

## “Breaking Bad”: Periodically Justifiable

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In December 2018, I moved into a little casita in Albuquerque, New Mexico (aka “the ABQ”) located two blocks north of the Crossroads Motel, one of the landmark filming sites for the Emmy award-winning series *Breaking Bad*: a crime drama created by producer, Vince Gilligan (with co-producers Mark Johnson and Michelle MacLaren) airing in 2008 on the AMC cable network. *Breaking Bad* tells the story of Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with terminal lung cancer who enlists the help of a former student Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) to cook illegal methamphetamines to accrue as much money as possible to leave behind for his family. I moved to “the ABQ” in the summer of 2013 amidst *Breaking Bad*’s fifth and final season and found myself immediately immersed in both the fantasy and the reality of the criminal backdrop that *Breaking Bad* aided in generating to define what it means to be a Burqueños (an Albuquerque native). From T-shirts to decals to signs posted in store windows stating—Yes! *Breaking Bad* was filmed here—I found myself lost in a mediated reality of what I had perceived Albuquerque to be while watching *Breaking Bad* versus my lived experience walking the streets of Knob Hill, the International District, and the Brickyard District (neighborhoods of the city).

Prior to watching *Breaking Bad* and before moving to “the ABQ,” stopping at intersections along the main strips of Albuquerque, I came to the realization I had never been particularly aware of the condition of people’s teeth and their correlation to drug use. Yet, it began to be the first thing I noticed when I handed out water and cigarettes (instead of change) from my car window to people standing on the corners of Lomas and University and Central and Yale, which are major intersections for the crossing of students at the University of New Mexico. From this collision of fantasy and reality, a rather expected question emerged: What is real? Were these people playing some role in my version of what *Breaking Bad* had

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taught me to believe about Albuquerque? Or were these people an embodiment of realities that were simply recreated through script and dialogue?

As I pondered the plotline of *Breaking Bad*, I mused over Walter's transformation from passive rule-follower to aggressive rule-breaker and the show's framing of Walter's initial involvement in his new profession as latent, even harmless, because he was simply producing a product that would help his family survive after his passing. But by the second episode, "Cat's in the Bag..." Walter's harmless involvement in the drug industry escalates to murder, placing Walter dead center in the middle of a moral conundrum. This kind of moral dilemma lies at the heart of social ideologies affected and created by the all-invasive roll of media (Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 223). Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard, and Knut Lundby suggest the role of media in social and cultural change is not merely present in institutionalized forms of communication, but that it "has become an integral...context of human life" (223). Etienne Villiers reviews the connection between media and morality suggesting moral responsibility becomes expanded through an increased awareness of social moral values being represented in the media (16-17).

Expanding upon this, this article examines not just the connection between media and reality, but assesses the role of media in shaping moral codes within realities. To accomplish this, I investigate how television plots driven by illegal and/or immoral behavior address conflicting moral values. Specifically, *Breaking Bad* exists an exemplar artifact to examine the role media plays in shaping moral codes because the show's very premise is a series of scenes locating the moral underpinning of illegal behavior. Kathryn Reklis summarizes the particular genius of *Breaking Bad* as a moral touchstone: "Most complicated of all is the way the viewer is taken into the moral ambiguities of the show... [the] moral bait-and-switch is the point of the whole series" (42). This bait-and-switch is precisely the juxtaposition of moral dilemmas that makes this show an ideal subject for this research.

I utilize a philosophical framework to guide the research questions, because as Corey Anton discusses, philosophical problems are becoming increasingly symptomatic of media and technology (225). I focus on research questions steeped in the philosophical paradox between deontology and consequentialism. These two perspectives provide an answer to the question: Do the ends justify the means? Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the extent to which *Breaking Bad* supports a deontological or consequentialist perspective as well as how these

concepts create a relationship between legality and morality. Additionally, it explores how the plot, character development, and dialogue in *Breaking Bad* work to promote or deter illegal and/or immoral behavior based on the philosophical assumptions of the tension between deontological and consequentialist perspectives.

## Deontology and Consequentialism

To understand the scope of the research questions, a brief overview of the theoretical constructs of deontology and consequentialism is necessary to contextualize the tenets of each and how they apply specifically to this research. This section provides an overview of primary literature and theories in the development of these two philosophical traditions. Additionally, through examples of plotline, character development, and dialogue, this section provides a justification for utilizing these elements to interpret the moral codes present in the show.

Deontology can be summarized as the study of the nature of duty and obligation to society or a system of rules to determine right from wrong. Consequentialism, by comparison, is a doctrine suggesting that the morality of an action is best judged by its consequences. The quintessential example often used to describe the tension between deontology and consequentialism is a hypothetical situation of an individual harboring a criminal who is innocent. One day the police knock on the door and ask: Are you harboring this criminal? The deontologist would argue the protection and safety of the innocent criminal justifies the act of lying—regardless of the individual's subscription to the moral value of honesty and thus dishonesty in this situation is morally warranted. For the consequentialist, the criminal's innocence cannot and should not take precedence over the inherent moral value of honesty; for the consequentialist, the moral value of honesty is indeed inherent and thus individuals have a duty to uphold the moral value of honesty regardless of the external circumstances.

In Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, he discusses the role of duty as a facet of morality and frames the conflict between consequentialism and deontology as an inherent facet of this duty; furthermore, without restraint of freedom, people lack virtue. Kant further argues that consequences are not in-and-of-themselves right or wrong but, rather, the motives of the individuals/actors determine the morality of actions; this perspective aligns most fully with

deontological perspectives. This conceptualization of duty underscores the plotline of the artifact under examination. Michael Lacewing extrapolates the two major classes of duty represented by deontology. First, he argues for "general duties" grounded most readily in prohibitions: don't lie, steal, cheat, or murder. Second, he suggests "specific duties" linked to our individual personal and social relationships. For example: "If you make a promise, you have a duty to keep it. If you are a parent, you have a duty to provide for your children" (1). Returning to the show's synopsis, Walter is caught between the specific duties he must provide for his family and the more general duties he has to society in upholding the law.

From the deontological viewpoint, the consequences of Walter's actions do not determine the morality; rather, specific duties (at times) may supersede general duties if the actions in-and-of-themselves are moral. Michael Lacewing further contextualizes this through an examination of intentionality. That is, if the action is intended to do harm, it will be morally wrong necessarily; however, if the consequences are unintentional (e.g., manslaughter versus first degree murder), moral ambiguity applies to the action. This notion of intentionality lies at the very heart of the tension between deontology and consequentialism present in *Breaking Bad*. As will be extrapolated in the analysis, a juxtaposition of intentional actions followed by unintentional consequences drives the plotline and dialogue of the series. For example, in one scene Walter intentionally seeks out a distributor without understanding the drug trade well enough to know its dangers. Later, the episode reveal that Walter's eagerness to distribute his product too quickly leads to the unintentional death of two drug distributors.

On the other end of the spectrum, the consequentialist school of thought holds that the consequences of any given action becomes the ultimate basis for any judgement about the rightness or wrongness of the action. While many approaches to consequentialism exist<sup>1</sup>, the most common application is rooted in utilitarianism; this approach is an ethical philosophical tradition that prioritizes the good of the many over the good of the individual in the tradition of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Habibi). From this consequentialist perspective, the individual needs of Walter's family cannot morally supersede the larger consequences of Walter's actions in harming society at large. In *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* by Bentham, the nature of consequentialism suggests that "nature has placed mankind

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<sup>1</sup> See state consequentialism, ethical egotism, ethical altruism, rule consequentialism, two-level consequentialism, motive consequentialism, negative consequentialism, teleological ethics, and acts and omissions.

[sic] under the governance of two sovereign masters... On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their thrown. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think” (1). This kind of dialectical positioning of right/wrong with cause/effects develops the tension present in the question: Do the ends justify the means?

I argue *Breaking Bad* supports a consequentialist perspective by juxtaposing deontological and consequentialist perspectives, which equates morality with legality as it relates to drug law in the United States (US). Major themes emerge from the plotline, character development, and dialogue that deter illegal behavior based on the tension created by pairing scenes that justify breaking the law with scenes that show the harm caused by the illegal behavior—thus, conflating breaking drug laws as immoral behavior. Further, I argue this equation of legal with moral, especially when located and filmed in the real location of Albuquerque (rather than a soundstage or stand-in), has the possibility of shaping the very laws it critiques. To substantiate this argument, I now turn to the method and analysis of this research.

## Method and Analysis

To answer the research questions, I executed a textual analysis of the television series’ scripts. After watching and analyzing the show’s content, I use specific examples from the series as evidence of the accuracy of my argument in favor of the consequentialist perspective. I focus my analysis on the show’s structure. *Breaking Bad* uses juxtaposition of scenes promoting deontology with scenes promoting consequentialism to isolate specific justifications and compare those justifications to the negative consequences that are tied to the immoral action.

For this analysis, I focus on five episodes from Season One of *Breaking Bad* where I saw the most salient examples of deontological and consequential perspectives. A narrower focus on specific examples from a limited number of episodes increases the clarity of the units of analysis: plot, character development, and dialogue. By using multiple examples from a limited number of episodes, this research develops a more detailed landscape of how these elements support the aims and arguments. The final step will demonstrate how these elements change over the course of the series.

### Season 1: Episode 1 “Pilot”

In the opening scene of the pilot episode, Walter White is found emerging from the wreckage of his portable meth lab, wearing only a gas mask and white underwear. Walter, hearing sirens and assuming it is the police coming to arrest him, records a video for his family. While Walter never explicitly admits to participating in the manufacture of methamphetamines, his declaration to his family that, "I only had you in my heart," coupled with the presence of methamphetamine paraphernalia, creates a space for the viewer to assume the presence of illegal behavior. This scene provides the backdrop upon which Walter's life prior to this moment can be viewed retrospectively and with compassion.

By providing this background, the producers provide a space for the philosophical conflict between consequentialism and deontology to react to each other as a means of supporting a consequentialist view that supports an inherent rightness or wrongness attached to specific behaviors. The deontological view that sees actions as morally relative depending upon the situation, however, is necessary for the plot to thrive; as *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan states: "We are telling a story of transformation in which a previously good man, through sheer force of will, decides to become a bad man" (MacInnes). That is, a reason must exist for the character break the law and the audience must "always be able to understand why" (MacInnes). As Worstall describes in *Forbes* magazine, *Breaking Bad* was not well received in countries with socialized medicine; the presence of an oppressive healthcare system is necessary to identify with Walter's character and justify his behavior.

The episode further develops this compassion by shifting back three months prior to a scene that depicts Walter teaching an introductory chemistry lesson to his high school chemistry class. The dialogue of this scene (a conversation aimed at defining what chemistry "is") functions as an element of foreshadowing, providing a landscape upon which Walter's character will be forced to travel and navigate.

WALTER. Chemistry. It is the study of what? Anyone? Ben.

BEN. Chemicals.

WALTER. Chemicals. No. Chemistry is... Well, technically, chemistry is the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as the study of change. Now, just...Just think about this. Electrons. They change their energy levels.

Molecules. Molecules change their bonds. Elements. They combine and change into compounds. Well, that's... That's all of life, right? I mean, it's just... It's the constant, it's the cycle. It's solution, dissolution, just over and over and over. It is growth, then decay, then transformation. It is fascinating, really.

In this scene, the plotline drives a deontological perspective by suggesting that the ends justify the means. The scene represents Walter's transformation as something cyclical and predestined. It provides a gradient upon which the changes in Walter's character can be seen as not simply bad or wrong or immoral, but inevitable.

Later in the episode, after being diagnosed with cancer, Walter works at his second job—a car wash managed by an owner who treats Walter poorly. Walter is contemplative, looking out the window, when the owner insists that he perform work outside of his job duty. Instead of conforming as he normally would have, Walter declares: “Fuck You, Bogdan,” displaying extreme anger while ripping down air fresheners and car accessories as he leaves the building. This scene is the opening of an internal conversation regarding consequences. The knowledge of imminent death created a situation where the consequences of Walter's actions were diminished, providing the space for Walter's justification of using his chemical knowledge to make meth to provide for his family before he dies.

In the following scene, Walter calls his brother-in-law, Hank (a DEA agent) and asks to go on a previously offered “ride along” to see the take down of an active meth lab. It is on this ride along that Walter discovers his soon-to-be partner—a former student, Jesse Pinkman—is involved in the meth operation. Walter seeks out Jesse's help, stating that Jesse knows the business and he knows the chemistry. Jesse questions Walter's motives in the following dialogue:

JESSE. Wait. Wait. Hold up. Tell me why you're doing this. Seriously.

WALTER. Why do you do it?

JESSE. Money, mainly.

WALTER. There you go.

JESSE. Nah, come on, man. Some straight like you, giant stick up his

ass all a sudden at age, what, 60, he's just gonna break bad?

WALTER. I'm 50.

JESSE. It's weird, is all. Okay, it doesn't compute.

This interaction highlights the inconceivability of a transformation so large and cataclysmic, that it creates dissonance in the audience in their capacity to believe that Walter could possibly "break bad" to an extent that the audience would view Walter as immoral.

The end of Episode 1, however, already places Walter, having cooked only one batch of meth, in a kill-or-be-killed situation. Jesse's attempt to distribute Walter's product to his former partner, Emilio, is unsuccessful, and Emilio and his cousin, Krazy 8, attempt to kill Walter after recognizing him from his "ride along" with the DEA. Walter offers to teach them his formula if they let him live. In the RV, Walter concocts phosphine gas, which is fatal when inhaled. This concoction kills Emilio and severely incapacitates Krazy 8. This scene provides the realization that even though Walter's motives were well-intended, it was not possible for him to cook even just one batch of meth before he needed to kill another human being. This act highlights the consequences and minimizes the justification of Walter's actions, thus supporting a consequentialist perspective.

### Season 1: Episode 2 "Cat's in the Bag"

During another chemistry lesson, Walter's lecture provides another element of foreshadowing into his changing character:

WALTER. So the term "chiral" derives from the Greek word "hand." Now, the concept here being that just as your left hand and your right hand are mirror images of one another, right, identical and yet opposite, well, so, too, organic compounds can exist as mirror-image forms of one another all the way down at the molecular level. But although they may look the same, they don't always behave the same. For instance...Thalidomide. The... The right-handed isomer of the drug thalidomide is a perfectly fine, good medicine to give to a pregnant woman to prevent morning sickness. But make the mistake of giving

that same pregnant woman the left-handed isomer of the drug thalidomide and her child will be born with horrible birth defects. Which is precisely what happened in the 1950s. So chiral, chirality, mirrored images, right? Active, inactive, good, bad.

Returning to the question of assessing the role of dialogue to deter illegal and/or immoral behavior, this monologue creates a space for the audience to interpret Walter's subtle change as justifiable, or at very least unnoticeable: a mirrored image of his presented self as an upstanding chemistry teacher and his hidden self as a producer of methamphetamines. This interpretation is possible because his change is "chiral" in nature; although he "looks" the same, his behavior has changed. By providing the example of the Thalidomide, the audience can conceive of Walter as both *good* and *bad* simultaneously.

As the episode progresses, however, this balance between good and bad shifts to the consequentialist perspective when, upon discovering that Krazy 8 did not die from the effects of the phosphine gas, Walter and Jesse face the deeper dilemma of killing a man who no longer poses an imminent threat. Walter attempts to rationalize the possibility of letting him live in the following dialogue:

WALTER. In other words, what is his reputation for violence?

JESSE. Well, um, he did try to kill us both yesterday, so there's that.

WALTER. Look, what I'm trying to say is that he's a distributor, right? He's a... He's a businessman. He's a man of business. It would therefore seem to follow that he is capable of acting out of mutual self-interest, yes? What? Do you think he is capable of listening to reason? I mean, what...? What kind of reason? You mean, like, "Dear Krazy-8, hey, listen, if I let you go, you promise not to come back and waste my entire family? No Colombian neckties? You mean that kind of reason? No, man, I can't say as I have high fucking hopes where that's concerned.

This interaction highlights the dilemma that Krazy 8 is still a viable threat to Jesse, Walter, and his family. Yet, Walter's moral impulse still seeks to discover a viable alternative to killing. In this interaction, Walter attempts to ward off thoughts of justification and to persuade himself that a possible way to allow Krazy 8 to live

and to protect himself, his family, and Jesse exists. The simple fact that Walter wants to not kill Krazy 8 allows the audience to identify with the character. It creates space for justification to arise. That is, as long as Walter exhausts every possible resource and idea to avoid killing Krazy 8, if in the end it is not avoidable, then murder is justifiable.

Jesse attempts to help assuage Walter's guilt about the prospect of killing Krazy 8 in the following dialogue:

JESSE. So, hey, have you, um? Have you done the...? The thing?

WALTER. Yeah, I'm... I'm working up to it.

JESSE. You know what? I bet he doesn't even wake up. You know, not even if you took him to the hospital right now. Now, if it was me, I would just try and think of it like I was... I was doing him a favor.

By framing the situation hypothetically as a "no-win" situation, Walter can view the murder as a kindness instead of an immoral act. In a similar vein to putting down a dying dog, Walter's actions can be viewed as humane, rather than depraved, if death is certain regardless of when it happens or whether or not Walter is involved. However, this logic is dislodged as Krazy 8 wakes up when Walter attempts to kill him. Krazy 8 asks for water, and in all of his humanity, Walter brings him not only water, but food as well—even a bucket for a toilet, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer. In essence, this scene, in juxtaposition to Walter's conversation with Jesse, humanizes Krazy 8 at the same time that it humanizes Walter. This diminishes the capacity for justification and increases the audience's awareness of the consequences Walter faces if he chooses to kill Krazy 8. Thus, the scene supports a consequentialist perspective, even in light of the deontological perspective witnessed in the previous scene.

### Season 1: Episode 3 "...And the Bag's in the River"

The beginning scene of Episode 3 opens with a bird's eye view of Walter and Jesse cleaning up the dissolved remains of Emilio, Jesse's former partner. Filmed through a pane of glass, Walt and Jesse wipe the glass clean of blood, tissue, bone, and partially disintegrated body parts. The grotesque nature of the scene settles in the

viewers' stomach as both very real and unbelievably horrific, drawing a hard line between the realities of life and death. The visceral scene reduces the human form down to inanimate matter and trace elements. This accomplishes a disorientation, because even though what lies within the eye of the viewer was once a living organism, it is now nothing more than the chemical elements of the human body broken down by acid.

Dialogue of a flashback from Walt's memory as a graduate student overlays this scene. Together, he and a friend begin to list all of the chemical elements that make up the human body: hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, carbon, calcium, iron, magnesium, and so forth. But they still come up short of the complete mass of the human body:

WALTER. So the whole thing adds up to...99.888042 percent. We are 0.111958 percent shy.

GRETCHEN. Supposedly that's everything.

WALTER. Yeah? Mm-hm. I don't know, it just... It just... It seems like something's missing, doesn't it? There's got to be more to a human being than that.

This reduction of life to the sum of chemical elements evokes a dehumanization of the victim, causing the viewer to see him as only a combination of lifeless elements. This desensitization is left hovering in the minds of the viewers for nearly the entire episode before the show juxtaposes a consequentialist perspective of the situation. Later, the episode again flashes back to Walter and his friend's experiment to discover the entirety of the human form and, being unable to account for the smallest percentage, Walt asks the question: what could possibly be left? His friend replies: the soul. Entering this discussion about the existence and presence of a soul minimizes the dehumanization of Emilio in the opening scene and reestablishes the moral conflict of murder.

This idea is explored further in the episode when Walt is faced with killing Emilio's partner, Krazy 8, who survived the chemical exposure Walt used to defend himself against the attack of Emilio and Krazy 8. Jesse and Walt chain Krazy 8 to a pole in the basement by his neck using a bike lock. Walter faces the problem of whether to kill Krazy 8. At a pinnacle moment, Walt begins to make a pro/con list

to determine whether or not he should kill him. This list epitomizes the conundrum of the deontological/consequentialist stance. Essentially, Walter must ask himself if saving himself and his family was a "good enough" justification for breaking his moral code of believing that murder is wrong. Throughout the entire episode, Walt tries to humanize Krazy 8 in an attempt to eliminate the risk of death to him and his family if he lets him go.

KRAZY 8: You hope I just drop dead and make it easy on you, don't you? Walter, I don't know what you think you're doing here, but trust me, this line of work doesn't suit you.

Here, Krazy 8 foreshadows the monumental change Walter will have to go through to adapt to the ruthless nature of the business. He cannot casually enter the world of methamphetamines and expect that it does not have consequences—although that is exactly how Walter is approaching the situation. He seeks to eradicate any part of the overall system that does not fit within his schema for the rationalization and justification of his involvement. Krazy 8's statement highlights this dissonance and contradiction by pointing out the fragile nature of Walter's character. He is not capable, at that moment, of committing murder; however, Krazy 8 points to the fact that within the drug business, murder is simply a consequence. It is necessary. It is common. It is inevitable.

### Season 1: Episode 6 "Crazy Handful of Nothin"

Two significant exchanges happen in Episode 6 that pertain to the conversation of moral codes. The first occurs at the beginning of the episode. As Walter and Jesse attempt to start fresh after the Emilio and Krazy 8 fiasco, Walter attempts to lay down "ground rules" about how the operation will run. In the following dialogue, Walter tries to separate himself from the consequences of his involvement. What he does not see, does not exist:

WALTER. Let's get something straight. This, the chemistry, is my realm. I am in charge of the cooking. Out there on the street, you deal with that. As far as our customers go, I don't want to know anything about them. I don't wanna see them, I don't wanna hear from them. I want no interaction with them whatsoever. This operation is you and

me, and I'm the silent partner. You got any issues with that?

JESSE. Whatever, man.

WALTER. No matter what happens, no more bloodshed. No violence.

In this interaction, Walter attempts to set moral ground by eliminating the presence of any knowledge of the effects of his “product.” Later in the episode, Walter’s efforts to moralize his part in the process disintegrates when he can no longer finish the batch of meth because of his lungs. It is also at this juncture that Jesse learns of Walter’s cancer and comes to understand the reasons for Walter’s involvement:

JESSE. God. I get it now. That's why you're doing all this. You want to make some cash for your people before you check out.

WALTER. You got a problem with that?

JESSE. You tell me. You're the one that looks like he just crawled out of a microwave. You gonna be able to finish the batch?

WALTER. Yes.

JESSE. All right.

WALTER. No. You do it.

JESSE. Me?

WALTER. Yeah. What happened to your mad skills? Go on. Here. You do it. You can do it. If you have any questions, I'll be right out here.

In this interaction, Jesse highlights the importance of why Walter is involved in the operation as he provides dialogue that justifies Walter’s actions. Through the perspective of Jesse, you get the reinforcement and confirmation that what Walt is doing is acceptable. The ends justify the means. Yet, the consequentialist view remains as Walter’s invisible lines between production and distribution disintegrate

and he is forced to ask Jesse to finish the batch. Those lines drawn at the beginning of the episode start to blur. He cannot physically make the meth, and therefore must rely on Jesse to do it for him. This dependence highlights the fact that Walt cannot separate out what he is doing from what Jesse is doing. He cannot escape the consequences.

A second interaction of importance comes, again, from Walter's teaching as he explains the difference between slow and fast change in chemical reactions:

WALTER. Chemical reactions involve change on two levels: Matter and energy. When a reaction is gradual, the change in energy is slight. I mean, you don't even notice the reaction is happening. For example, when rust collects on the underside of a car, right? But if a reaction happens quickly, otherwise harmless substances can interact in a way that generates enormous bursts of energy. Who can give me an example of rapid chemical reaction? Hint, hint. Right here.

STUDENT. Like, an explosion?

WALTER. Yes, good. Explosions. Explosions are the result of chemical reaction happening almost instantaneously. And the faster reactants, i.e. Explosives...And fulminative mercury is a prime example of that. The faster they undergo change, the more violent the explosion.

This dialogue acts as a metaphor for the change that Walter is going through. It is a slow transformation—so slow that you will not even notice until it actually happens (like the rust). This dialogue serves a combination of both justification and consequentialism. It is easy to justify a change that we do not see happening. Yet, at the same time, the end product is still damaging, even if it comes on slowly, instead of an enormous assaultive explosion. So, while Walter's change is metaphorically happening in gradual terms, this dialogue foreshadows the consequences to come from Walter's actions. Additionally, it foreshadows the random bursts of energy that will accelerate Walter's change.

This episode also depicts Walter's first major physical change. Walter is found in his bathroom, taking dozens of pills for his chemotherapy, and looks at himself in the mirror to notice his hair falling out. At this juncture Walter decides to shave his head. This physical transformation is an insight into the consequentialist view.

This perspective is reflected in an interview with Gilligan discussing his pitch to producers saying: “I told them: ‘This is a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr. Chips into Scarface.’” (MacInnes). Walter’s attempts earlier in the episode to separate himself from the distribution portion of the work, saying “no matter what, no more bloodshed,” with a full head of hair, followed in sequence by a scene of Walter emerging from a burning building with a fully shaven head, draws attention to this movement from Mr. Chips to Scarface as indicated by Gilligan. That is, the change in Walter’s appearance operates as an indicator of the internal moral changes happening within Walter.

This change, in turn, leads to the last interaction of the episode between Walter and Tuco, the “new” Krazy 8. In attempting to sell the product to Tuco, Jesse is beaten to the point of hospitalization. From guilt, Walter blurs the lines even more by going to Tuco to make right for Jesse. His emotional connection to Jesse forces Walter to cross his own boundaries by participating in the distribution side of the business. He cannot “just” be the cook; by the very nature of the business, he must be a part of the entire operation. In doing so, Walter cannot remain blind to the consequences of his role in producing the meth. This scene also portrays the first mention of Walter’s alter-ego, Heisenberg. The presence of an alias provides a vector of transformation. Walter can leave behind his identity as “Walter White,” high school chemistry teacher, father, husband, and law-abiding citizen, and can transform in and out of this alter ego to deal with the immoral aspects of his contribution to the production of meth.

Ultimately, the presence of the alter ego is an indicator of a consequentialist perspective. The only way that Walter can blind himself from the consequences of his actions is to split off the part of himself that cannot morally deal with the consequences of his actions. Thus, the alter ego, Heisenberg, allows for Walter to justify his actions, while at the same time, still promoting a consequentialist perspective.

### Season 1: Episode 7 “A No-Rough Stuff-Type Deal...”

An interesting conversation begins to emerge in Episode 7, beginning a conversation that problematizes the conceptualization of laws and its ties to morality. The episode is a series of conversations and events that bridge the gap between justification and moral consequences. The first interaction is between Walter and Skyler. While in a school meeting, Walter puts his hands between

Skyler's legs and attempts to please her sexually under the table. Later, in the parking lot, Walter and Skyler have sex in their car.

SKYLER. Where did that come from? And what was it so damn good?

WALTER. Because it was illegal.

In this interaction, Walter draws to light the appeal of breaking the law. This highlights the excitement and enjoyment that can accompany doing something that is not supposed to be done. In the context of a sexual encounter between husband and wife in a high school parking lot, the audience can dismiss the moral implications of the rules broken simply based on physical location of where the act happened. The severity of the infraction was small; therefore, the breaking of the law can be justified.

Another moral indicator of this episode comes when Skyler's sister, Marie is revealed as a closeted-shoplifter—something that Hank has covered up with his law enforcement privileges. In another scene, Walter and Hank sit on the patio, and Hank takes out a Cuban cigar:

WALTER. Now, I was under the impression... ..that these were illegal.

HANK. Yeah, well, sometimes forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest, doesn't it?

WALTER. It's funny, isn't it? How we draw that line.

HANK. Yeah. What line is that?

WALTER. Well, what's legal, what's illegal. You know, Cuban cigars, alcohol. You know, if we were drinking this in 1930, we'd be breaking the law. Another year, we'd be okay. Who knows what will be legal next year.

HANK. You mean like pot?

WALTER. Yeah. Like pot. Or whatever.

HANK. Cocaine? Heroin?

WALTER. I'm just saying it's arbitrary.

HANK: Well, you ought to visit lockup. You hear a lot of guys talking like that. "Hey, man, what you busting me with these 14 bales of ganja? It's all going to be legal next year when Willie Nelson's president. " Say it, buddy. It don't only go one way either. I mean, some other stuff is legal that shouldn't be. I mean, frigging meth used to be legal. Used to sell it over every counter at every pharmacy across America. Thank God they came to their senses on that one, huh?

In this interaction, Walter's perspective represents lawmaking as arbitrary and inconsistent when he mentions prohibition. From this perspective, breaking the law can be justified if laws have arbitrary definitions, purposes, and affects. Walter's perspective undermines the connection between legality and morality insofar as it ignores the difference in severity of harm between alcohol and cigars comparative to the harm of heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamines.

But Hank promptly points out the flaw in Walter's logic when he reverses the analogy and suggests then that if somethings are illegal that should not be, then does it not also follow that there are some things that are not illegal that ought to be? This perspective follows the viewpoint of the consequentialist perspective by highlighting the purpose of the law: to protect. The determination of what is legal and illegal may not always be logical, but it is not as arbitrary as Walter portrays it to be. This reveals the fact that, again, Walter is struggling to justify his involvement with producing meth. The fact that the internal struggle exists indicates the consequentialist perspective. If the action were truly "harmless" or without consequence, then Walter would not feel the need to justify his actions.

### Mirroring/Making Reality

This research posed three research questions related to the relationship between media and morality and proposes an argument that *Breaking Bad* supports a consequential perspective on moral codes pertaining to legality and morality. Additionally, I argue the analysis of the plotline, character development, and

dialogue reveals a relationship between popular television and moral codes and promotes a relationship between legality and morality as entwined, thus, deterring illegal behavior based upon the theoretical frameworks of deontology and consequentialism. This argument is supported by the analysis that demonstrates that the juxtaposition of Walter's attempts to justify his involvement in producing meth is outweighed by the overarching presence of the consequences of him doing so. With each attempt he makes to eradicate the consequences of his actions, his justifications cannot withstand the moral demands of reality.

Ultimately, the show creates dissonance in the audience about whether or not to "root" for a main character whose foreshadowed transformation can only lead to that which the audience abhors. It is both frightening and enticing to the audience to watch this transformation happen, but, ultimately, the consequentialist perspective must be upheld in light of the dialogue, interactions, and scenes highlighted in this article. This provides a rich data set to interpret, particularly as it relates to the show's receptivity and physical location in current political conversations on the war on drugs and the necessity of a border wall between the United States and Mexico to prevent the movement of drugs across the border.

Returning to the fundamental elements of consequentialism, *Breaking Bad* creates in its audience not only a reality which subscribes to a utilitarian mindset, but also reinforces cultural myths correlating immoral and illegal drug activity to actual physical places and spaces due to it being set in Albuquerque rather than a fictional location. New Mexico remains (before and after the series) the second most impoverished state, and Albuquerque ranked as the eleventh most dangerous city in the United States in 2018 (Federal Bureau of Investigation Crime Data Explorer). Additionally, nearly five years after the concluding episode of *Breaking Bad*, Mike Gallagher of *The Albuquerque Journal* investigated drug crimes in New Mexico particularly as they are related to New Mexico's proximity to the Sinaloa and Juarez Mexican cartels. Gallagher comments that "while we in New Mexico focus on drug-fueled property crimes...our state is much more than a local market. It is a primary corridor for the cartels to ship drugs nationwide" (*Albuquerque Journal*). The article goes on to report that "They made 104 cases in four months, almost overwhelming the ability of the U.S. Attorney's Office to handle," yet this remains a nationwide problem pinned on border states such as New Mexico.

In an interview with *Press-Enterprise*, Gilligan stated that *Breaking Bad* was originally intended to be set in Riverside, CA. But *Breaking Bad* producers relocated its shooting location because of a tax credit offered by New Mexico,

initially intending to film in New Mexico and retain the setting of Riverside; however, once producers arrived in Albuquerque and investigated drug crimes in New Mexico, a new vision for the development of a story surrounding methamphetamines and drug trafficking quickly emerged (*Press-Enterprise*). This relocation created an even bigger tie between the poverty of New Mexico and drug-related crimes. When paired with a consequentialist perspective linking legality and morality, this decision creates a reality which promotes a vision of border states/cities as deficit in moral codes and character. While the lived reality of high crime rates in New Mexico are arguably an accurate depiction of certain actualities, the consequentialist perspective promoted in *Breaking Bad* reinforces a myth which isolates drug problems in the United States as a border issue.

Placing this within the context of a political climate in the United States under the Trump administration promoting a border wall between the United States and Mexico, the implications of these ideological assumptions being fostered in *Breaking Bad* arguably have the potential to impact not only the perceptions of its viewers but also has the potential to alter the very laws of which it is in judgement. As noted by Alan Gomez in mainstream news media, the Trump administration has “repeatedly pointed to the flow of drugs across the southern border as proof that a [border] wall is needed” (USA Today). Yet, as pointed out in an NPR interview with Donald J. Trump, “the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has reported that the vast majority of drugs, illegal drugs, come through legal ports of entry,” questioning the role of a border wall in preventing illegal drug trafficking (Newsday). In the same interview, former Deputy Drug Enforcement Administrator Jack Riley noted the impracticality of large shipments of drugs being moved across the border at non-entry locations and that while he believes a wall would “slow down...illegal immigration...it will have little effect on the large amount of narcotics that are coming into the country” (Inkeep). Pulling these facts together demonstrate the rhetorical strategy predicated on fear tactics linking the drug trade industry to morally bankrupt cartels—with inseparable racial and nationalist ties—as a means to rationalize a border wall.

In tandem with these rhetorical maneuvers to justify a US border wall, *Breaking Bad's* portrayal of Albuquerque as a methamphetamine hub between the United States and Mexico, while simultaneously promoting a consequentialist view that denotes immorality, has the potential to reinforce cultural myths surrounding nationalism. Gallagher reports drugs from cartels supplies heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana to locations as far and wide as New York

City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Alabama, Oklahoma, Minnesota and parts of Texas (*Albuquerque Journal*). And while many of these drugs are crossing at border entry points, the widespread drug problem across the United States becomes invisible through media representations such as *Breaking Bad* that give these drug problems a specific location—enhancing the rhetorically-constructed vision of morally corrupt drug dealers from Mexico crossing our borders bringing not just drugs but crime and delinquency. This rhetoric can be seen littered in media outlets and press conferences. When announcing his candidacy for President of the United States, Trump stated: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best...They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” (*Washington Post*). Phillip Bump of the *Washington Post* notes that “Trump has tied illegal immigration to the opioid crisis specifically and illegal drug smuggling broadly” (*Washington Post*). Thus, returning to the third and final research question, this analysis demonstrates how the specific elements in *Breaking Bad* carries with it rhetorically-salient and philosophically-grounded perspectives that support current political arguments backing racially-driven policies, having widespread impacts.

Future research into other popular television series with similar themes such as *Narcos*, *Queen of the South*, and the popular spin off *Better Call Saul* could substantiate a consistent pattern of consequentialist perspectives being used to reinforce dominant ideologies surrounding the connection between morality and legality as it pertains to cultural myths sequestering drug-related crime as a regional issue. Furthermore, future research has the potential to look closer at issues of race, gender, and sexuality as it pertains to the consequentialist themes present in drug-related crime television.

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