

Match Point



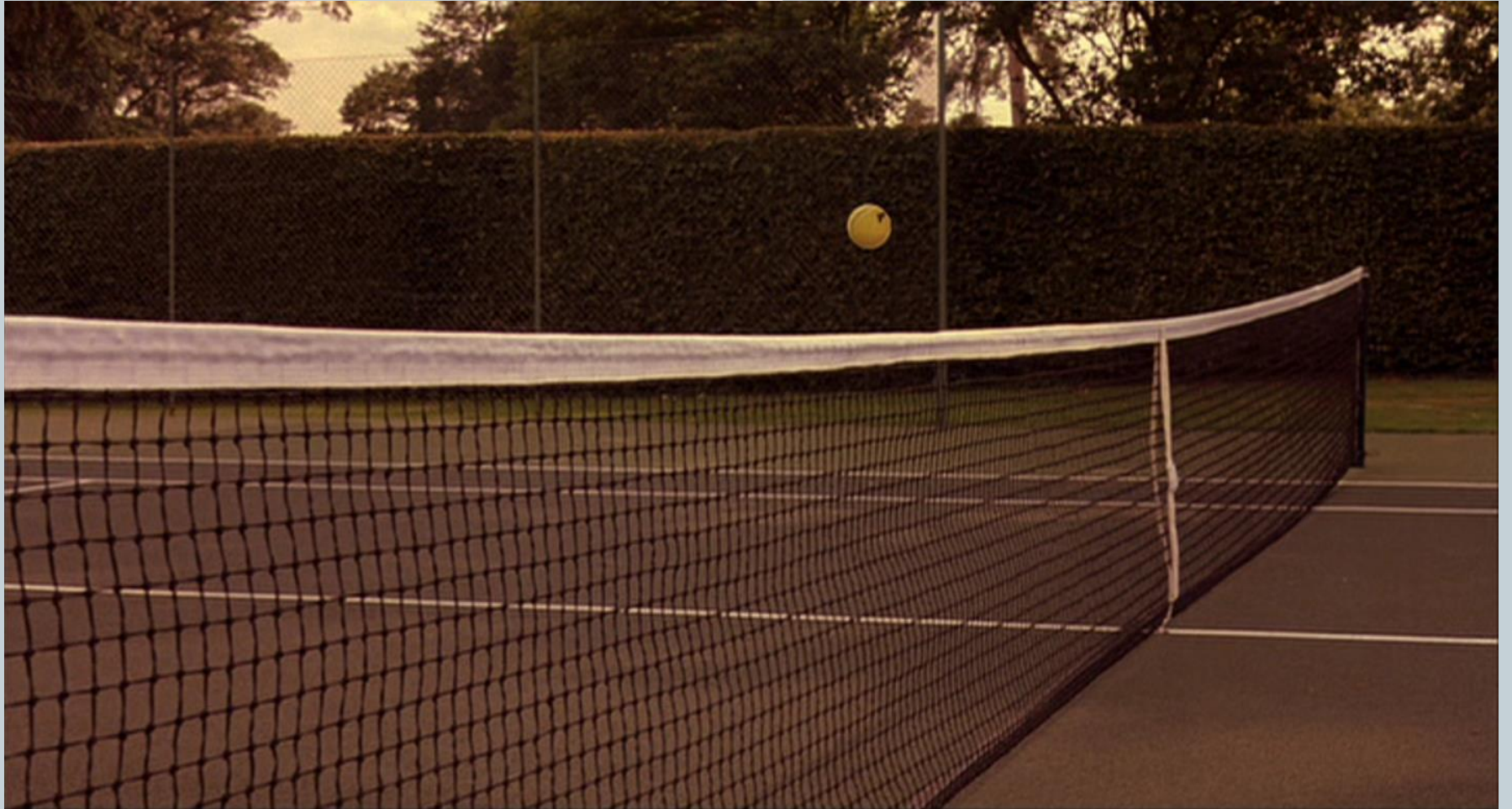
ETHICAL DILEMMA -- GREED OR LUST?



- At the heart of Woody Allen's *Match Point* there's a question about the essential nature of the universe we live in...
- Is it a just and moral universe?
- Or is it a universe that is completely uncaring about what is just, right, and good?
- Allen's answer to this question (at least in this film) is an unequivocal "the universe doesn't care"
- In fact, what happens to us is mostly a matter of luck, nothing more.



- This idea of luck is presented at the very outset of the film when the central character Chris Wilton (who is a tennis champion) compares life to a common phenomenon in tennis where, during a play, the ball hits the top of the net. He says,
- *The man who said “I’d rather be lucky than good” saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It’s scary to think so much is out of one’s control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net and for a split second it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck it goes forward and you win. Or maybe it doesn’t and you lose.*





- Much of what is philosophically relevant in the film is contained in this opening monologue.
- Before I get to that, let me just give you a brief overview of the plot.
- So Chris Wilton of the above monologue is a tennis professional from Ireland who has a job as a tennis instructor at an upscale club in London.
- At the club he strikes up a friendship with a wealthy pupil, Tom Hewett, after discovering their common affinity for opera.
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- During a family gathering, Chris meets Tom's American fiancée, Nola Rice, and they are instantly attracted to each other.







- Tom's mother, Eleanor, does not approve of her son's relationship with Nola, a struggling actress. This is a source of tension in the family.
- This is not the case with Chris Wilton, whom the family, including the mom wholeheartedly approve of.
- In fact, Chloe persuades her father, Alec, to give Chris a job as an executive in one of his companies.



- Alec does so, and Chris begins to be accepted into the family. As a result, marriage is discussed.
- One afternoon, after Nola has a major disagreement with Eleanor (the mom) she leaves the house in anger during a thunderstorm.
- Chris follows Nola outside and confesses his feelings for her, and they passionately have sex in a wheat field.







- Nola feels extreme guilt over this, but Chris does not...
- He wants to pursue an ongoing clandestine relationship.
- In the meantime he also wants to marry Chloe (which he does)...
- For various reasons Tom and Nola end their relationship and Nola (to Chris' disappointment) disappears.
- While Chloe desperately tries to get pregnant in a very clinical way (did I mention that there's almost no passion in Chris' and Chloe's marriage) Chris tries unsuccessfully to track down Nola.



- By pure luck, he meets Nola sometime later at the Tate Modern and he's able to get her phone number.
- Despite Nola's reluctance, they begin a passionate and torrid affair.
- And then the inevitable happens...
- While Chris is spending time with his wife's family, Nola calls to inform him that she is pregnant.



- Panicked, Chris asks her to get an abortion, but she refuses, saying that she wants to raise the child with him.
- She urges Chris to divorce his wife, and he feels trapped and finds himself lying to Chloe as well as to Nola.
- Nola confronts him on the street outside his apartment and he just barely escapes public detection.
- At this point Chris begins to consider his options and cooks up a scheme.



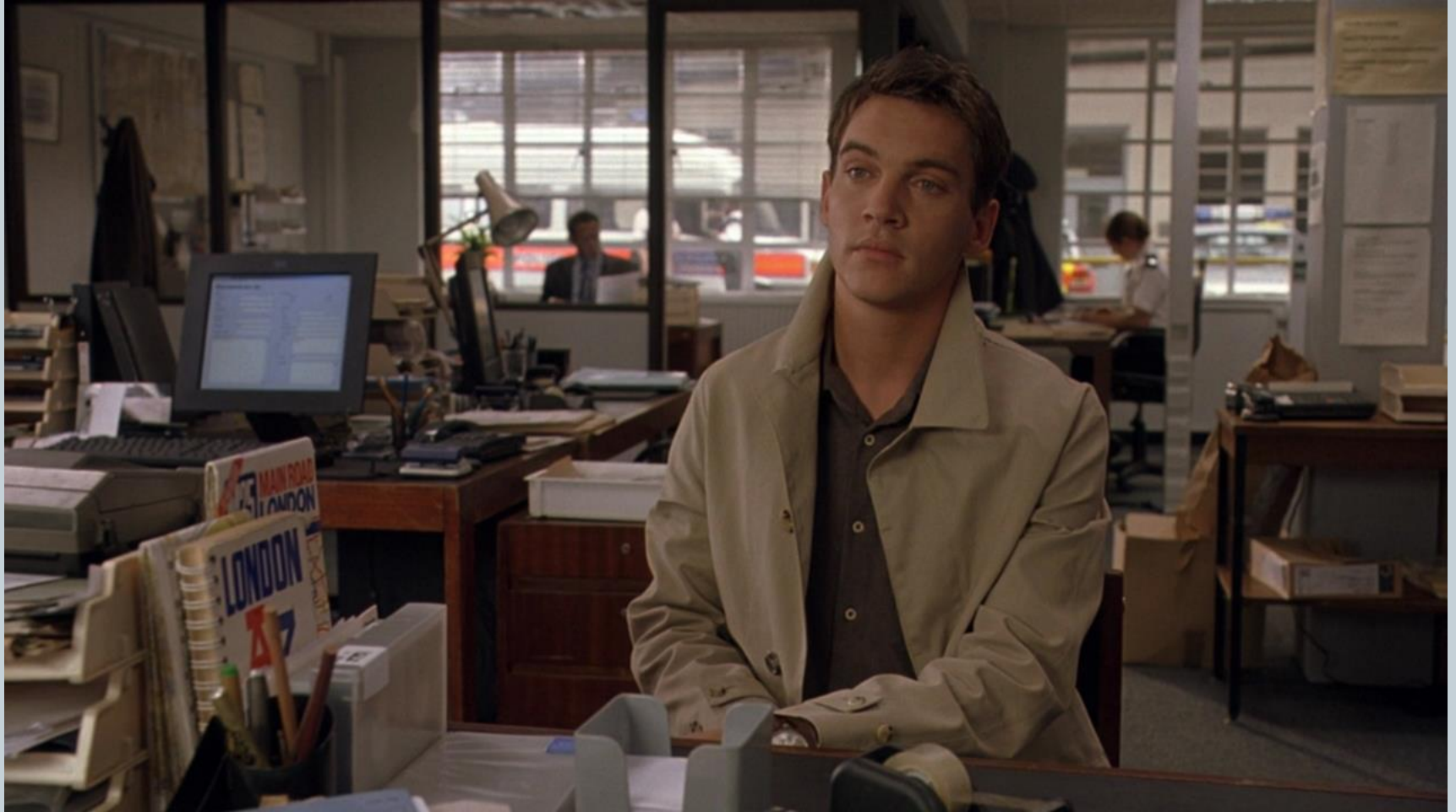
- Soon afterwards, Chris takes a shotgun from his father-in-law's home and carries it to his office in a tennis bag.
- After leaving the office, he calls Nola on her mobile to tell her he has good news for her (purportedly that he asked Chloe for a divorce).
- He goes to Nola's building and gains entry into the apartment of her neighbor, Mrs. Eastby, whom he shoots and kills and then stages a burglary by ransacking the rooms and stealing jewelry and drugs.



- As Nola returns, he shoots her in the stairwell.
- Chris then takes a taxi to the theater to watch a musical with Chloe.
- Scotland Yard investigates the crime and concludes it was likely committed by a drug addict stealing money.
- The following day, as the murder is in the news, Chris returns the shotgun and he and Chloe announces that she is pregnant.



- Detective Mike Banner invites Chris for an interview in relation to the murder.
- Before he goes in to see the detectives, Chris throws Mrs. Eastby's jewelry and drugs into the river, but by chance her ring bounces on the railing and falls to the pavement.
- This imagery ties in to the opening scene when the tennis ball hits the net, but bounces back.
- At the police station, Chris lies about his relationship with Nola, but Banner surprises him with her diary, in which he is featured extensively.





- He confesses his affair but denies any link to the murder, and appeals to the detectives not to involve him further in their investigation as news of the affair may end his marriage just as he and his wife are expecting a baby.
- One night, Chris sees apparitions of Nola and Mrs. Eastby, who tell him to be ready for the consequences of his actions.
- He replies that his crimes, though wrong, had been committed for a "grand scheme", and that he is able to suppress his guilt.



- That same night, Banner dreams that Chris committed the murders.
- The next morning, however, his theory is discredited by his partner, Dowd, who informs him that a drug addict found murdered on the streets had Mrs. Eastby's ring in his pocket.
- Banner and Dowd consider the case closed and abandon any further investigation.
- Chloe gives birth to a baby boy named Terence, and his uncle Tom blesses him not with greatness but with luck.

Philosophical Ideas



- As I mentioned at the beginning luck seems to be (according to Allen) a significant force in the universe.
- Despite his corrupt moral nature, Chris Wilton comes out unscathed. In fact, he ends up affluent, with a beautiful family and a loving wife.
- It must be mentioned that Allen channels some ideas from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.
- In fact, early on in the film Wilton is seen reading the novel.



- In *Crime and Punishment* the character Raskolnikov kills two women to prove that he is a superior being.
- In doing this he is racked by guilt and seeks redemption by confessing his crime and finding God.
- Wilton too, kills two women but unlike Raskolnikov shows almost no guilt.
- In fact, unlike Raskolnikov Chris Wilton does everything in his power to avoid detection and manages to do so by pure luck – *had the ring fallen into the river rather than the sidewalk it would not have been picked up by a homeless person and the detectives would have continued to pursue him.*



- Allen seems to be arguing that there is neither a God, nor punishment, or love.
- Chris Wilton is completely self centred and is forced to choose between his greed or his lust.
- Wilton doesn't even seem think that what he does is a matter of choice.
- In his universe, things happen by way of fate and luck. Choice has nothing to do with the matter.



- I think that this is the biggest issue that I have with the film.
- Allen's thesis is nihilistic. It seems to suggest that morality is superfluous and that there is no reason to avoid wrong-doing, as long as one can get away with it.
- If this, indeed, is Allen's message it is problematic in that it does not, in any way, conform to reality.
- While in the real world luck plays a bit of a role, it is not the main driving force.
- In fact, if we go back to Allen's tennis analogy, a tennis match is almost never decided on a lucky bounce.
- The same is true of a person's life or career.



- In this film though Chris Wilton gets multiple lucky breaks being able to hide his ongoing affair and his multiple murders.
- There are a number of things that just don't add up.
- It's hard to believe that Chris' father-in-law (who is an extremely successful businessman) does not know how to read people well enough to know that he's being played...
 - that his mother-in-law who is unrelentingly suspicious of Nola Rice gives him a free pass.
 - that his wife is not more suspicious than she's presented that he's cheating on her.
 - that his co-workers and managers do not question his frequent and poorly explained absences from the office.
 - that Nola's co-worker, who knows that she was heading to meet her lover the day she was murdered, can't connect the dots.
 - that no one catches Chris sneaking off with a rifle from his wife's family collection, or putting it back.
- In real life sometimes people do get away with murder, but in this case, if one thinks about it there were many instances that stretch credulity.
- In the real world, it's likely that Chris would have been caught.

Moral Responsibility



- If we buy the idea that chance and luck are the main ingredients in human affairs, then we're buying into a form of philosophical determinism.
- In that case we can't hold Chris Wilton responsible for his destructive actions, but neither is he responsible for his successes.
- If that is the way the world works, then none of us can be given credit for our successes or be held responsible for our wrongdoings.
- According to this notion, it is a matter of luck whether or not someone gets caught for his crimes, whether someone succeeds or fails in life, and even whether or not someone gets trapped in a situation in which one feels compelled to commit adultery or murder.



- If one accepts that chance plays a major role in life, the more one relinquishes personal responsibility for how one's life turns out.
- This form of Moral Nihilism is dangerous because it discourages active engagement in pursuing one's goals, while at the same time excusing and encouraging passive resignation to whatever happens in life.
- After all, if life is determined by luck, as individuals we have little control over our own fortunes.



- What the film fails to highlight is the importance of character in shaping what one will become.
- So the most important factor determining a person's life is not chance but the kind of choices one makes when dealing with whatever life gives us, either good or bad.

Discussion



- An important question in the film is one of moral responsibility...
- Assuming we could get away with murder, what would be the incentive to be good?
- In this film Allen does not provide an answer.
- I'm going to open the floor to discussion. There are a number of possible ways to think about it...



Moral/Ethical Nihilism	Platonic Idealism	Aristotle	Deontology Kant	God/Religion	Existentialism
<p>Chris Wilton</p> <p>Nothing is morally right or morally wrong.</p> <p>Get away with whatever you can.</p> <p>Even more extreme than moral relativism, which allows for actions to be wrong relative to a particular culture or individual.</p>	<p>Morality is transcendent.</p> <p>The Form of the Good.</p> <p>Eliminating the activities of the lower parts of the soul and acting solely on the basis of reason</p> <p>Well-being is the highest aim of moral thought and conduct, and the virtues are the dispositions/skills needed to attain well-being.</p>	<p>Virtue is practical...</p> <p>The purpose of ethics is to become good, not merely to know.</p> <p>Claims that the right course of action depends upon the details of a particular situation, rather than being generated merely by applying a law.</p>	<p>The supreme principle of morality is a principle of practical rationality</p> <p>Categorical Imperative</p> <p>Objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must follow despite any natural desires we may have to the contrary.</p> <p>Act according to the maxim that you would wish all other rational people to follow, as if it were a universal law.</p> <p>Duty!</p>	<p>The Ten Commandments</p> <p>Divine Command Theory...</p> <p>Equates morality to adherence to authoritative commands in a holy book.</p>	<p>without God, we are left to choose our own moral choices without any divine guidance, and so must choose well for all humanity.</p> <p>“I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man” (Sartre)</p> <p>Since freedom to choose is the highest good in Existential thought, freedom of the other must be respected in any ethical/moral system constructed.</p>