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“Ahead of the lawmen”:
Law and Morality in Disney Animated Films 1960 – 1998

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between law and morality in a selection of animated Disney movies released between 1960 and 1998. The authors analyze all of the fully-animated, G-rated movies that grossed $100 million or more (adjusted for inflation) which shaped the childhood of lawyers practicing today. We find that the predominant representation of the relationship between law and morality is that they are at odds. Law most often is portrayed as having no relationship to morality or, even worse, as an obstacle to justice. These findings have implications for theories of law and morality, justice, and ethics. These findings also raise provocative questions concerning the role of mass media and popular culture on children’s moral development and understanding of the role of law.

I. Introduction

One jump ahead of the breadline
One swing ahead of the sword
I steal only what I can’t afford,
One jump ahead of the lawmen
That’s all, and that’s no joke
These guys don’t appreciate I’m broke
-“One Jump Ahead” (song), Aladdin, 1992

By the time American children are four-to-six years old, they have developed a moral code and an awareness of a variety of legal concepts. By first grade, moral orders and understanding of rules shape children’s behavior. Researchers suggest that children’s moral orders vary, are relativistic and still are developing in four-to-six year olds. Parents, friends, and books undoubtedly play a role in shaping these burgeoning moral and legal orders, but the media plays an important role as well. This article
examines the relationship between law and morality in animated Disney movies between 1960 and 1998. Because childhood development experts have demonstrated that media play an important role in shaping moral and legal orders of young people, we examine the movies that shaped the childhoods of those lawyers currently practicing. Our analysis demonstrates that Disney movies often portray an antagonistic relationship between law and morals. This relationship raises questions about the effect of these movies on children’s assessments of the utility of law for solving individual disputes or regulating social and moral orders. Although this kind of conflict may be written off as a plot device (when law fails, violence or “action” becomes crucial for restoring the moral or just outcome), we argue our findings reveal an ambiguous relationship between law and morality that may affect lay people’s understanding of the law and lawyers.

II. Law, Morality, and Movies

Cultural objects such as movies, books, art, and television embody social understandings. This article begins with the premise, shared by the vast majority of scholars of culture and media, that media plays a role in shaping perceptions of the world. At the same time, perceptions of the social world also influence cultural objects. As one scholar of culture asks, is the function of popular culture to propagandize to the masses or “is it about rebellion and opposition to the prevailing social order?” We argue that culture and cultural objects are mutually constitutive. In other words, cultural objects reflect, reinforce, challenge, and dismantle social orders. Culture is at once being reflected by and in cultural objects and being shaped by them.
In this section of the article, we ask how scholars conceive of the relationship between law and morality generally and within movies, we explore theories of popular culture generally for an understanding of how movies might influence popular consciousness, and finally we explain why Disney movies are a suitable object of inquiry for our analysis.

a. Law and Morality – in real life and in the movies

The relationship between law and morality famously has been debated among political theorists, jurists, and philosophers for centuries. It is far too simple to say that the purpose of law is to promote “morality” or even the social good. Legal Positivism most famously expressed by John Austin and later,\(^\text{13}\) contends that there is no necessary relationship between law and morals. Legal positivists point out that law is, at best, conceptually separate from moral and ethical values\(^\text{14}\) or, at worst, nothing more than the rules of the sovereign backed by force.\(^\text{15}\) At the other end of the law/morality spectrum are theorists of Natural Law who believe that just or moral laws emerge from natural circumstances. Laws therefore can be discovered or elaborated by people, but are not made by people. Rather, laws emerge from moral order that transcends individuals.\(^\text{16}\)

Our purpose here is not to argue that law is or is not coterminous with morality in the real world. Rather, we approach our project with an understanding that law and morals are not necessarily related because “there is a contradiction between the needs of the community… and the moral duties of and toward individuals”.\(^\text{17}\) Law and morals (or ethics) have relative definitions. Ethics are individual constructions of understanding harm or suffering while law requires evaluating actual social ills\(^\text{18}\) and minimizing social
disorder. Because law and morality may have different and often contradictory aims, they likely will conflict.

And yet, in the context of a children’s movie in which the moral, just, or correct outcome is unambiguous, it is easy to analyze the role of law (did law, legal institutions and legal processes aid or thwart the proper outcome?) and even children will notice the mechanisms that produce the proper outcome. Moral outcomes are not just generated or thwarted by law, of course. Individual bravery, the power of romantic love, and even magic play a role in achieving “happily ever after,” but we are particularly interested in law.

b. Theories of popular culture analysis and influence

“All audiences...can be seduced” – Griswold

It is difficult to know precisely how media influences affect the world view of individuals and, more fundamentally, what popular culture represents. In other words, “is popular culture there to indoctrinate the people, to get them to accept and adhere to ideas and values which ensure the continued dominance of those in more privileged positions who thus exercise power over them?”20, or is popular culture about resistance to the dominant order? Scholars associated with mass media theory embrace the notion that, as consumers of culture, people passively receive and incorporate ideas in the media they observe.21 More postmodern scholars of mass media state that media and culture are so all-encompassing that people cannot escape them and that ultimately and inevitably, the media create our view of the world.22
The task of this article is not to demonstrate a direct link between how children understand law and morality; such a demonstration would require research with children. We do, however, begin with the supposition that there is some relationship between popular culture, moral development, and understandings of law. As Bandura claimed, “children often do what they see others doing”. Most studies that support such a conclusion relate to smoking tobacco or drinking alcohol. However, a similar effect may be seen in viewers’ perception of law. Bandura’s theory also suggests that people may learn passively, in that one does not have to be actively trying to learn from media to take lessons away from it. “The mere absence of resistance is all that may be required for learning to occur; the substance of entertainment television may be ‘caught’ rather than ‘taught.’”. Furthermore, culture often is represented as a mirror to reality. Because of how pervasive media is in today’s society, “no horizon of expectations is robust enough to withstand the constant onslaught of violence and perversion.” As a result, postmodernism asserts that “this mirror is now the only reality we have.”

We subscribe to a middle-ground approach that emphasizes the interrelationship between media and culture. This approach is known in the literature as a more dialogical theory, which posits that popular culture has influence and constitutive power to help us understand the world around us, but that we also are not “cultural dopes”. In other words, media has “‘framing’ power that limits the range of the decoding and discussion”, but the theory recognizes that we can interpret what we learn from media. “John Fiske used the analogy of mass culture being like a supermarket. People may pick up mass-produced items from the cultural supermarket, but when they cook (make
meanings) they mix these supermarket goods with whatever they have in the pantry at home, thereby individualizing and transforming the final product” .

Several studies suggest that children are more passively receptive to cultural messages, especially ones with legal overtones, than are older children. Carlson states, “older children are more sensitive to the requirements of due process”. This may mean that, in the case of Disney films, they would more commonly reject messages that promote shirking due process for the sake of raw morality.

c. Why Disney?

Disney movies receive much attention and analysis from scholars in a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. Disney movies have been critiqued by critical race scholars for employing racist stereotypes and outmoded gender roles, for promoting and even naturalizing heterosexist norms, and for being culturally insensitive and stereotypical. The moral absolutism that makes Disney movie consumers so comfortable and which give the movies such mass appeal necessarily overemploys standard cultural norms, making Disney films a rich source for analyzing the relationship between law and morality. Because Disney movies follow relatively predictable moral tales, the law nearly always plays a formal or informal role in ensuring or resisting the unambiguously correct moral outcome. And, Disney movies enjoy a tremendous market share, and have lasting impact on loyal audience members.

Disney movies are made for children and they follow predictable patterns. The films are formulaic enough to be familiar and yet innovative enough to be interesting. Once a “magic box office formula” has been discovered, “films recycle themselves in a
number of sequels”. Disney films are not always strict sequels, but they follow remarkably similar character development lines, and portrayals of morality and law. The predictability of the films portrayal of good winning over bad and right beating out wrong is comforting to children and something on which their parents are willing to spend money.

Similarly, children tend to follow moral absolutism over relativism because it is less philosophically complex, and many children may unquestioningly view a protagonist’s rejection of the law, for the sake of supposed morality, as acceptable. Disney is a cultural staple because many people have seen the animated movies that Disney produces. In the previously mentioned study, 96 of the 103 students in the class had previously seen The Little Mermaid, which, when it came out, “generated $84.4 million in the United States in 1989.” Additionally, many young children (the target age group for Disney movies) often watch movies repeatedly in the theater and at home on video, DVD, or now, streaming online, as opposed to older audiences who tend to watch the same movie relatively infrequently. The frequent viewing patterns of youths would suggest that they might absorb such films more deeply than older audiences would of other movies. Disney has become such a cultural force that so many people have experienced that one study asserted that, “These films to [sic] inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values and ideals than more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family.” The fact that Disney’s influence has been placed on par with that of the family shows its immense power in our culture.

*Relativism in Morality and Law*
Let’s take a deeper look at the clash of morality and law; specifically, the idea of taking a particular side in this conflict, depending on the situation. Disney taps into the developing moral systems of children in order to be more appealing to a young audience despite the complexity of relationship between law and morals in the specific situations. In the Kohlberg “model of moral development,” Kohlberg describes a “progression from children acting morally out of desire to avoid punishment from authority figures to a contractual, reciprocal sense of interpersonal morality to eventually a sense of fairness in relation to societal norms and rules codified for the good of the larger social group”.

Most young viewers of Disney likely fall into one of the first two categories of moral development. For viewers in the first category, seeing someone do something immoral and not be punished for it would give these people the idea that such an action was, in fact, moral. For example, seeing Aladdin steal fruit and bread from the market would be seen as completely moral, even though it is blatantly illegal and morally ambiguous.

Even for viewers in the second category, morality is based on interpersonal dynamics; because Aladdin helps starving children and escapes the negative dynamic of police punishment, his actions would be interpreted as moral. Thus, in such a situation, Disney uses the audience’s still-developing moral compasses to portray the protagonist as unambiguously moral, even if his actions tell a different story.

The perspective in Disney films is a form of extreme moral relativism. In Disney, the law is a standard that can be loosely followed, but only when it benefits the protagonist. As soon as the path of absolute morality is more convenient, the protagonist should disregard the law, seeing as it often gets in the way of the protagonist’s “moral” actions. Piaget’s thesis states that children are part of a “developmental sequence” that
results in the “understanding that a person has to take responsibility for one’s behavior and that rules for social conduct are contingent, conventional and negotiable rather than intrinsically correct and fixed across contexts”.

Disney taps into this “developmental sequence” to show children the moral flaws of the law, portraying it to be just as relative as morality itself.

Even in other, nonlinear theories of moral development, “moral practices [are] linked to particular social contexts”. In the theory of symbolic interactionism, norms are set by social experiences, and how we imagine others reacting to our actions.

Disney makes it so that children no longer have to imagine such outcomes; they can see the results of such actions in animated form. If the result is positive (even if the original action was illegal), then children may view the action as moral. Thus, children may base their moral compasses, at least in part, on what they see in the particular contexts of Disney films.

III. Methodology

Our interests lie in the circumstances under which law is consistent with promoting or thwarting morality. And, we are interested in the connection between law and morality among lawyers practicing today. Of course, animated Disney movies would be only one small part of an adult’s moral compass, but it is worth exploring because of the clear moral tales and the ambiguity of law’s role in promoting the right outcomes. We do not subscribe to the idea that there ever was a “golden age” of professionalism during which lawyers were more ethical than they are today. Neither do we mean to suggest that conceptions of morality are formed solely (or even primarily) by osmosis
through Disney movies. However, there is a sense that lawyers today are culpable in (or at least implicated in) what are considered serious moral wrongdoing in civil and criminal law and particularly within corporations.\textsuperscript{50}

To explore the relationship between law and morality in the films that shaped the youth of lawyers practicing today, we look to the most viewed animated Disney films released between 1961 and 1998. Disney released 46 animated films in the period (see Appendix A for the complete list). We limit our analysis to full-length, fully-animated, G-rated feature films which grossed $100 million or more in 2009 dollars. These parameters ensure that we are analyzing the 14 most widely-viewed and influential children’s movies in the period: 101 Dalmatians (1961); Jungle Book (1967); Robin Hood (1973); The Rescuers (1977); The Little Mermaid (1989); Beauty and the Beast (1991); Aladdin (1992); Lion King (1994); Pocahontas (1995); Toy Story (1995); The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996); Hercules (1997); Mulan (1998); and Bug’s Life (1998).\textsuperscript{51}

The authors viewed all of the movies coding all references to law including illegal activity, punishment, criminality, contracts, litigation, and lawyering as well as broader legal/philosophical constructs such as justice and liberty. We began with questions about representations of law’s efficacy or inefficacy in Disney movies. We quickly concluded that law is almost never portrayed efficaciously and yet, the unambiguously moral outcome universally is achieved by the end of the movie.

\textbf{IV. Analysis}
Our analysis of Disney movies demonstrates that the relationship between law and morality in Disney movies is ambiguous at best. Law plays a variety of roles in producing moral outcomes that serve as the climax of all Disney films: law occasionally aids the moral outcome, often is a useless after thought, but most often is an impediment to achieving the proper moral outcome.

a. Law at Odds with morality

Law and morality are most often and most emphatically presented as at odds one with the other in the Disney films that make up our sample. *The Little Mermaid* contains perhaps Disney’s most troubling representation of the discontinuity of law and morals. In *The Little Mermaid*, the protagonist, Ariel, a young mermaid, falls in love with a human, Prince Eric and wants to marry him. In a fit of teenage angst involving resisting her father, King Tritan (the King of the Sea), Ariel seeks the counsel of Ursula, the Sea Witch who collects shriveled shells of mer-people that she enslaves body and soul. Ursula offers to help Ariel telling her that in order to get Eric, Ariel will have to “become human herself.” Ursula is willing to use her magic to transform Ariel’s fins into legs but only in exchange for Ariel’s voice and a contractual “bet” that if Ariel is unable to get Eric to kiss her in three days, Ursula will ultimately own Ariel, body and soul.

This arrangement is sealed with 16-year-old Ariel’s signature on a contract drawn up by Ursula. Ariel is unsuccessful in receiving the kiss due, in no small part, to Ursula’s interference (including using Ariel’s acquired voice to trick Eric). When the three days are over, Ursula exclaims, “She’s mine!” snatches Ariel (whose legs have magically become fins again), and scurries off to her sea cave followed by Flotsam and Jetsam,
Ursula’s loyal henchmen in the form of electric eels. King Tritan is waiting at the Sea Witch’s cave to get his daughter back. As Ariel begins to shrivel, King Tritan points his powerful trident at Ursula commanding, “Ursula, Stop!” The Sea Witch stops only to produce the golden contract with Ariel’s signature. King Tritan attempts to destroy the contract using a powerful force of nature visibly represented by lightning bolts from his trident whose powers have been demonstrated earlier in the movie. The force ricochets off the contract with such power that it pushes Ursula back violently, but the contract remains intact, leaving Ursula to chide King Tritan. Ursula says, “See! The contract is legal, binding, and enforceable. No one can [invalidate the contract]. . . not even you, Tritan.”

Law is represented in two ways in this scene. There is a powerful rule of law message in this scene because “law” cannot be overturned by the will (or force) of the King. In this way, an important principle of law is reinforced – no one, not even the most powerful leader, is above the law. Unfortunately, this Rule of Law principle is completely at odds with the correct moral outcome. At the same time, “law” (in this case contract law) is presented completely formalistically. If the contract is executed, it is binding, regardless of whether the contract is morally bankrupt.

Ariel signs (and is bound by) what clearly is an illegal and immoral contract. The contract is illegal because Ariel is 16 years old (not old enough to enter into a legally binding contract) and she is selling or contracting away body parts. In the United States, there are strict prohibitions on selling body parts. It may be that in the mer-world, sixteen is the age of majority, but the contract also is illegal because it is unconscionable. The doctrine of unconscionability is the
primary mechanism by which fairness and morality are brought into the common law of contract.\textsuperscript{53} Exchanges made when the conditions of power are such that one person basically has no choice, a contract is unconscionable. A contract is also unconscionable if a person is enslaved as a result. Indentured servitude by contract is illegal.

So while there is a so-subtle as almost not to be noticed message about law in which law and morality are in sync (the rule of law, not of men is observed), the abject immorality of the contract is not questioned. Indeed, it is blindly enforced with no mediating party to assess the contract. And when that fails to produce a just outcome, the mer-world is reduced to violence. The reader unfamiliar with the movie will not be surprised to find out that the good guys prevail, Prince Eric manages to destroy the evil Sea Witch, a reflective Tritan decides to allow Ariel to be human, and she and Prince Eric enjoy a lavish Disney princess wedding complete with an enormous white gown (with tiara), rainbows, singing dolphins, and the promise of living happily ever after.

Another example of law being at odds with morality can be seen in the film \textit{Aladdin}. Princess Jasmine is bound by the traditional law found in many cultures of having to marry royalty. This tradition is justified by the desire among elites to make the ruling class more powerful and by the social desirability of marriages that result in financial security. Prince William’s choice of Kate Middleton exemplifies the class-based characteristic of “normal” mate selection in modern society. Even in contemporary American society such customs persist. For instance, current President Barack Obama’s choice to marry Michelle Obama - a Harvard Law School educated attorney – exemplifies the social desirability of marriages resulting in financial security. The President of the United States marrying a low-wage worker would be seen as an unusual
and undesirable outcome, since we expect our leaders to be married to other educated, upper-class people. These dominant cultural norms of “like-marriage-like” reflect the pervasiveness of norms, whether they be informal customs or formal laws.

However, in contrast to formal laws and social customs, an ethical view of *Aladdin* compels us to look at the narrative on an individual level. Aladdin and Jasmine’s feelings for each other make the moral case for marriage (based in love, not dynasty) the correct moral outcome; children know that Aladdin and Jasmine should be married. And, in *Aladdin*’s conclusion, morality (or the importance of a Princess wedding) trumps law. More broadly, in our analyses of Disney films, Disney consistently takes this side, in which the ethics applied to a personal circumstance trumps the formal legal rules and the social rules established in these fictional societies (be they under the sea or in faraway Middle Eastern lands).\(^5\)

*Aladdin* contains other morals-over-law narratives in addition to the main Jasmine-Aladdin romance storyline. For instance, Aladdin’s decision featured at the beginning of this article to steal food from the market is made moral because of individual personal necessity and the morality of sharing -- he and others are able to eat--over the social good of maintaining the necessary standard of having to pay for goods. As a result, *Aladdin* portrays stealing food as moral, even when the stealing is in direct contradiction with the law.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, the illegal detention of Belle’s father in an insane asylum is another instance where law and morals are at odds. The villain Gaston and his conspirator, Monsieur D'arque, devise a plan to detain Belle's father, Maurice, in an
asylum. After Maurice claims to have seen the 10-foot tall beast, Gaston decides to use Maurice’s story to argue that Maurice is insane and needs to be institutionalized. Gaston and Monsieur D'arque go to Maurice’s house and ask Maurice to recount his story of the beast in front of skeptical villagers. The villagers heckle Maurice, and two of Gaston’s thugs grab Maurice. As he tries to struggle away from his captors, Maurice is taken away to the asylum. Gaston then tells Belle that the only way to save her father is for Belle to marry Gaston.

This situation presents yet another instance in which law is at odds with morality. Under the law, a declaration of insanity is one of the only legal ways to indefinitely detain a person against his or her will. The rule of law, therefore, is understood as the basis of Maurice’s imprisonment in the asylum. Gaston and Monsieur D'arque act as executives with the power to apprehend Maurice. Because the rule of law seems to be behind the villains, the villagers do not challenge the villains’ abduction of Maurice. Indeed, the law of insanity is blindly enforced.

“Law” (in this case, law’s execution) is presented as a normal mechanism for exercising power; if a person is insane, s/he belongs in an asylum, even if the basis for the determination of insanity is deceptive and immoral. This scene portrays the message that law cannot be overturned by the will of an individual (Maurice). In this way, the rule of law is reinforced: no one is above the law, and the law validates forceful incarceration if decision-makers conclude it is necessary. Furthermore, Gaston’s efforts to woo Belle into marriage are accepted in Western culture as part of a man’s attempt to court a woman. Historically, legal marriage began with a proposal, and the proposal was - and often still is - expected to come from the man.
However, the Rule of Law is at odds with the desirable moral outcome. Gaston’s ultimatum clearly invalidates the law of contracts because Belle is placed under duress during the decision to marry Gaston. Therefore, any marriage under such conditions is likely to be invalid. Furthermore, Gaston’s misrepresentation of Maurice’s mental state makes Maurice’s forced incarceration illegal. Before being indefinitely detained, Maurice could expect a judge or third-party to independently determine his sanity or insanity. However, in the fantastical time and place of Beauty and the Beast, the heckling villagers constitute the trier of fact, and their “jury decision” solidifies Maurice’s fate in the asylum. No one (except protagonist Belle) challenges the institutionalization of Maurice. As a result, Belle is left on her own to be the sole champion of morality struggling against the rule of law, and moral resolution is not reached until the film plunges into violent conflict.

Protagonists often break the law at the end of films to vanquish the villain (as was the case with Prince Eric exploding Ursula in The Little Mermaid). In these instances, the protagonist’s evaluation of the situation leads toward punishment of the villain that necessarily goes well beyond reparation. These two circumstances differ with respect to who engages in judgment, how the agent and his or her acts are understood (in terms of the assignment of responsibility), and the target of enforcement or punishment. In each of these cases, “the differences are not merely a matter of focus or stress. They involve fundamental incompatibilities”. Hogan describes the contrast in punishment, based on the nature of the harm, saying,

Legal evaluation and action involve principles that push toward reducing our empathic responses to agents (thus, at the extreme, dehumanizing them and substituting a general calculus for the individual focus of humanizing empathy), toward increasing punishments beyond basic reparations (since basic reparations
would not provide a disincentive for future crime), toward foregoing forgiveness. Ethical evaluation and action, in contrast, involve principles that push toward enhancing our empathic response to agents (thus humanizing them, and substituting this empathically individualized humanization for broad calculative concerns), toward reducing punishments to basic reparations (except in the case of the ethical self-evaluation by the agent), and toward genuine forgiveness.  

He goes on to place this contradiction in the context of Aristotle’s works:

Aristotle wrote that we have tragedy when the hero falls due to some action of his or her own, but not due to an evil character. If the hero's character is evil, then we may simply view his or her fall as deserved, thus not tragic. If the hero falls through no fault of his or her own, that "shocks our feelings" (1932, 45). We do not experience tragic fear and pity, but anger. We feel the fall to be tragic only when the hero is guilty, yet not so guilty that we desire the punishment. Punishment goes beyond any given act—for an act, as such, cannot be punished—to the character, which, in this case, is not fundamentally bad. In that way, such punishment goes beyond what is morally necessary. Indeed, from a moral point of view, punishment—at least punishment beyond reparation (which is a sort of undoing of the harmful act)—is always excessive.

We see “fundamental incompatibility” in many conflicts in Disney, especially ones which involve vigilante justice. Frequently, the protagonist in some way punishes the villain for his/her actions, in a way that exceeds the “moral” response. However, when it suits the protagonist to do something that is immoral, no legal response is issued. In both cases, the protagonist is seen as being correct, and the outcome is portrayed as suitable and just.

It can be said, therefore, that Disney takes a legal view of punishment, and an ethical view of transgressions. The punishment in this generation of Disney films is almost always death, which goes far beyond the villains’ transgression. The only clear exceptions to villain death come in the two earliest films in our sample. In the earliest film in our sample, *101 Dalmatians* (1961), Cruella de Vil crashes her car by driving off a small ravine with her two sidekicks as passengers, Their final scene shows Cruella
standing amongst the wreckage yelling at the sidekicks, and crying that the Dalmatians escaped. In the second earliest film, Disney’s 1967 *The Jungle Book*, the villain Shere Khan is last seen being burned in a fire and running away for his own survival. These less severe punishments in earlier films perhaps show a general move by Disney toward more serious and exorbitant punishments. In the later films such as *Beauty and the Beast*, the villain Gaston falls to his death during the final fight with the protagonist Beast. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula explodes at the hands of Prince Eric. In *The Lion King*, Scar is handed over to the hyenas (to be severely maimed or killed, the consequence of which is of no further concern to the protagonist). In *Hercules*, after acting as a lawyer making contracts to acquire people’s souls, Hades is pushed into the pit of condemned souls.

In each instance, Disney’s narrative presents the protagonist’s actual crime from an individualized view in which the excessive punishment to the villain is seen as acceptable. Thus, Disney engages in a fundamental distortion of both categories (morality and legality). Instead of following the definitions and implications of each, Disney picks and chooses the elements that are most convenient for its protagonists. When the protagonist makes the ethical choice, legal punishment is invalidated; however, when the protagonist makes unethical choices (that often permit harm to another, usually the villain), legal punishment – even in excess – is validated.

b. **Law and Morality unrelated**

Law’s tenuous relationship to morality in Disney films perhaps is most palpable when the law is unrelated to protagonist’s moral decision-making. In our sample of Disney films, the protagonist uses the rule of law when convenient; when not convenient,
the protagonist eschews the law. This irrelevance of law as a social control mechanism on the protagonist is most plainly apparent in the often violent outcomes of the films. For instance, in *The Lion King*, after a physical battle with protagonist Simba, villain Scar is cornered and presumably eaten by famished hyenas. In another instance, Jaffar, villain of *Aladdin*, is indefinitely trapped in a Genie bottle and later explodes at the hands of the protagonists.  

Consequently, often law fundamentally has nothing to do with dictating the final resolution of the films. In the most significant final scenes, protagonists ignore the role of law in dictating the villains’ proper punishments. The acts of the protagonists – by definition of their goodness – are justified, even if the protagonists intend to harm to the villains. In the case of Ursula’s death in *The Little Mermaid*, where Prince Eric impales Ursula, the protagonist intentionally causes suffering – and death -- to the villain. Yet, this direct harm seamlessly is part of the moral resolution of the film.  

Therefore, we draw two conclusions about law’s unrelatedness to morality in Disney films. First, law-abiding behavior is unrelated to the identity of protagonists and villains (whose identities are determined by who Disney presents as the ethical protagonist & immoral villain). Second, law is irrelevant in determining a just punishment for the villain; instead, the punishment is determined solely by the moral choice of the protagonist, even if that choice is to kill or assault the villain. In both situations, law is not in direct opposition to ethics (as is the case with Aladdin stealing food as policemen chase him); rather, law is irrelevant. Morality alone determines the outcome, and that moral determination rests solely with the protagonist.
V. Conclusion

Our analysis of Disney films reveals an ambiguous relationship between law and morality. At times, the law is coterminous with morality, but overwhelmingly, law is at odds with morality. Furthermore, the films conclude in ways that present law as unrelated to morality. Although we make no claim on the goodness or badness of these choices, Disney films reinforce a notion that a legal actor always is justified – even to cause others’ harm, suffering, or death – as long as that actor is seen as a protagonist.

Our results raise several questions about child moral development and the consequences of Disney’s portrayal of law and morality. First, Disney’s ubiquitousness has raised the question of whether Disney’s influence on child moral development is as great as that of family. Second, Disney’s ability to tap into children’s “developmental sequence” may make these films contributory to children’s perceptions of the role of law. Disney’s culturally influential narratives are the first messages about law and morality that the current generation of lawyers would have seen, and its potential to influence future attitudes towards law deserves greater consideration.

There are several pieces of information that suggest conclusions contrary to those drawn in this paper. One concern is that television and films may not actually affect the way in which children see the world, or that the effect is more minimal than we would expect. One theorist who raised this potential objection states that, “the size of television’s effects, however, may be less important in the long run than its persistence and pervasiveness”. Another concern is that there is significant scholarly disagreement about how, and in what timeframe, children gain and develop their senses of morality. However, seeing as there is no definitive answer to such a question, we must base our
analysis on the information that does exist, which, overall, suggests a non-linear, cumulative, and contextual development of morality.

The primary concern is that we, as adults, view Disney films inherently differently than do children. Our analysis is bound to be distorted by many more years of life experiences, whereas children (the primary audience) may legitimately not take away any messages of skewed law and morality systems from Disney movies. Buckingham discusses the possibility of “pretentiousness,” and says that the “fear of ‘taking it too seriously’ can also actively inhibit analysis.”\(^{63}\) He says the worst danger is “of assuming that what we perceive to be significant will necessarily be perceived as significant – or indeed, be perceived at all – by the audience”.\(^{64}\) However, as long as we take into account the creation of children’s moral compasses, and the way in which people view Disney movies, studied empirically, we may avoid most of the potential for error raised by Buckingham.

Finally, we also raise the question of whether ambiguous messages about law and morality plant the seeds for future vigilante behavior, as seen recently in lawyers’ roles in the meltdowns of Enron and the financial industry. Future analyses can address the question of whether exposure to moral messages of law’s irrelevancy makes illegal behavior more morally justifiable. Furthermore, we also raise the question of how mass media can foster non-violent legal resolution. Because of the dehumanization and violent fate of the villains in these films, we raise the question of whether the moral message of law’s irrelevancy makes violent outcomes desirable. Such questions and issues must be reserved for future analyses, but Disney’s portrayal of law as unrelated or at odds with morality already is revealed.
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1 [add LBN information here]

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54 We do not argue that this ethics-over-law narrative in Disney films is a “right” or “wrong” choice by the filmmakers. Rather, we make salient the fact that Disney films do not necessarily focus on the social good that may arise from custom or law.


60 The moral maxim determining the fate of the villain can be stated as “bad things can happen to bad people even if the protagonist acts badly.”


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