



Criminal Elements

James Bowman

Let's break it down." A man and a woman in a darkened classroom, flirting, are taking an elemental inventory of the human body. Hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon alone come to 98 percent, nitrogen and calcium tick up to 99.5, and half a dozen more trace elements only bring them to 99.888042—where is the other 0.111958? Supposedly that's everything, the woman insists, but the man is sure there must be something missing. "There's got to be more to a human being than that." What about the soul, the woman suggests? "Ha, there's no soul. There's just chemistry here."

This calculation is overcut with a montage of the same man, twenty-odd years later, cleaning up after the "chemical disincorporation" of his inaugural murder victim (the first of a long line). The victim's soul, if there ever was one, is long since departed, leaving gallons of bloody slosh behind, while the killer's soul, if he ever had one, has just crossed a threshold of its own.

Thus begins the third episode of Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad*, which

debuted on AMC in 2008 and is this summer heading into the second half of its fifth and final season. Walter White, the antihero played by Bryan Cranston, is a high school chemistry teacher in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who receives an unexpected diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer the day after his fiftieth birthday. With his corpus of 99.888042 percent traceable elements breaking down, he breaks bad—applying his scientific expertise to the manufacture of methamphetamine so he can make enough money to provide for his pregnant wife and disabled son after his impending death. Guided by his ne'er-do-well former student Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), Walt plunges into a criminal underworld of ruthless rival drug kingpins governed by little more than Hobbes's *bellum omnium contra omnes*. While fighting to survive in this crowd he must also stay out of sight of what remains of the law, as near to him as his own drug enforcement agent brother-in-law, Hank Schrader (Dean Norris), as, with dread turning to relish, Walt contributes to the disincorporation of civil society.

All of us are uneasily aware that beneath the good civilizational order in which most readers of these pages and viewers of the show continue to live their lives there is a dark alternative where old rules dominate, the Enlightenment's recurring bad dream just waiting for the opportunity to reassert itself. Ironically, it is Walt's Enlightenment credentials as a man of science that are his entrance ticket to this new state of nature. Chemistry, as Walt rapturously tells his less-than-rapt students, is a cycle of "growth, then decay, then transformation"; and while Enlightenment notions of moral progress are implicitly connected to material progress in the advance of science and rationality, the lesson of the science itself is that moral and social transformation is as likely to be cyclical as it is progressive.

Students of history or anthropology are more likely to see the alternative to Western civilization and the rule of law not as the twilight struggle of individual savagery but as the tribal, family-oriented society and the honor culture that actually did precede the Enlightenment's commitment to universal values and that is still predominant in most parts of the world where those liberal and progressive standards have a more precarious hold.

Some of the best television of the last decade or so has explored the tension between Enlightenment liberal

modernity and pre-Enlightenment honor culture. *The Sopranos* treated it playfully, imagining the criminal classes as aspiring to suburban respectability while still hoping to inhabit, out of sight of their New Jersey neighbors, the same Sicilian underworld where their fathers and grandfathers had lived. The sense of the threat posed by that underworld to the dominant culture was less in mind than the threat—or promise—that the dominant culture, with its therapeutic and liberal standards, would swamp the already evanescent honor culture of the Mafia. In *The Wire*, the state of nature was also circumscribed and limited to the streets of Baltimore where the dominant culture with sometimes greater and sometimes less success has managed to contain it by its own legally dubious methods. But in *Breaking Bad*, the state of pre-Enlightenment nature is seen as thrusting its way up from its subterranean hiding places and reasserting itself anew.

As in *The Sopranos*, the violent, frequently deadly criminal world exists alongside the more recognizable one of the show's intended audience, and its main characters live in both, moving with greater or lesser ease between them. In both shows there is a plainly implausible absence or ineffectiveness of the forces of law and order at crucial moments throughout. The difference is that Tony Soprano has a criminal culture, albeit a rapidly changing and increasingly outmoded

one, to guide and inform his actions and Walter White does not.

My favorite example of the many tragicomic ironies Mr. Gilligan draws from the clash of these two parallel worlds comes in Season One when Walt and Jesse have outwitted but not succeeded in killing a murderous drug dealer (Maximino Arciniega), now confined in Jesse's basement and there shackled by the neck to a pole with a bike lock. What are they to do with this person? Walt is still a suburban chemistry teacher and imagines that his dabbling in the crystal meth trade can be conducted on a strictly part-time basis. He recognizes that the prudent course would be to kill the dealer, who goes by the name of Krazy-8 but is actually the son of a local furniture store owner with whom Walt has done business in the past. The two of them engage in an amicable chat about mutual acquaintances as if they were—as indeed they are—Albuquerque neighbors.

Seeking a rational solution to his dilemma, Walt, sitting on the toilet, draws up a list in two columns, one headed “Let Him Live” and the other “Kill Him.” Under “Let Him Live” we are able to read:

- It's the moral thing to do
- Judeo/Christian principles
- You are not a murderer
- Sanctity of life
- He may listen to reason
- Post-traumatic stress

- Won't be able to live with yourself
- Murder is wrong!

Under “Kill Him” there is just one entry: “He'll kill your entire family if you let him go.” It is presumably the remains of Walt's self-respect as a decent, law-abiding citizen of an enlightened country that force him to weigh what he regards as the certainty of his family's murder more or less equally against the moral tenets to which he still feels the necessity to think himself bound. Yet we are also meant to suppose that he would actually have “let him live,” but that, at the last minute before releasing him, he finds incontrovertible evidence that Krazy-8's friendly and anodyne conversation has been only a cover for the fact that he is awaiting this opportunity to kill Walt.

The key objection on the “Let Him Live” side of the ledger is “You are not a murderer,” and Walt's need to think well of himself becomes something of a running joke in the series. Thus, as he strangles Krazy-8 with the bike lock he keeps saying: “I'm sorry; I'm so sorry.” In Season Three, we find Walt saying to his sleazy lawyer, Saul Goodman (the effervescent Bob Odenkirk), “I can't be the bad guy.”

Later in the series, however, while Walt still has to maintain a façade of conventional morality to mask his criminal activities from the community, his increasing pride in his role as a drug-empire-building mastermind

leads him to abandon any genuine scruples regarding his lawlessness. By the middle of Season Four, he tells his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn), who is frantic with worry that he might be in danger from violent criminal associates who will one day come knocking on their door: “I am not in danger, Skyler. I *am* the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I *am* the one who knocks.” Some critics have argued that Walt’s apparent descent into evil is something of an illusion; as Scott Meslow of *The Atlantic* website writes, “The Big Secret of *Breaking Bad* [is that] Walter White was always a Bad Guy.”

I think the big secret is, rather, that Walter has found the way into viewers’ sympathies, pioneered by cowboys and gangsters in the American entertainment industry of past generations, by exempting himself (in his case with the help of his diagnosis) from enlightened ideas of Good and Bad and returning to that frontier state of nature where the only thing that matters is the skill to survive. Or that and a sense of honor. The fact that Walt realizes this before others in the series is what gives him his big advantage over those who still imagine that he, like themselves, must owe something to the moral and legal codes the rest of society supposes itself to be living by.

The point of inflection between Walt’s civilized and frontier selves

is his glorification of autonomy—an ideal that, in the world of Enlightened civilization is formally constructed from *choices* and *consent*, but in the world of the frontier, devolves into raw power. Either might be aptly described by Walt’s pronouncement to a fellow patient, “Never give up control; live life on your own terms.” As the patient points out, this is something of an illusion: “cancer is cancer,” after all. “The hell with your cancer,” Walt snaps. “Right from the start it’s a death sentence. That’s what they keep telling me. Well, guess what? Every life comes with a death sentence.... but until then, who’s in charge? Me! That’s how I live my life.”

Control is so important to Walt that initially he rejects treatment, feeling that he’s being pressured into it while the outcome will be the same regardless. “What I want,” he plaintively tells his family, “what I need—is a choice.” Eventually, however, he bows to pressure and the cancer implausibly goes into remission, liberating him from what seemed like certain doom to live entirely by his own lights. When his son, upset and baffled by changes at home, is given the explanation that Walt suffers from a gambling addiction, Walt rejects this medical determinism even as an exoneration from his weird behavior: “What is going on with me is not about some disease. It’s about choices. Choices I have made. Choices I stand by.”

This ethic of autonomy is even more pronounced in Walt's sometime assistant, Gale Boetticher (David Costabile), a true creature of the Enlightenment, entranced with science as a beautiful ideal. A charming, cultured libertarian, he believes absolutely in the self-determination of rational beings, even towards grave harm. "Consenting adults want what they want," he says, explaining how he happens to be in the meth trade. "And if I'm not supplying it, they'll get it from someone else. At least with me they get *exactly* what they pay for—no added toxins or adulterants." (As a vegan, he is actively opposed to harms inflicted on animals—subrational beings which do not enter into this kind of analysis.)

By contrast, Walt's original and more permanent assistant, Jesse, is human weakness itself. We first meet him climbing naked out a second-story window to evade the police in a routine drug bust. His entire life since at least high school, when he was Walt's uninspired student, has been characterized by minor trouble-making, to the point where he is no longer welcome in his family's home. He cannot be entrusted with any amount of money without blowing it in some asinine way, and there is seemingly no addiction in which he fails to indulge.

But if Jesse is unfit for polite society, he makes a lousy criminal too, never becoming hardened to the reality of what he's doing even as he

continues to do it. In particular, alone among the drug traffickers and to some extent the cast at large, he shows real concern for children. The unexpected presence of a small boy in a junkie household throws Jesse for a loop; what was supposed to be a quick and firm intimidation (the boy's parents had ripped Jesse off) turns into a nightmare as he tries to get his business done without endangering the child. The way Jesse's heart palpably breaks across his face when he realizes that the kid, raised in this mess, does not even know how to play pat-a-cake almost suggests some long-buried trauma of his own—although from everything we know Jesse had a perfectly safe and respectable upbringing. Later, he is appalled to learn of the drug gang's conscription of children as young as ten years old and—to the consternation of his colleagues—takes a militant stand against it. This ends horribly for everyone, but in these and other incidents, it becomes clear that Jesse, at least, has a heart.

These two alternate and opposite assistants cancel each other out when Walt has Jesse shoot Gale to save Walt's own life, but in a deeper figurative sense before that. For good and ill, everything that Jesse stands for puts the lie to the cult of autonomy represented in Gale and Walt's professed beliefs. Children, after all, are the invisible quirks to social contract theory, being not yet rational and able to consent but (unlike

animals) presumably growing into these things with time. Jesse values their vulnerability in a way that his more powerful and intelligent peers do not.

Regrettably, Jesse's concern does not extend to others who are victims of these vaunted choices—that is, people just like himself, the weak, stupid, and self-destructive. Not only Walt and Jesse but the series as a whole seems to regard with contempt the people who actually use the chemical product of their labors, casualties of a form of social breakdown increasingly common in civilized society. Walt and Jesse's meth sales thrive on account of the weaknesses of those who have dropped out of that society and become lesser criminals than themselves. If everyone were as diligent as Walt is in providing for his family, there would be no market for his product and he wouldn't be able to provide for them. But this reminder of the Kantian categorical imperative on which so much of Enlightenment morality is founded has almost no part to play in *Breaking Bad*.

There is a brief flirtation with the question of drug use and its effects on the users when at the end of Season Two and the beginning of Season Three, Jesse is devastated by the accidental death of Jane (Krysten Ritter), his girlfriend and fellow heroin addict, and goes into rehab. But Jesse, suffering much more from grief than from heroin,

gets clean without much apparent effort and thereafter despicably uses his group-therapy sessions to find new buyers for his crystal meth. There is a good joke when a couple of his dimwitted friends do the like and get caught up in the Twelve Step program. But they experience a rare moment of moral feeling when they, and then Jesse, begin to feel pangs of conscience about taking advantage of such vulnerable people. It is one of the hazards of drug retailing that any human contact with one's customers is likely to interfere with one's ability to see them as customers, but soon Jesse and Walt are both relieved to acquire a mostly invisible network of dealers and are thus spared from any necessity of witnessing the human devastation caused by the drugs themselves—as opposed to the competition to make and market them.

Such detachment from the consequences of their actions threatens at times to become an excuse for the series to emulate the less serious manifestations of popular culture by treating crime as fun and criminals as heroes, but we are never very far away from some new reminder of its tragic, real-world consequences, as when children become innocent (or not so innocent) victims. Apart from Hank and his fellow DEA agents, the points of Walt's contact with the world outside the drug trade are mostly limited to those for whom it might as well be taking place in

another country—as, in some episodes set in Mexico, it is. For the show to produce the effects it does, it has to keep always before our eyes Walt’s continued existence in the workaday, bourgeois world which the show’s audience may also be presumed to inhabit. Thus Jesse almost never calls Walt anything but “Mr. White,” as if Jesse still sat in the back row of his high school chemistry class and was jerked awake on being called on unexpectedly.

In the midst of all his forays into the primitive honor culture of the criminal underworld, Walt remains at heart a man of science. And it is indeed Walt’s scientific knowledge and skill as a chemist that enable him to succeed so prodigiously in his new life of crime. Even as an untutored amateur in the violent ways of the drug trade, Walt proves adept at transforming knowledge into power. As early as the first episode, when he and Jesse are being forced at gunpoint to cook meth for a pair of small-time thugs, Walt manages to use the chemicals he is working with to create a deadly cloud of phosphine gas that incapacitates his captors. A few episodes later, Walt intimidates and impresses a mid-level drug boss by detonating a small crystal of fulminated mercury, saying it was just “a little tweak of chemistry.” More than once he neatly—or not so neatly—disposes of the bodies of his or others’ victims using hydrofluoric

acid, and twice in the series Walt synthesizes the lethal toxin ricin to assassinate adversaries. Although his ricin schemes do not actually work out, he does manage to eliminate his chief rival at the end of Season Four using a cleverly improvised homemade explosive. And of course there is his trademark “Blue Sky” meth, the blue-tinged product that earns Walt his fortune, and also his fame as the notorious Heisenberg—the criminal alias inspired by science that Walt uses for himself throughout the series.

While Walt does participate to some extent in the honor culture that permeates the criminal world, the power that his scientific knowledge gives him means that he can afford to ignore the precepts of honor and loyalty that guide those more seasoned criminals who are steeped in that culture’s traditions and customs. Walt’s arrogance and troublemaking tendency to ignore what the honor culture demands bring him into frequent conflict with these more experienced criminals, perhaps best exemplified by the hard-boiled Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks), who never sees eye-to-eye with Walt. Mike, who serves as the go-to guy for the mysterious drug kingpin (and owner of the fast-food fried-chicken chain Pollos Hermanos) Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), rightly perceives Walt as a capricious and dangerous interloper, unwilling to play by the rules of honor, loyalty, and

deference to the strict hierarchy of a criminal organization. However, Walt's meth-cooking skills make him an indispensably profitable part of Gus's criminal empire. Walt and Mike grudgingly cooperate, but the canny Mike is uneasy with Walt's arrogance.

Even though Walt's scientific knowledge and skill are enough for him eventually to dominate the criminal world, there are hints that this pragmatic success is not enough to satisfy him. During Season Three, Walt reflects on how he has been unable to make his wife "understand" why he has done what he has done, recognizing that he wants his family to miss him when he is gone, and that the wealth he is amassing only made sense as a way to provide security for them. Acknowledging that he wants to be remembered well by his wife and children, he even imagines that "there must exist certain words in a certain specific order" that could explain his criminality to Skyler—some scientifically valid proof that would justify him before his family and secure their love, respect, and esteem. He does not seem to recognize that there is no formula for understanding between people, and still less for love.

Walt's deepening alienation from his wife and children as a result of his life of crime is one of the show's tragic ironies, since the family plays such a paramount role in Walt's version of the frontier honor culture. Even when Skyler, having learned of

his secret life in spite of his efforts to keep it from her, makes up her mind to divorce him, Walt remains devoted to her. In Season Three, at a crucial juncture in his criminal career when Skyler's decision to leave him makes Walt decide to get out of the meth business for good, he tries to explain to the crime-lord Gus Fring, who is trying to put Walt in charge of a new, state-of-the-art meth lab, why he doesn't want to go back to "cooking" again. He made some "very bad decisions," he tells Gus, and now he means to reverse them. "Why did you make these decisions?" Gus asks. For his family, replies Walt. "Then they weren't bad decisions." But, Walt objects, they have cost him his wife. Gus responds: Walt still has his children, doesn't he, including a newborn daughter? Then, concluding, Gus gets to the heart of the matter:

What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family.... And a man, *a man* provides. And he does it even when he is not appreciated or respected or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it, because he's a man.

Here Gus, who appears to have no family of his own, makes explicit what has been implicit in the series from the beginning: that there is a point at which even ordinarily decent civilized men, *qua* men, can be made to revert to their traditional role in tribal, patriarchal society, a role

which everything in our culture for two generations has been geared to representing to us as hopelessly outmoded and obsolete. That role is bound up with an equally obsolete consciousness that the only thing that really matters, or ought to matter to a man, is the honor of his manhood—something that expresses itself in the ability to “provide” for one’s family as well as to brave and overcome the dangers posed to that family by one’s enemies and rivals without recourse to the law.

Despite Walt’s misgivings about whether his patriarchal honor is worth losing the love and respect of his wife for, it seems for a while as if the new social contract will keep his little family together. Yet in Season Five, we see Skyler begin to treat Walt with fear as, increasingly, the equivalent of the old-fashioned Mafia don who may be presumed to visit transgressions against his absolute authority with lethal punishments, even for family members. In Season Five, Skyler finds Walt and the kids watching *Scarface* (the Al Pacino version) on TV, and it immediately suggests to her her greatest fear about Walt’s criminal career. The idea seems to be that there is no middle way, no easy compromise between tribal chieftain and ordinary, law-abiding suburban dad: when you stop being the one, then you must start being the other.

An interesting and underappreciated character development in the series belongs to Skyler, whose unim-

peachable moral rectitude in Seasons One and Two is suggested by a confrontation with her shoplifting sister Marie (Betsy Brandt). At this point, Skyler knows nothing of Walt’s secret criminal life. She confides in Walt, who takes the opportunity to say that people sometimes do these things for the sake of their families.

“Is that supposed to justify stealing?” asks Skyler.

“What would you do if it were me?” asks Walt boldly. “Would you divorce me? Would you turn me in to the police?”

“You don’t want to find out,” she says to him, as if teasingly.

But of course he does find out. She decides to initiate divorce proceedings but, crucially, not to turn him in to the police—or to Hank, who has learned to wink at his wife’s “addiction,” as he professes to see it, to thievery. Skyler, therefore, at first takes a high moral line regarding Walt’s material solicitude for her and her children—by rejecting, in effect, the bride price of money he is now able to offer her. Yet, like Walt himself but in reverse, she wants to reserve to herself a bit of the alternative to the life she feels forced to choose. Her unreconstructed sense of what is due to wifely loyalty prevents her from reporting Walt to the authorities, and gradually she finds herself learning to accept a part, and eventually a partnership, in his criminal life for the sake of the financial security it offers the family.

Skyler is helped to this acceptance by a defiant affair with her boss, Ted Beneke (Christopher Cousins). She hopes that the affair will force Walt to agree to a divorce, but in any such situation she has to be aware of the contrast between the two men, and to look to Ted for the moral principle she has found lacking in Walt. Instead, she finds that Ted has been cooking not crystal meth but the books at his failing business and is in serious tax trouble likely to result in his being sent to jail. When Ted attempts to justify his actions by appealing to his own family obligations, Skyler must begin to feel, as Walt does, that there is no escape from the life of crime. Soon she has joined with Walt in running an elaborate money-laundering scheme through a carwash—which she herself comes up with the underhanded means of acquiring. Skyler also invents the serviceable lie of Walt’s fake gambling addiction to explain to Hank and Marie how the Whites have come by their recent good fortune. Impressed by her quick thinking, Walt asks, “How did you come up with that?”

“I learned from the best,” Skyler replies.

She is also learning to value the money for what it enables her to do for the family. When Hank is seriously wounded by a couple of drug cartel killers, Skyler is able to pay for his expensive rehabilitation out of Walt’s supposed gambling

winnings. By a further irony, the leisure afforded Hank by his months in bed enables him to pursue a private obsession with the capture of the mysterious drug boss known as Heisenberg without realizing that Heisenberg is his brother-in-law—until the cliffhanger that ends the first half of Season Five. Insofar as the first fifty-four episodes of the series have followed Skyler’s conversion from law-abiding wife and mother in a modern, partnership-style marriage to a subservient criminal consort, an inevitable theme of the final eight episodes must be Hank’s forced response to the sudden discovery of his own unavoidable conflict of heartfelt loyalties, those to the family versus those to society and the law.

What brings about Hank’s discovery is, of all things, a copy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* that Walt has left sitting out almost as if waiting to be found. Walt’s former assistant Gale had given and inscribed the book to Walt—“my other favorite W.W.” The gift commemorated their collaboration in the lab, where, when it was instantly obvious that they shared a personal chemistry, Gale had recited for Walt a favorite Whitman poem:

When I heard the learn’d astronomer;
 When the proofs, the figures,
 were ranged in columns before me;
 When I was shown the charts and
 the diagrams, to add, divide,
 and measure them;

When I, sitting, heard the astronomer,
where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became
tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd
off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air,
and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

It is a strange poem for Gale, who says “I *love* the lab,” to cherish, since it sounds a note of something more than skepticism about science. If anything, Whitman hints at the mysteries of the infinite that so often stymie the scientific mind’s attempts at description.

That theme is shared by another Whitman poem never quoted on *Breaking Bad* but used as the inspiration for the title of the show’s final mid-season cliffhanger, “Gliding Over All”:

Gliding o’er all, through all,
Through Nature, Time, and Space,
As a ship on the waters advancing,
The voyage of the soul—not life alone,
Death, many deaths I’ll sing.

The many deaths that weigh on Walt’s soul may have their due in the end, but the one Death, that which was always ahead of him, certainly will. It was his encounter with the reality of his own death—his cancer diagnosis

in the show’s first episode—that breaks him bad. That a confrontation with mortality should lead a man of science to abandon the world of Enlightenment values for the honor culture of the criminal lifestyle is strangely fitting. For although modern philosophy, politics, and everyday life are largely oriented toward the defeat or delay of death, the rational man of science can ultimately only think of his own death as the disincorporation of his material self, followed by incomprehensible void.

Death, if not any better understood in the honor culture, at least has a clear place carved out for it there: it is something that there are uses for, there are consolations from, and there are things worse than. Enlightenment science can account for so much of what we see in the natural and social world, but as Walt learns, there are mysteries that still defy the rational mind. Living with these mysteries, not least the mystery posed by our own confrontation with nothingness, means looking beyond the rationalistic Enlightenment vision of the world arrayed in its proofs and figures, charts and diagrams, to other, more primitive sources of wisdom.

James Bowman, resident scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, is the author of Honor: A History (Encounter, 2006).