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Chidella Upendra
Indian Institute of Technology, Indore, India, cupendra@iiti.ac.in

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The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood

Abstract
This is a book review of Sara Anson Vaux, *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 259 pp.

Keywords
Eastwood, Ethics, Redemptive Violence

Author Notes
C. Upendra is an assistant professor of philosophy in the school of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Indore, Indore, India. He is particularly concerned with issues in moral philosophy, political philosophy, and Film and Society. Upendra has published his doctoral thesis from the Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2007 and is working on the reprint edition to be released in 2014. He is also working on a two year research project on "Explaining the Moral Compass: The Dead End of Morality," sponsored by The Indian Council of Philosophical Research. He has also published long review essays in journals like Journal of Public Reason, Political Studies Review, Journal of Baudrillard Studies and REASONPAPERS. He teaches courses like "Understanding Philosophy" and "Philosophy of Film" to undergraduates and courses such as "Foundations of Knowledge," "New Dimensions in Epistemology" and "Foundations of Social Sciences" to postgraduate students.

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Sara Anson Vaux's book *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood* splendidly portrays the career of Clint Eastwood, who is undoubtedly one of the stars of western cinema. From his earlier films to his current day directorial career, one can see a marked change in his artistic and aesthetic imagination on the one hand, and the kind of social and moral appeal his films have on the other. Eastwood's treatment of difficult social issues takes audiences on a ride into the depths of his imagination. Throughout his career, Eastwood's films have broached a number of compelling issues. Although they are rooted in everyday life, they are morally significant because they are ultimately concerned with justice and the human condition.

Anson Vaux has meticulously outlined the 'philosophical' significance of Eastwood films (both as an actor and a director). The ways in which he explores issues like justice, vengeance, and empathy expose the deeper ethical bearings of our thinking in general and our lives in particular. For example, Anson Vaux very rightly points out that almost all of his films carry 'the angel imagery' – an embodiment of the hope that someday humanity (in both an individualistic and collective sense) will be saved from the dangers caused by human beings themselves. This metaphor has symbolic parallels to the idea of a 'deliverer' or 'savior' in Christianity and other world religions too. Indeed, in all the films taken up for discussion by Anson Vaux (*Pale Rider*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Unforgiven*, *Mystic River*, *A Perfect World*, *Gran Torino*, *Invictus*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Hereafter*), traces of the 'messianic view' of the world can be found, which both underscores the theological import of Eastwood's films and also reflects western cinema's fascination with 'apocalypse.' The book also makes, if not explicit, at least a passing reference to the theological significance of our lives - put forth by Eastwood in several ways. His films are about the transcendental validation of our hopes amid human miseries and hopelessness. The reason Anson Vaux uses the term 'transcendental' is that there is always an element of hope (characterized

metaphysically) amid humanity's catastrophic handling of their own affairs. It means that if 'redemption' is not found within the 'human realm', then it drives us to the supernatural domain.

Eastwood's career centers on the eternal tension between the hero and his community, justice and mercy, forgiveness and vengeance, compassion and emotion, and the relentless inner urge for the creation of a better world. In *High Plains Drifter*, Anson Vaux states that Eastwood addresses several questions bothering American society, such as how one brings sense out of lynching and other herd-like human behaviours. Eastwood's films suggest that, to answer these questions, we must approach the past carefully - the way it is treated in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. In this film Eastwood takes up several issues: the relationship between isolation and community, vengeance and mercy, and forgiveness and reconciliation. *Josey Wales* is remarkable in this sense, for it captures the desperation and beauty of the ordinary [27]. It addresses a central question: 'How can one be a stranger in one's own community?' It seems there is no easy way to find reconciliation between individual(s) and society. Consequently, Eastwood's treatment of the past involves a certain demystification of America [41], which is the focus of *Pale Rider* – a film that deals with rescue, retribution, and reconciliation. Here, Eastwood offers a more philosophical treatment of the issue of 'redemptive violence', which seems to be the only way out when 'habits of sin and violence' become inseparable from the human condition [56]. Nevertheless, as it confronts us with the problematic nature of 'violence for the sake of violence,' *Pale Rider* is undoubtedly a daring attempt to understand justice and community differently. Eastwood treats this theme even more directly in *Mystic River*, a film in which child abuse, the stealing of someone's life, arrogance, and the quest for power all reflect an inability to rid oneself of the past and point up the meaninglessness of life. Anson Vaux captures the mood of the film by highlighting the "annihilating path vengeance can take" and by suggesting that "guilt and innocence are

irrelevant, power is all" [85]. She ultimately concludes that, in *Mystic River*, only love can resist the darkness of the human heart [95], which is possible only when one understands what life is all about.

In *Million Dollar Baby* Eastwood explores the growing imperfections of the world in which we live by offering a compassionate take on the end of life. Similarly, in *Changeling*, Eastwood exhibits his concern for moral heroism and the need for something more vital to fight the condition of human moral decadence. Here too Eastwood draws from messianic themes. Yet, like many of his others, this film is ultimately an exploration of 'human frailty,' which is perhaps Eastwood's favorite subject. For example, *Gran Torino* is a film about spiritual and social dislocation, but it is also about the inward turn that drives an individual toward or away from the 'other'. Thus, according to Anson Vaux, there is only one alternative to moral failure in Eastwood's films: compassion for the other. In *Invictus*¸ Eastwood explores this theme through the story of Nelson Mandela, who worked against vengeance and hatred by fostering values like forgiveness, compassion, and co-existence. Anson Vaux puts it magnificently, "Only someone who has experienced violence can understand it enough to transcend it" [187]. Finally, *Hereafter* is about Eastwood's philosophical treatment of human life, focusing on advancing the future into the past.

The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood brings to light five important aspects of a filmmaker's work: (a) the importance of understanding social issues philosophically, (b) the filmmaker's understanding of these issues, and her/his intentions, (c) the aesthetic and sociological impact of these films on the viewers, (d) the tendency for audiences to remain apathetic and simply ignore these issues, and (e) the ways in which these films persuade us to think about the world we have inherited and the world we have made for ourselves. Anson Vaux's book, no doubt, challenges the reader to be more thoughtful about Eastwood's films and, by extension, how we live in the world. The theological significance of Eastwood's

films lies here - as mentioned earlier, in their longing for justice and mercy for human beings. Anson Vaux draws a detailed account of this impulse toward justice and mercy by discussing the repeated appearance of the 'miraculous messenger' in Eastwood's films - the person with no name, who comes from oblivion, delivers a necessary message, and then fades back into oblivion.

Anson Vaux's book is not just an analysis of Eastwood's films but also an analysis of his understanding of life in the material world. In this regard, Anson Vaux rightly says that Eastwood has American history at the back of his mind. Despite their narrative and generic differences, films like *Unforgiven, The Outlaw Josey Wales, Million Dollar Baby* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* all focus on the notion of what human flourishing looks like in an American context. In other words, in an American context that perhaps over-values individualism, Eastwood suggests that it matters how "*I*" am related to the world of other human beings and how "*I*" treat them as my fellow human beings. This is what one can take away from Eastwood films - we are always in need of some kind of intervention (usually manifested in human form) to redeem us from our own created evils.

The book is certainly a fine scholarly contribution and will be of help to researchers in the fields of religion and film in many ways. From the beginning to the end, the book engages us in the world of ethical reflection. Scholars on religion will be helped by both the book and the films analyzed. Scholars of film will benefit from the way the book has carefully translated those cinematic themes into philosophical ideas. In addition to scholars of religion and film, those working in philosophy and American history will also find many insights. The only comment that can be pointed out is that the author could have taken up other films too for analysis, as they also depict, in many more ways, the ingenuity of Clint Eastwood.