatible with virtue theory at all. Virtue ethics is based on motivation and empowerment, the acquisition and exercise of concrete abilities. The Commandments, on the other hand, constitute a list of abstract principles. What could one possibility have to do with the other? The genius of Kiesłowski’s Decalogue is that it fleshes out an answer to this question. It shows us what the Commandments mean in terms of the day-to-day rhythms of human life, our day-to-day strivings to live well. From this perspective, the Commandments appear not as abstract principles governing various categories of action—principles to which actions must conform on pain of qualifying as “wrong”; they appear rather as descriptions of broad patterns of behavior: thought and feeling, as well as action. The films show us what happens to human lives that incorporate various patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. They thereby provide a basis for an account of traditional morality capable of responding to the antimoralist challenge.

Consider, for instance, the fifth commandment: “You shall not kill” (Exod. 20:13 RSV). Exponents of the moralizing interpretation often take this to be the paradigmatic moral rule. Taken strictly, this understanding of the commandment is problematic. Does it prohibit killing in self-defense, for instance? Conversely, does it permit hideous acts of violence that fall short of actually killing someone? Affirmative answers to these questions strike many people as absurd. That is why exponents of the moralizing interpretation typically gloss the fifth commandment in a way that prohibits violence and permits killing in self-defense. But why do these answers seem absurd? According to a virtue-ethical interpretation of the commandment, the reason is that we can recognize that an act of wanton killing represents a broader pattern of behavior—one that can have destructive implications for human well-being. The cultivation of that pattern is what the commandment warns against. It effectively says: Do not cultivate the habits of thought and feeling that would enable you to murder lest you alienate yourself from the goods you most deeply desire. That pattern of behavior comprises not just murder, however, but other forms of violence as well: The habits of mind that enable murder are the same as those enabling
hideous acts of violence. The commandment can thus be extended to the latter as well. On the other hand, since the attitudes that motivate killing in self-defense are not of the same sort, their cultivation need not alienate one from the goods associated with living well. The commandment, then, need not be taken to proscribe killing in self-defense.

An understanding of the fifth commandment along these lines is illustrated in Five. The film gives us a glimpse into the character of a young man, Jacek Lazar (Mirosław Baka). Jacek coolly walks the other way as he sees two men brutally assault a third in the street; he callously chases away the pigeons being fed by an elderly woman; and he drops a rock from a highway overpass to break the windshield of an oncoming car. He assaults a man in a public restroom for no apparent reason, and he ultimately lures a cabdriver, Waldemar (Jan Tesarz), to a remote location to murder him. Jacek has incorporated patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that have devastating consequences for the achievement of human fulfillment. He lives a life of profound social isolation—something expressed even in the sickly hues and penumbral shadows in which he is filmed (Figure 1–1). That isolation crystallizes as he is caught, tried, convicted, and ultimately executed for his crime.

The film displays in a matter-of-fact way what it would mean to cultivate the pattern of behavior prohibited by the commandment, and it extends the scope of that pattern by drawing a parallel between Jacek and Waldemar, whom we see engaged in similarly callous acts. Joseph G. Kickasola describes the parallel in the following terms:

Jacek deliberately scares away an old woman’s pigeons. He pushes a man into a latrine. He drops the rock on a busy highway. In the same
callous manner, Waldemar leaves Dorota [a pregnant woman] and her husband, sexually harasses Beata (the vegetable market worker), and cruelly honks to scare a passing man and his dogs. This point/counterpoint of cruelties leaves the viewer with the impression that the two men (who have not met) are actually engaged in a game of bitter one-upsmanship. Their solidarity in contempt is a poisonous kinship, and one wonders whether Waldemar might have just as likely killed Jacek as the other way around. (205)

One way of interpreting the parallel between Jacek and Waldemar is to say that each has cultivated patterns of behavior that result in a social and spiritual death long before undergoing the biological deaths we witness in the film.

Moreover, *The Decalogue* sets up a further parallel with Polish society as a whole. Kickasola remarks, “There is a certain deadness that permeates the entire *Decalogue*” (174), and he notes that *Five* suggests that “Polish society may not be so different from the lonely halls of the penal institution” (202). The judge who tries Jacek’s case describes the verdict as “inevitable.” We watch the executioner (Zbigniew Zapasiewicz) making the arrangements for Jacek’s hanging with a cool, clinical familiarity that bespeaks experience and above all routine: “Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness,” as Horatio remarked to Hamlet. On the other hand, when Jacek’s defense attorney, Piotr (Krzysztof Globisz), struggles with the question of whether he could have intervened in Jacek’s life to avert the crime, the judge dismisses the sentiment: “You are too sensitive for this profession,” he replies. Is a society that makes killing a property of easiness also spiritually dead? Is it a society that is capable of contributing to human flourishing? Or is it instead a society that has lost the ability to help its members cultivate the patterns of thought, feeling, and action every human needs to live well?

All the films of *The Decalogue* illustrate how patterns of thought, feeling, and action influence our ability to secure the goods we most deeply desire in life. *One*, for instance, illustrates how worshipping false gods does not amount to burning pigeons before stone idols, but placing our trust in things that are ultimately incapable of providing us with what we most deeply want in life. *Two* and *Eight* show us that lying is not a straightforward matter of saying what is untrue; utterances that betray the life and love we most deeply desire are lies whether those utterances be true or not. *Four* shows us how the constancy of love and care, not biology, is what matters most in defining our relationships to those we call mother and father.
Six illustrates the dangers of cultivating an attitude that trivializes human sexuality and divorces it from its connection to human intimacy. Seven shows us that stealing encompasses a broad range of attitudes, feelings, and circumstances that bear only a family resemblance to the paradigm case of absconding with someone else’s goods. We see how various forms of theft can influence human life and alienate us from the ones we love and the ones we ought to love. Nine shows us that it is possible not just to covet our neighbors’ spouses, but our own spouses as well, and that human fulfillment is threatened by an attitude that treats people as possessions.

**Frailty and Hope**

There are two aspects of human life that the films illustrate in an especially powerful way: the enduring character of human frailty and the equally enduring character of human hope. They mark what is perhaps The Decalogue’s deepest insight into the human condition.

Failure is as real a part of human life as anything else. We all pursue the good life, and yet we invariably make choices and cultivate patterns of behavior that hinder us in our pursuit. One of the most insightful features of The Decalogue is the way it reveals the myriad ways we are capable of failing, the myriad ways we fall short of realizing what is best for us and for others. Like any other aspect of human life, however, there are better and worse ways of managing failure. The better ways correspond to virtues. Among them is hope.

Hope, one might say, is the ability to believe that failure is not the end of the human story. Importantly, however, hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism concerns what we can reasonably expect given antecedent conditions. Based on what I know about someone’s abilities, history, and current circumstances, I might be rationally justified in supposing that he or she will succeed at a certain kind of task. Hope does not have this aspect of making a rational projection about what future states of affairs are likely to result given past and present conditions. In fact, hope is perfectly compatible with pessimism about the human condition. The data on human life gathered hitherto do not lend themselves easily to optimism, to the reasonable expectation that the future of humankind will be any better than its past. On the contrary, the history of humanity gives us every reason to suppose there will continue to be injustice, corruption, greed, falsehood, violence, oppression, ideology, theft, war, and indifference. We have every reason, in other words, to believe the cliché that history will repeat itself, that the future of humankind will resemble its scarred past.
Hope, however, reaches beyond this reasonable expectation. It is the ability to believe that, despite humanity’s dismal penchant for repeating again and again the same mistakes, failure is nevertheless not the whole of the human story.

The films of *The Decalogue* are hopeful but not optimistic. The events they depict do not give us reason to suppose that the characters’ futures will be any better than their wounded pasts. They do not have the determinacy of Hollywood-style happy endings. They are instead characterized by the indeterminacy of real hope. They leave open the possibility that the future will not be defined by the past; that failure is not the whole story; that the inertia of human failure will not outpace the meaningfulness of future human striving. But neither do they ignore that inertia, nor is it the case that the future appears completely unproblematic, completely untouched by past entanglements. Consider, for instance, the husband and wife, Andrzej (Olgierd Łukaszewicz) and Dorota (Krystyna Janda), in *Tizo*. The final scene shows Andrzej joyfully telling the doctor (Aleksander Bardini) that he and Dorota are expecting a child. What he does not know—what she and the doctor have both concealed from him—is that the child has been fathered by another man. Likewise, Zofia and Elżbieta (Teresa Marczewska), the women in *Eight*, are reconciled with each other, but we are reminded in the final scene that not everyone has been reconciled to the past, including the tailor (Tadeusz Łomnicki) once falsely accused of collaborating with the Gestapo. In *Four* we look forward as Michał (Janusz Gajos) and Anka (Adrianna Biedrzyńska), a father and daughter, try to reevaluate their relationship after the discovery that she may not in fact be his biological daughter. But the letter, which had seemed throughout the film to hold the key to that reevaluation, is burned beyond readability (Figure 1–2). Human life is filled with sorrow and loss. *The Decalogue* gives us so many images of human frailty, and yet despite that the films all end with an image of hope.

*Ten* communicates this idea perhaps most clearly of all. Two brothers, Jerzy (Jerzy Stuhr) and Artur (Zbigniew Zamachowski), discover that they have inherited a stamp collection worth millions. Although they initially claim to be indifferent to material possessions, they grow increasingly jealous of the collection, enticed by its countless promises of future gain and well-being. When the collection is stolen through their own folly, the brothers turn on each other: Each tells the police investigator in secret that he suspects the other of having stolen it. Although they ultimately discover who is really responsible for the theft, they have no way of proving it, and hence no way of retrieving the collection. They come to terms with their
loss, and each comes to terms with his betrayal of the other. In the final scene, they confess their betrayals and exchange forgiveness. They also discover that they have both acquired an interest in stamp collecting and have independently purchased the same (common and inexpensive) series of stamps. We see them with foreheads pressed one to the other, laughing through their tears at the absurdity of their situation and in newfound appreciation of brotherly love in the midst of loss. As Kickasola describes it:

The two men have coveted, desired, been selfish, possessive, and suspicious of others. Yet in the end, they share their new material interests, combining the stamps to make a series. . . . Giving oneself away to a loved one marks the beginnings of morality and its teleology. The final, uncanny “chance” occurrence [the discovery that they have both purchased the same stamps] precipitates the miracle of reconciliation. (241)

Our situation is like that of the brothers. Human life seems to hold out to each of us the promise of unlimited gain. But the reality of living reveals that promise to be illusory; it reveals the true character of human limitation and ultimately loss. And yet there is still the possibility of rediscovering love, freedom, and joy in the midst of that loss and in full recognition of human frailty and limitation. Witnessing their plight and the plights of the other characters in The Decalogue inspires us with a desire that this possibility should be realized, that all should be well for the characters and for ourselves despite all we have done to make it unwell. Ultimately, then, The Decalogue suggests the image of a forgiving universe—a universe in which despite our folly we are not ultimately crushed by the weight of our past
failures; we instead discover that the most worthwhile aspects of human life, the most cherished of human connections, are forged in the experience of failure and shared vulnerability.

NOTES


3. Joseph Kickasola tells us, “For this episode of the series, Kieslowski returned to one of his most trusted cinematographers, Sławomir Idziak . . . [who] ordered over 600 custom-made, green filters of the ‘crueller, duller, emptier’ look of the film. . . . Apart from the skewing of color, another effect of the filter is the amplification of contrast, plunging the world into stark divisions between inky blackness and points and slashes of light. Even the light of day appears impotent in the face of this darkness.” Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: The Liminal Image* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 202. Further references will be cited in the text.