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Recognition and Restlessness in John Ford's *The Searchers*

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Abstract (Summary)

The central character in *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards, demonstrates a puzzling mix of self-sufficient individualism, deep racism, and perpetual dissatisfaction. This article explains this mix by arguing that the film is ambivalent about the kind of modern individualism Ethan represents. Although the film approves of the individualist's retreat from corrupt society and politics, it nonetheless claims that self-knowledge and freedom cannot be achieved in solitude, but only in the context of other human beings. According to the film, the individual remains unstable and restless until circumscribed by a stable, just community founded on a shared search for self-knowledge. The film suggests that the community at the margins of society that Ethan creates with another character, Martin Pawley, allows for a fragile and moderated form of individuality. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

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Keywords: John Ford, frontier, individuality, recognition, self-knowledge

A puzzling discordance haunts the central character of John Ford's *The Searchers*. On one hand, Ethan Edwards exemplifies the ideal of the gruff, courageous, self-sufficient individual, flouting fortune and dependence on others while sarcastically exclaiming, "that'll be the day." This familiar and celebrated ideal of the American West is not unique to the frontier. Rather, the tendency to withdraw from a corrupt society and seek freedom and justice on one's own has a long intellectual history. Rousseau's philosophy introduced the romanticized, individualist hero who rejects corrupt society, an idea further developed by Romanticism.¹ More broadly, however, the basic desire for individual self-sufficiency is a celebrated part of modern political thought. From Machiavelli's advice to rely on one's arms alone to Locke's rights-based individualism to Hegel's philosophy of freedom, modern political thought seeks a political order in which free and equal individuals can enjoy autonomy and self-sufficiency. Our admiration for Ethan's solitary courage stems in large part from his ability to put this ideal, which stands as a hallmark of modern American political life, into practice.

On the other hand, Ethan is a vicious racist, a criminal, a mercenary, and a defender of the defeated Confederacy. His racist "dark side" does not result from unthinking obedience to custom, as he displays a thorough knowledge of Comanche language and culture.² Nor does his criminal and mercenary side arise from a selfish desire for wealth. Ethan maintains a rugged, unadorned appearance and uses his money only for his family's benefit, including to gain information in his pursuit of his kidnapped niece Debbie. We are only obliquely privy to his criminal past, but his racism

appears bluntly and violently, condemned even by the film as unjust and selfdestructive. Strikingly, this resilient individualist searches for his niece for five years, only to attempt to shoot her for accepting the Comanche community as her own.

What can we make of this puzzle? The literature, which tends to focus on Ethan's personal psychology, illicit love for his brother's wife Martha, and consuming rage over the murders of his mother and Martha, offers many plausible answers.³ Some scholars understand the story allegorically, arguing that Ethan represents the initial drive for philosophy. Others see him as an Achilles figure, i.e. a flawed, mythic warrior-hero.⁴ My approach differs from previous accounts in that it is neither primarily psychological nor allegorical, but rather political-philosophical. I argue that the puzzle of Ethan's character is explicable by understanding the film as a dramatization of the possibilities and problems of the modern ideal of individualism lying at the heart of not only Ethan's character, but also the aims of our modern political order.⁵

Ethan represents an ideal of individualism familiar to political theorists from the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his successors. This ideal departs from the possessive individualism characteristic of bourgeois society, because it denies that genuine freedom can be achieved in modern commercial society and politics, which distort and corrupt the individual's unique personality. Although the film portrays Ethan's withdrawal from society approvingly, it emphasizes his subsequent dissatisfaction with the solitary pursuit of freedom. The film shows that Ethan's pursuit of freedom at the margins of society still requires genuine human contact. Yet, over the course of the film, Ethan's strategies for pursuing his freedom are again and again revealed as self-defeating. Only by forging a community with his companion Martin Pawley based on the search for self-knowledge can Ethan discover and become his true self.

However, this frontier community is necessarily temporary, as the demands of family and civilization once again call to both Ethan and Martin. In the end, the film presents two ideals of modern individualism for us to consider: Ethan's romantic and unsatisfied longing for uncorrupted or pure freedom, and Martin's desire for freedom as moderated by a loving marriage. These ideals can be realized only through community with one another, yet this community stands opposed to and threatened by the inevitable extension of modern commercial society and politics. Because my interpretation of the film centers on the meaning of the two central characters and the community they form, I will proceed by drawing on evidence from the film to examine the development of each character, beginning with Ethan.⁶

INDIVIDUAL RETREAT FROM SOCIETY

Played by John Wayne, who himself exemplifies the hardened, courageous individual, the character Ethan Edwards exudes the self-sufficient individualism prevalent in the Western genre from the very first frame of *The Searchers*. He first appears as a lonely, solitary figure emerging from the frontier and approaching the Edwards's household. He subsequently establishes himself as the courageous man of the frontier, in contrast to his more moderate brother Aaron, whom he chastises for "quitting" ranching and settling for "chopping cotton" with his neighbors, the Jamisons. In a fateful moment, he even replaces Aaron in an excursion to investigate a local cattle theft.⁷ Moreover, Ethan's impossible love for Aaron's wife Martha seems to stem from their similarly independent free spirits.⁸ Throughout the film, Ethan displays again and again that he knows how to survive on his own.⁹ He also reveals his courage in battle and equanimity in the face of death by standing and shooting at the charging Comanche, rather than taking cover like the others in his party. In this scene, he engages in and clearly wins a manliness contest with the local preacher and lawman, Sam Clayton.¹⁰ After Clayton's failure, Ethan happily leaves Clayton's company to search for Debbie on his own.

This individualism, then, is of a peculiar type. Ethan is not a stalwart individual leader like Clayton, who enjoys being the center of attention when his arrival generates a social whirlwind at the Edwards household. Rather, Ethan finds that he can only exercise his individual freedom by rejecting society and politics and retreating to the frontier, away from civilization. The famous first shot of the film portrays Ethan almost as a natural part of the landscape. He slowly emerges from the chaotic, sublime frontier, which the film's opening framing shot contrasts with the sphere of family and civilization.¹¹ He never seems to fit in any company throughout the film. He is skeptical of swearing oaths, hates taking orders, and refuses to reveal any information about himself or his past, even to his family.

What is so unsettling to Ethan about human community? Ethan finds no place for himself in the civilization expanding onto the Western frontier—not in any family, nor within the forts, nor even under the law that Clayton attempts to impose on him. The film shows us that Ethan rejects society because it would corrupt and distort his freedom. Human communities take away individual autonomy by compelling individuals to obey the demands of abstract laws, rather than the authentic claims of their own particular individuality. Ethan displays a general discontent with submitting his

sovereignty to a higher authority in his refusal to take the oath Clayton requests at the beginning of the search party. His continued allegiance to the Confederacy years after the end of the Civil War indicates, furthermore, his belief in personal freedom over the encroachments of law and government. Ethan grudgingly agrees to abide by the warrant out for his arrest for killing the greedy merchant Futterman, even though we see that the law does not understand the particular necessities of the frontier justice that Ethan knows intuitively and that partially constitute his identity.¹²

Aside from society's tendency to ignore or distort individuals' uniqueness, it also corrupts individuals by making them overly dependent on society for their livelihood and well-being. In society, individuals lose the ability to conceive of and execute noble actions by relying entirely on their own self-cultivated virtue and their interest in doing so. Socialized human beings must live in cities where labor is divided and each person can perform only certain specialized tasks. They must then rely on others to supply basic necessities. The demands of market efficiency blunt and stymie the overall cultivation of the whole, self-sufficient person who can carry out a free and just action from beginning to end on his own. At the same time, commercial society engenders in human beings the insatiable desire for wealth, which forms an important feature of modern bourgeois character and galvanizes economic growth.¹³ Futterman represents this greedy amorality seeping into the lawless frontier. Against the background of this enervating commercial society, Ethan desires to live on his own and cultivate his own virtues.

This desire for freedom as autonomy and independence helps explain not just Ethan's retreat from society, but also his repudiation of religion and politics. Ethan pays little respect to religion, as displayed in his undermining of Clayton's authority, unwillingness to turn "sword into plowshare," utter desecration of a dead Comanche's body, and disregard for Comanche religious rites for their dead. Furthermore, Ethan walks out on his family's funeral and rudely interrupts the marriage of two other characters, Laurie and Charlie. The use of the same music in these two scenes underscores the parallel between them.¹⁴ Ethan's disrespect for religion makes sense; he wants to be a sovereign individual, free from the externally imposed authority of a church community or the putative revealed word of God. For Ethan, religion gets in the way of what must be done. Clayton's plan to sneak up on the Comanche is clearly motivated by an idealistic, religiously inspired assumption that the most peaceful or compassionate plan is the best plan. Clayton's religion blinds him to the more appropriate course of action and lands the whole party in dire trouble. Because Clayton, unlike Ethan, depends too much on an abstract doctrine, he cannot adapt to the requirements of circumstances.¹⁵

Ethan also regards politics with contempt. Like religion, it threatens his freedom and stands in the way of the best course of action. In the film, we witness both the injustice and incompetence of political action. The cavalry slaughters a group of Comanche women and children, including Martin's recently and accidentally acquired wife Look. Even Ethan winces at the senselessness of the cavalry's action. Furthermore, the cavalry appears incompetent as well as ruthless. It lags far behind the ragtag force assembled by Clayton at the end of the film and finally reveals the adverse effects of nepotism when its lieutenant, the son of the cavalry commander, comically mishandles his sword and stabs Clayton in the rear. In dramatizing these failures of politics, the film shows that the law, like the abstract doctrine of religion, relies on overly rigid, unwavering principles. Therefore, it does not contain the freedom or flexibility to make an informed judgment of what is appropriate in certain circumstances- unlike Ethan, who is armed with comprehensive, on-the-ground knowledge of Comanche practice. Adherence to the law, then, would fetter Ethan's independent judgment. Furthermore, he would sacrifice his own sovereignty to a law that might have unjust applications.

INDIVIDUAL RETURN TO SOCIETY FOR RECOGNITION

Ethan's drive for individual freedom leads him to reject society and its corrupting influence. Yet the film raises the question of how it is possible to guide oneself at the margins of society. What principles remain after such a rejection? The film portrays Ethan as moving through three different principles of self-understanding, each of which proves to undermine itself. The first way Ethan understands his freedom is a logical result of his character's repudiation of social and political ties. His freedom from human contact takes the form of a job as a mercenary in the Mexican army.¹⁶ Because mercenaries follow their own sovereign will, they are free to take a job or not and so are not bound by traditional norms of attachment to community or religion. Furthermore, mercenaries do not depend on other mercenaries. Rather, they rely largely on their own wits and arms. They have no attachment to one another aside from the economic incentives loosely binding them together.

What is the problem with the mercenary understanding of freedom as a life of calculated, economic self-interest? This life is not self-destructive for a person like Futterman, whose sole motivation appears to be greedy self-satisfaction, which he carries out through duplicitous scheming. Yet Futterman's greed actually reveals his lack of freedom. The principles of his action come from mere natural appetites, the desire for wealth and bodily goods. For Ethan, the life of the mercenary appears no more liberating than dogmatic religion or corrupt politics, because the mercenary's claim to

utter self-sovereignty allows for even less self-knowledge. As a mercenary, one cannot be free, because one is chained to a false self-understanding.

The main problem facing the solitary mercenary is that no one recognizes his freedom, in part because he eschews the judgments of others. By rejecting the judgments of his fellows, he cannot be sure whether he is in fact free or, rather, enslaved to some force hidden from his sight.¹⁷ The lack of recognition provokes constant dissatisfaction for individualists like Ethan, who needs other human beings' approval, even as he tries to dismiss them. The film never suggests why Ethan leaves his mercenary life to return to the Edwards household, but we can surmise that Ethan requires genuine human contact to reveal his own true individuality, i.e., to prove that he is not enslaved to greedy self-interest or the desires of the body. Ethan's joy at being reunited with the family and his longing for Martha indicate that he needs deeper human ties than the absolute independence and "trust no one" attitude characteristic of criminal and mercenary life.¹⁸

Ethan's Failure in the Family

The second step in Ethan's development occurs when he seeks to understand himself by returning to his family. In the early scenes of the film, we witness Ethan happily enjoying the company of his brother's home. He lifts and embraces Debbie, just as he will later in the fateful final scene. Ethan offers his nephew, Ben, his saber, and Debbie his Confederate medal. Aaron warmly welcomes Ethan, who seems genuinely happy to find himself within a home, a comforting place where other people recognize and admire him for who he is. The love that he shares with Martha, moreover, creates another powerful connection that satisfies his desire to be recognized for the unique person he is. The family therefore seems to provide a deep care for and recognition of Ethan's individual personality-unlike modern commercial society, whose demands try to mold him into some abstract and fungible personality.

Yet fissures form in Ethan's relationship with his family almost as soon as he arrives. The palpable tension between Ethan and Martha causes Ethan to overreact when Aaron questions why Ethan "stay[s] put [in the ranch] beyond any real reason." Aaron implies, of course, that there is something going on between Ethan and Martha. This implication is underscored by the *mise-en-scène*: Martha hovers behind, yet very close to, Ethan. The image draws a subtle visual connection between the two at the same time that Aaron does so verbally. His accusation threatens to dissolve the household, and Ethan must literally leave the home to sit in the dark on the front porch, while we (and Ethan) see Aaron closing his brother out of the bedroom.

Family fails to truly recognize Ethan's free individuality for two reasons.¹⁹ These two reasons stem from the two principles on which the family is founded: consanguinity, the relationship of "blood" or kin (natural connection), and marriage, the connection by oath (agreement to begin a new family). The blood connection fails to provide sufficient recognition for Ethan because the unity it creates is based on the natural instinct of familial love. The natural family bond is comforting, because it always provides a home, an origin, and a root or basis for an individual's journey toward freedom. Yet the family cannot provide Ethan with the recognition that he has succeeded in making himself into a free individual. An aspiring free individual like Ethan has difficulty taking family members' judgments at face value, because he cannot be sure whether these judgments are simply based on the natural instinct of love. Nonetheless, Ethan attempts to gain recognition of his independence and courage, especially from his brother. For instance, Ethan becomes indignant at Aaron's imputation that he will not pay for his stay and declares that he will replace his brother in the search party.

The second source of the lack of recognition in the Edwards household concerns the marriage oath between Aaron and Martha. Ethan's love for Martha is fundamentally stymied by the institution of marriage.²⁰ On one level, Ethan returns to the Edwards household in the vain hope of finding recognition from a fellow free spirit in Martha. Yet ultimately, he knows that her marriage oath prevents him from pursuing a relationship with her that would allow such recognition. Martha can only subtly recognize his love: after she strokes his cloak longingly, she allows Ethan to kiss her on her forehead. Aaron, by contrast, snubs Ethan by closing the bedroom door as Ethan peers in. Aaron's activity reveals not just his refusal to recognize Ethan, but also the fundamental incompatibility that continues to exist between Ethan's desire for freedom and the family-an incompatibility visualized in the film's formal structure as a contrast between the "inner" life of comfort, safety, and family, and the "outer" life of struggle, danger, and freedom.

Ethan's participation in the search party for the missing cattle puts his doomed approach to recognition through the family into clear focus. Why does he join the band? Ford's cluttered and claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* of the Edwards household during the arrival of Clayton reveals Ethan's discomfort within the enclosed space of the family, as opposed to the freedom of the frontier. Ethan also still seeks recognition from Aaron and Martha for his independence and

courage. He must escape from their household in order to be recognized by it. In pursuit of these contradictory goals, i.e., genuine recognition from his family and leaving their home, he makes a fatal miscalculation by choosing his own freedom at the expense of the family's safety. Therefore, everyone falls into the Comanche trap. When Ethan comes upon the dead rancher, he immediately sees the gambit.

As we watch an enraged Ethan search for the kidnapped children, we must understand his sustained search as animated by more than just rage against the Comanche. A large part of Ethan's rage is directed against himself. Ethan experiences guilt as he realizes that his desire for freedom has not only failed, but also backfired. His precipitate choice to assert himself makes him partially responsible for the fate of the Edwards family. We can assume that had Ethan not been blinded by an overwhelming need to assert his courageous freedom, he would have stayed at home and possibly held off the Comanche assault, as he helps repulse two others later in the film. Ethan fails to achieve freedom in this situation, because he is blinded by his desire and manipulated by a Comanche ploy.

Ethan's contradictory desire is punished in a strange fashion: the family's grim fate is, in a sense, the ultimate consequence of Ethan's original wishes.²¹ For Ethan to be recognized by the family, it would have to be dissolved and made part of the free frontier where Ethan can truly display his virtues of self-sufficient individuality. Its members would need to be put in jeopardy, themselves disconnected from their home. In other words, the film shows us the realization of Ethan's contradictory presence through the destruction of the Edwards household. Ethan breaks down the opposition between freedom and family he initially establishes by crossing the threshold of the household in the film's opening moments. Yet he brutally reestablishes this opposition by upsetting family harmony and reminding us that the marriage oath is both necessary to family stability and breakable by an outsider. In pursuing this instability even as he looks for recognition from his kin, Ethan actually wills the destruction of the family. In mythic fashion, the Fates punish Ethan for effecting such a contradiction in himself and the family. It is precisely from the Fates' perspective that the opposition between household and frontier is so harrowingly reestablished, in a shot that repeats the framing of the initial shot of the film and shows the defeated Ethan stumbling out of the destroyed home that contains Martha's corpse.²²

Ethan's Failure on the Frontier

Ethan feels in some sense responsible for the massacre and, hence, that he must atone for his failure of self-knowledge. The desire for redemption leaves open the possibility that Ethan may someday return home after his own internal contradictions are resolved on the frontier.²³ On the frontier, then, Ethan cultivates a third form of individualism: the seeker after justice. Yet, as the film follows the search parties onto the frontier, we immediately encounter an unresolved ambiguity in this character. Why does Ethan search for Debbie? On one hand, Ethan seeks to reestablish justice in his conflict with the Comanche by reuniting Debbie with her family and returning familial nature to its rightful state. On the other hand, however, Ethan seeks revenge. Yet, insofar as Ethan's actions are fueled by the thirst for revenge, his character represents a further lack of self-knowledge. Over the course of the film, the two motivations so thoroughly merge together that the viewer cannot tell which one moves Ethan. Though both aim to realize justice, justice can only be found when the wrongful party recognizes its wrong and therefore recognizes the moral motivations of the just party. We will see that the mutual lack of recognition between the whites and the Comanche leads to an endless cycle of restlessness and violence.

The frontier on which Ethan seeks justice seems an ideal place for the solitary, self-sufficient individual. He does not need to depend on human law or society, and he has moved beyond the natural comforts of the family. He is truly free, living on his wits alone. When Ethan sets off with his own small band of searchers-when he leaves behind the remnants of religion and politics-he becomes free to act without being accountable to Clayton or the other members of the party. We might expect that the frontier Ethan will become the romanticized image of the naturally good man portrayed in many American Westerns. This hero spontaneously upholds justice in the absence of civilization and law. He is naturally endowed with a moral sense of right and wrong and with the ability to carry out justice in a right and proper way. When justice is served, he rides off into the sunset to serve the cause of justice another day.

Yet Ethan is emphatically not like these romantic natural heroes, although they do share certain characteristics. Ethan is presented to us at the beginning of the film as an extension of nature itself, harmoniously existing within it. With his extensive knowledge of the territory and how to survive in it, he feels more comfortable in open expanses than in the enclosed, cramped space of the family household.²⁴ Yet, when we look more closely, our expectations are upended. Ethan is not at home in nature, but rather battles against it, conquering it in an attempt to navigate through it. We see him, for instance, mercilessly killing buffalo in an insane drive to eliminate the Comanche source of food. He slaughters the buffalo without regard to natural desires of survival, but rather for mastery over the natural world and revenge on the Comanche. He describes himself as a "critter who'll just keep coming on." Unlike a natural creature,

whose desires are finitely satiable within nature, Ethan "just keep[s] coming on," spurning the desire for food, safety, and reproduction, questing instead after vengeance that perpetually escapes his grasp.

What prevents Ethan from finding satisfaction on the frontier? Unlike romantic natural heroes, who pursue justice because it is their nature to do so, Ethan seeks recognition from others for his actions. His attempt to demonstrate his freedom on the frontier consists of his project of obtaining justice for the Edwards family. This project, however, requires convincing the Comanche to recognize his principles of justice. Without the recognition of his rivals, Ethan appears in their eyes as the same ruthless killer that each of them appears to him. In other words, Ethan sees the Comanche as nameless, faceless, and animalistic-not free, but rather a natural evil-and so too does Ethan appear to them. The film shows us that the brute assertion of force garners no recognition of freedom, even if one is deeply convinced that one is in the right. Without this recognition from one's rival, one will remain forever uncertain whether one acts freely based on self-imposed principles of justice or simply from all-consuming feelings of revenge.

As we see during the course of the film, the Comanche do not recognize the justice of Ethan's pursuit. They ignore his claims and escape his grasp for at least five years. When Ethan and Scar, the Comanche group's leader, finally meet face-to-face, we see that Scar will not recognize the justice of Ethan's claim. Scar will not recognize Ethan because he deeply resembles Ethan. They are both convinced of the justice of their own claim and the utter barbarity of the other's, both having lost family members to the other's violence. The film also shows us the deep resemblance between Ethan and Scar in stature and intelligence. Scar returns Ethan's sarcastic comment, "You speak pretty good American for a Comanche," with "You speak good Comanche. Someone teach you?" Scar, like Ethan, has been a wanderer for many years. He is Ethan's near-equal in battlefield strategy, outwitting the initial band of searchers under Clayton's command. Like Ethan, he seeks recognition, in Scar's case from his fellow Comanche by beginning the "war song" and charging across the river to attack the initial band of searchers. Ethan understands that Scar, as the "war chief," "has gotta save face." When these two similar characters meet, even Ethan's lack of recognition is mirrored in Scar's, a mutual refusal to recognize the other that leads to constant searching, agitation, and violence on both sides.

The lack of recognition angers Ethan. He vainly kills the very individuals from whom he desperately seeks acknowledgement. They see Ethan as a vicious, ruthless predator, and, perhaps not surprisingly, Ethan begins to fill this role. The relationship eventually becomes one of mere force. Ethan sees himself as a free natural beast, expressed in his contradictory phrase: a "critter who'll just keep coming on." Ethan adopts the Comanche understanding of him as a natural predator while nonetheless problematically demanding that he be recognized as just in his ruthlessness. This contradictory view of the Comanche as both objects of violence and moral subjects who can provide Ethan with his needed recognition is dramatized powerfully when Ethan finally finds Debbie. Ethan thinks that Debbie has become so thoroughly socialized into the Comanche lifestyle that it would be unjust to return her to her former home. She is no longer family but has freely formed her own identity as a Comanche-Ethan's enemy. Ironically, Ethan feels that his only option is to kill Debbie, thereby destroying the very aim of his search and undermining his own attempt to find freedom.

It is important to notice, however, that although Ethan acts heinously in almost killing Debbie, his recognition of Debbie's Comanche identity marks an important step in his development. In separating Debbie's natural origin from her socialized identity, Ethan realizes the family's limitations in providing recognition of freedom and principles of justice. "Kin" or "blood" relations do not ground principles of justice, because the family is bound together by natural instinct and immediate forms of love. By contrast, freedom can be found and recognized only when one leaves the family and searches for one's own identity. Ethan feels that Debbie has chosen her new identity and is therefore culpable for entering into the unjust Comanche society. In seeing that identity is not necessarily connected to blood, race, or family, Ethan takes a step toward overcoming his racism and entering into a relationship of mutual recognition with the other.

Although Ethan takes this step beyond the family, he remains ensnared in the contradictions of his own claims. Instead of compromising with or persuading the Comanche, he resorts to force. He acts not on his own free selfknowledge, but on the understanding of himself he gleans from the Comanche: that he is a "critter," a ruthless natural being. In other words, Ethan demands recognition of his justice, but he acts on this demand with force. In so doing, he both recognizes the rational capacities of his enemies and forces them to submit and obey, thereby treating them like animals.²⁶ He simultaneously expects the others to recognize his free pursuit of justice even while denying them the capacity or opportunity to recognize it. The two possible outcomes of Ethan's contradictory approach to the Comanche-either they submit to his will or they die at his hand-cannot satisfy his demand for recognition of his freedom.

The film points beyond this quagmire of force-a state of nature in which cycles of revenge and confusion persist-to a state of political order, in which warring parties can recognize an impartial arbiter to settle their differences and can gain satisfaction in their demands for justice and recognition of their freedom. Without the impartial arbiter of politics,

the cycle of violence continues, and Ethan continues vainly to search for recognition of his freedom. Whereas the film initially leads us to admire the goodness of the hero who retreats from a corrupt society, it also levels a critique against the solitary, romantic, spontaneously good hero of the mythic Western. The natural pursuit of justice is difficult to conceive and execute in the frontier "state of nature" and is riddled with torment. The hero Ethan endures great suffering in his restless search for justice, as we can tell when he inflicts the worst kind of punishment he can imagine on the dead Comanche the search party encounters early in the film. Ethan shoots the eyes out of the dead Comanche, who is then condemned to wander among the winds for eternity without a home—a state eerily similar to Ethan's own. Seeing that mere force cannot accomplish his goals, Ethan tries to wreak spiritual revenge, inflicting not physical pain, but spiritual torment. Ironically, Ethan's contradictory demand for recognition asks the other to experience the same pain he himself experiences. Never able to recognize and feel the pain of the other, Ethan does not see that his counterpart Scar in fact experiences the same restless rage. However, we as viewers can see the parallel and reflect on the tragic lack of recognition identically befalling both groups. The film also suggests the necessity of a political order to provide satisfaction to both parties' claims of justice, even if such a social and political order would ultimately undermine Ethan's individuality.²⁷ Ethan's character brings out the limitations of modern society and politics, but his own limitations point back to the necessity of this very order.

THE CREATION OF THE JUST FRONTIER COMMUNITY

The film approvingly portrays Ethan's withdrawal from the corruption of society and politics, yet it also shows him proceeding through a series of failed attempts to find his own true or genuine individuality. Ethan moves from one attempt to another, because he finds that the forms of human recognition he has been pursuing do not supply him with the self-knowledge of his true and free individuality. These errors of self-knowledge condemn each of his attempts to failure.

Yet the film is not called "The Searcher." The title announces to the viewer that the centerpiece of the film is a group of searchers, not Ethan's solitary individualism. The Searchers indicates that Ethan can only find satisfaction with other searchers after freedom and self-knowledge. The film criticizes the modern tendency to think that self-knowledge is found through a retreat into one's authentic self or a discovery of some hidden inner gem inside one's own heart. In the film, individual self-knowledge does not involve a personal or private journey into oneself. Rather, the film presents self-knowledge somewhat paradoxically as only attainable in a collective journey outside oneself. Ethan's individualism can only come to fruition through the founding of a frontier community of which Ethan understands himself to be a part. Through this community with his companion Martin on the frontier, Ethan gains the genuine recognition he desires. In particular, the influence of the more moderate Martin teaches Ethan to recognize the other not as an object of violence, but as a source of moral judgment. At the same time, Martin realizes his own form of individualism by learning the importance of independence, courage, and self-sufficiency from Ethan. In the end, both characters express important elements of a newfound moderate individualism.

This frontier "community" is far from harmonious and happy. At first, Ethan and Martin barely get along. Ethan remarks on meeting Martin as a young adult that he could have mistaken Martin for a "half-breed." Ethan leaves him behind at a few crucial points in the film, and Martin has to catch up in order to maintain the community. Except for the rare occasions when the two have genuine moments of conversation (e.g., before they both fall asleep in the home of their neighbors, the Jorgensens), they appear to be at one another's throats. Neither sets out consciously to "found" a community, but it arises naturally, despite their resistance, as a result of their shared task and complementary characteristics. Yet this agonistic community is the only kind possible for two strong personalities, because each would lose himself and his uniqueness within a harmonious and happy community. Furthermore, the conflict between the two clearly displays their virtues and vices to one another. Concord promotes dissimulation of character, whereas conflict brings out one's character, even to oneself. The vexed relationship is necessary and salutary for Ethan, because it helps him learn about himself by seeing his own faults reflected in Martin's activity.

The Community's Development of Martin's Individuality

Let us turn to the character of the young, often brash Martin Pawley.²⁸ The initial shot of Martin establishes a direct parallel between him and Ethan, a parallel maintained throughout the film. The camera is positioned within the Edwards house, framing the shot within a dark border. Outside, instead of Ethan slowly approaching the household, as in the initial shot of the film, Martin dismounts his horse and enters the house with a flourish. Martin's rash, impetuous youth is set alongside the fact that Martin is not related "by blood" to the Edwards family. In fact, Martin is by blood part Native American—and was saved by Ethan's own act of courageous freedom. We could say, then, that Martin was "born" in Ethan's freedom.²⁹ Unlike a naturally generated child raised in the household of the biological parents, Martin

was brought into the world through an act of heroism and raised by the free compassion of the Edwards family. The film therefore portrays Martin as a kind of mediating figure between the family, the Comanche, and Ethan. Given Ethan's propensity to be single-minded in his pursuit of recognition (first in the family, then among the Comanche), Martin's presence in the film reassures us that an alternative, more moderate form of heroic individuality is possible.

Yet Martin is far from an exemplar of individual virtue in the opening moments of the film. Martin admires and emulates Ethan but mistakenly understands his admiration for Ethan to be of a biological or familial nature. In a desire to establish Ethan as kin, Martin attempts to draw Ethan into a biological connection by calling him "uncle." Ethan repudiates this moniker, thereby stressing their relationship as born and maintained in freedom. In addition to this misidentification of biological parentage, Martin reveals his youthful faults in two early moments in the film. First, Martin rashly tries to return to the Edwards household without feeding his horse, a failure of knowledge that prevents him from reaching the home in time. Martin also displays a distinct lack of courage in the initial firefight with the Comanche. Instead of joining in the fracas, Martin cowers behind a log.

Martin's search, then, consists of finding a path to overcome these faults and cultivate a truer form of individual freedom. Since Martin was born into this freedom, he must bind himself to this task of truly realizing his destiny. This involves seeking knowledge about how he can best find his own path. Martin's path is promising, as we have seen, because his character naturally mediates between the various conflicting forces of the film: family, Comanche, and Ethan. Yet this path is also fraught with problems. Martin finds it difficult to reconcile his attachment to these forces, because he is thrust into situations where he must choose his allegiance. For instance, the film indicates an acute internal conflict in Martin's character in the initial firefight with the Comanche. He appears cowardly, but his paralysis during the fight can also be read as a result of his inability to reconcile his attachment to his family (represented by the search party) and his biological heritage (i.e., the Comanche). The film indicates that Martin has such a consideration on his mind when, just before the fight begins, Mose Harper taunts the Comanche with a stereotypical, racist gesture. Martin shoots him a glaring look, as if to say, "The Comanche are human beings, too, and I know this because I am part Comanche and have felt what it is like to be on the other side of such taunts." Martin searches for the selfknowledge to freely and willfully reconcile the conflicting forces within himself. Like Ethan, Martin does not turn inward on his quest for self-knowledge. He cannot settle down to an assured life of familial comfort and love with Laurie. Rather, he must set out on the frontier to learn about himself. Only on the frontier with Ethan and searching for his "kin" Debbie can Martin confront the three conflicting forces in his soul.

How does Ethan help Martin reach self-knowledge? Martin discerns a heightened version of himself in Ethan, who can survive on his own on the frontier and track a band of Comanche over the wide expanses of Texas for five long years. Ethan becomes Martin's exemplar of an individual who has realized a path that Martin himself may take. Ethan appears able to reconcile his different commitments effortlessly, which enables him to make split-second decisions that save his own and Martin's lives. By following Ethan's lead, Martin learns the virtues of self-sufficient individualism.

Yet Martin's stated reason for following Ethan is emphatically not to learn from him. On the contrary, he sees his role in the searching community as restraining Ethan's excesses, as when he remarks to Laurie that Ethan "is a man who can go crazy wild, and I intend to be there to stop him in case he does." Martin must stand in front of Debbie to protect her from Ethan's maniacal drive to kill her, and he grows angry at Ethan's repudiation of Debbie in his will. In these moments, Martin reveals himself as the voice of Ethan's conscience. Martin's character develops as he sees Ethan fail to achieve the freedom he desires. Whereas Martin sees the need to reconcile his conflicting commitments (to family, Comanche, and Ethan), Ethan lacks the self-knowledge to see such a conflict at all. Ethan's failure lies in reducing his allegiance to a single group or principle. This failure gives Martin a clue about how to reconcile his different commitments. He comes to see that he must affirm their common element of shared humanity, rather than the particular claims of blood or race that divide them.

Martin's individualism ripens in the final assault on Scar's camp. A disagreement about how to attack repeats a similar conflict from earlier in the film, when the initial expedition led by Clayton stumbles on Scar's encampment. Ethan advocates a frontal assault, whereas Clayton and Martin fear that it will endanger the girls' lives and call for a stealthy approach. Ethan begrudgingly submits, but Sam's plan fails miserably. When the same alternatives present themselves later in the film, Sam bows to Ethan's expertise. Martin, by contrast, asserts that Ethan's plan is deeply flawed and calls for a single-man stealth attack by night, thereby overcoming his dependence on Ethan's authority. Martin himself engages in this stealth attack. He demonstrates his courageous individualism by killing Scar and once again trying to stop Ethan from killing Debbie. In doing so, Martin attempts to follow his belief in the shared humanity of whites and Comanche and minimize both groups' casualties.

The Community's Development of Ethan's Individuality

Just as Martin's individualism emerges as mediated through his relationship with Ethan, so too does a more moderate individualism appear when Ethan improbably embraces Debbie at the end of the film. This moment seems somewhat bizarre on first viewing. The viewer may wonder what accounts for Ethan's sudden transformation from wanting to kill Debbie to embracing her. The solution to this puzzle lies in the development of Ethan's individualism through his interaction with Martin. By the time Ethan saves Debbie, he has internalized Martin's moral and moderating voice into his own identity.³⁰ Just as Martin sees himself in Ethan, so too does Ethan see a youthful version of himself in Martin. Their mutual recognition during the search is the source of their maturing individualities.

Although Ethan doubts Martin as a "half-breed" early in the film, he comes to admire and even recognize something of himself in the younger man in two important scenes. In the first scene, Martin has already won Ethan's respect by enduring years on the trail of the missing Debbie. When the trail has gone cold and the weary travelers lose track of the Comanche, they return to the Jorgensens' house for a clue. Before falling asleep, Ethan displays his care for Martin by suggesting that he settle down to a tranquil family life. Ethan sees himself in Martin and worries that Martin may turn into him. Martin appears to Ethan as his own younger self, who has the potential that Ethan sadly relinquished long ago. Ethan wishes to protect Martin from his own doleful fate. The implication of his advice is not to be like him, because the way of the wandering searcher is the path of woe. By recognizing himself in Martin and advising the younger man to deny his own recognition and emulation of him, Ethan takes an important step toward self-knowledge and realizing the excesses of his individualism. Ironically, Ethan asks the one character in the film who does recognize him not to do so. Ethan wishes Martin the opposite fate of the Comanche who does not recognize him: to find a home, rather than to wander the four winds. In desiring a valuable life for Martin that he knows he can never attain for himself, Ethan recognizes the moral principle of shared humanity beyond his own individual values. This recognition of universally shared values among human beings, who all search for self-knowledge and a home where they belong, moves Ethan closer to recognizing the identity and shared values of the Comanche community.

However, Martin rejects Ethan's advice, opting to continue his quest to save Debbie. At this point, Martin's own search is not complete. He cannot find a home until he completes this task and finds himself. Yet Ethan is puzzled by Martin's denial and motivation. "She's no kin to you at all," he says. Ethan considers only the family's natural blood relationships as sufficient justification for bringing about justice. Martin shows Ethan that he is wrong. Free individuals do not, like animals, simply respond to harm done to their biological kin by lashing out against their attackers. For Martin, justice should be sought regardless of one's relationship to the injured. Justice, unlike vengeance wreaked in feuds among particular natural families or clans, is universal. Martin attains a perspective beyond the merely familial to see all kidnappings and murder as wrong because they contravene justice, not only because they injure his own family and arouse his personal ire.

In a second scene, Ethan reveals his care for Martin and what he has learned from him when they discuss Ethan's will. Martin survived because of Ethan's courageous act of freedom, so Ethan feels responsible for the youth. Ethan transforms this quasi-fatherly sense of responsibility into a real fatherly role when he makes Martin the heir of his estate. Ethan's act of writing his will is a significant moment because it allows him to freely recognize Martin as a fellow member of the community of searching. Inheritance law normally follows the natural generation of human beings by endowing property to natural offspring. In replacing nature with human free will, Ethan makes the exchange between him and Martin something born of freedom, rather than the set demands of nature.³¹ In their mutual relationship of freedom formalized in this legal document, Martin's recognition can finally validate Ethan's free activity. Indeed, Ethan cannot wait for this recognition, because, having been shot in the arm by a poisoned arrow, he expects to die soon.

Martin's moderation and acceptance of justice beyond family relations help Ethan assume a transformed individualism. He gains self-knowledge from Martin and sees that his attempts to gain recognition through the family or violent revenge on the Comanche are self-defeating. He learns from Martin that justice is effected by recognizing moral principles—the integrity of the family and the affirmation of the other—that can quell his narrow vengeful desires and reconcile his internal conflicts. Ethan redeems himself and reveals this self-knowledge when he tries to reestablish right in the dissolved family and toward the estranged other. The moment of redemption occurs when Ethan comes upon the single character who represents both the fragmented family and the heretofore unrecognized other: Debbie. It is altogether fitting that he accepts Debbie regardless of her socialized identity.³² The seemingly unexplained transformation in Ethan's character (revealed in the moment when he embraces Debbie, rather than killing her) makes sense in light of Ethan's moderated individuality.

THE FRAGILE COMMUNITY AND TWO IDEALS OF INDIVIDUALITY

At the end of the film, we see the heroes returning triumphant, having accomplished their arduous task of restoring justice, attaining self-knowledge, and realizing a new form of individuality, all in one fell swoop. Ethan initially embodies the ideal in its antisocial, radically individualistic form. Yet we see over the course of the film that this radical individualism tends toward selfcontradiction, excess, and utter dissatisfaction. The original ideal must transform into an individual mediated by a free and just community. However, the end of the film belies our expectations when the community of Ethan and Martin dissolves. The two individuals who have learned so much from one another go their separate ways. Martin finds a home, whereas Ethan is condemned to be homeless, restlessly searching. What are we to make of the final moments of the film?

The film points toward an internal tension at the heart of the ideal of individualism, which it visualizes in the famous repeated shots from the camera enclosed within the household, peering out onto the frontier. This shot is used as the initial shot of the film, as well as its final shot. Martin attains satisfaction in realizing his individuality when he kills Scar and helps rescue Debbie. Having completed his quest, he can return home. According to Martin's version of individuality, the individual ultimately becomes himself in private life with family and close friends. Yet Martin's romantic, naturally benevolent character can only truly realize his nature in three steps: by coming to understand the violent and devastating tendencies on the frontier; conquering its savagery with his benevolence; and justifying family life not on the principle of blood, but on the common principle of humanity, which ends the cycle of violence. In so doing, he can return to the natural, rustic life of the family assured that he is prepared to fight back if trouble once again arises.

Yet, according to Ethan's more ambitious, nearly tyrannical individualism, the family remains fatally insufficient for the recognition of his freedom.³³ He requires a higher, more glorious form of recognition in public life. Ethan cannot cross the threshold into the sphere of the household. Rather, he must restlessly search on the frontier. The final scene of the film is a melancholy moment for Ethan. His individualism, as moderated through his search with Martin, reveals a tincture of nobility, yet we know that he will grow increasingly dissatisfied as he returns to his search for recognition of that individualism in contradictory ways, without Martin's moderating voice. In the end, the film can only point to the unfulfilled possibility of an impartial political order that would justly arbitrate the claims of whites and Comanche, mediate their demands of recognition, and bring them together within a new political community.³⁴ Perhaps only founding a new political order—the consummation of a public life—will ultimately satisfy Ethan's ambition. Founding a new political order realizes one's individuality while at the same time establishing principles of justice that make mutual recognition possible. It seems the closest approximation in practice of a prime mover, an individual who founds an order bearing his own image without relying on previously established institutions or principles.

Would Ethan be satisfied as a political founder? In his insightful reading of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Sidney A. Pearson (2007) argues that Ford was a "romantic," who, like Rousseau, longed for the individual who escapes the boundaries of politics and upholds a personal moral code.³⁵ Such a pre-political individual is ultimately tragic, Pearson argues, because he must bring about the political civilization that makes his own life impossible, without so much as a hint of recognition of the efforts of his heroic deeds. This is why, in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Doniphon, also played by John Wayne, is faced with a tragic and crushing choice that seals his own fate. In shooting Liberty Valance, Doniphon allows politics to come to Shinbone but also forces himself to recede into oblivion along with other pre-civilizational relics. Doniphon is another beautiful example of the tragic realization in Ford's work that a heroic form of life at the same time undermines that form of life, because it both represents and helps effect the transition from a troubled, internally contradictory society to a new one that promises change and reconciliation.

Yet *The Searchers* presents a distinctly less romantic Ford than does *Liberty Valance*. Ethan is not as purely good and trustworthy as Doniphon, nor is he as satisfied in the pre-political state. If anything, *The Searchers'* Ethan Edwards is a counterpoint to *Liberty Valance's* celebration of the pre-political. *The Searchers* does not establish political rule in the course of the film as *Liberty Valance* does, but it points toward it as the only way to overcome the deep self-contradictions facing the pre-political individual. Ethan faces these contradictions but, strangely, Doniphon does not. *The Searchers* in fact points toward the possibility of Ethan becoming the kind of recognized political founder that Doniphon tragically could never be. Suggesting this possibility, Ethan leads the small band of men in their final charge.³⁶ Ethan's ambitious individualism, as I have argued, develops dynamically, in contrast to Doniphon's static character. The role of political founder may help satisfy this publicly oriented individual, and Ethan does finally submit to his own universal just law and recognize the Comanche as equal, rational, and free beings.

The film dramatizes the development of a certain strand of individualism in the modern age and promotes the individual's quest to escape from society and politics and find his own individualism. *The Searchers* suggests that this individualism may be internally bifurcated between Martin's rustic, familial individuality and Ethan's wayward, wandering

individuality. More broadly, the film helps us understand that, whatever its form, modern individuals can only become their true selves through the active pursuit of self-knowledge. Such a pursuit does not occur through a private journey of self-discovery, as so many lesser narratives would have it. On the contrary, individual self-knowledge arises from interaction with other seekers after self-knowledge. According to John Ford's *The Searchers*, we are all searching for ourselves, and we can only complete our own searches by helping others find their way toward themselves.

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[Footnote]

NOTES

1. See Catherine Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990) for an account of American literature and its indebtedness to Rousseau and modern political philosophy as a whole. In a different vein, Frederick Jackson Turner has famously argued that the frontier mentality of the American West in the nineteenth century was successful (but also, perhaps, ridden with tension) because it combined the Enlightenment principle of spreading man-made civilization into the wilderness with the liberating experience of escaping society and enjoying uncorrupted nature. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007).
2. I disagree with Michael Böhnke, who argues that *The Searchers* is "essentially a film about custom . . . visualized by the central figure . . . Ethan Edwards." Michael Böhnke, "Myth and Law in the Films of John Ford," *Journal of Law and Society* 28 (March 2001), 58. On Ford's intentional "darkening" of Ethan's character, see Arthur M. Eckstein, "Darkening Ethan: John Ford's *The Searchers* from Novel to Screenplay to Screen," *Cinema Journal* 21 (1998): 3-24.
3. In an interview, Ford himself referred to his film as a "psychological epic" of the character of Ethan Edwards. Jean Mitry, "Interview with John Ford," in *Interviews with Film Directors*, ed. Andrew Sarris (New York: Avon, 1969), 197. For short histories of the rise of the "dark" or "psychological" Western, see Arthur M. Eckstein, "Introduction: Main Critical Issues in *The Searchers*," in *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western*, ed. Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 4-5. See also Edward Buscombe, *The Searchers* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 23-24. Böhnke argues that Ethan's racism stems from custom. Eckstein argues that Ethan's "repressed love" for Martha "is the engine behind the entire film" (5) and goes on to make an interesting claim that the film is about the "race war" surrounding the "crucial post-Brown [v. Board of Education] American dialogue on race" (9). Eckstein brings the psychological and racial account together by pointing to "racism's origin: the projection of unacceptable desires and emotions onto the Other, followed by hatred (and punishment) of that Other" (16), a clear pattern that occurs in the film in the character of Scar, the Comanche leader. The psychoanalytic reading is suggestive and plausible, accounting for many strange elements of the film; for example, Ethan's desire to kill Debbie reflects the psychological taboos broken by the sexual contact between Scar and the white women. Brian Henderson argues that Ethan plays the redemptive scapegoat of American racist attitudes, condemned to wander and suffer for our racist sins. Brian Henderson, "The Searchers: An American Dilemma," in Eckstein and Lehman, 47-74.
4. Richard Gilmore's chapter, "John Ford's *The Searchers* as an Allegory of the Philosophical Search," is an intriguing mix of psychoanalysis and philosophy. I agree with his psychoanalytic reading of the film, and his insight into the philosophical allegory of the film, that the search is essentially a search for self-knowledge, is very perceptive. Richard Gilmore, *Doing Philosophy at the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 15-32. James Clauss helpfully details the clear "mythic paradigms" at work in *The Searchers* and argues cogently that Ethan's quest resembles the mythic "descent into the underworld." James Clauss, "Descent into Hell: Mythic Paradigms in *The Searchers*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27 (Fall 1999): 2. Martin Winkler's account of the "mythic" qualities of *The Searchers* is illuminating (especially on the parallels of the heroism and isolation of Ethan and Achilles [149]), but the parallels to the character of Achilles seem a bit stretched at points, especially because of the many differences between the characters and motivations of Ethan and Achilles. No one can stop Ethan, whereas no one can get Achilles to reenter the fray after Agamemnon insults him. Martin Winkler, "Homer's Iliad and John Ford's *The Searchers*," in Eckstein and Lehman, 145-70.
5. That this film can admit of so many divergent and plausible interpretations again attests to its worthiness as one of the greatest American films. In 1992, it was voted fifth in a Sight and Sound poll of the ten greatest films.
6. A number of fine explications of the film proceed linearly through the plot, in contrast to my approach. See, for instance, Buscombe, *The Searchers*.
7. Aaron is portrayed as courageous nonetheless, as we later see that he fights for his family to the death.
8. Martha's free-spiritedness can be discerned when Aaron recounts the story of selling the ranch when Martha "wouldn't let a man quit." Aaron goes on to draw the parallel explicitly, stating that he "saw it [this courage] in you before the war." At the same time, Aaron's words (along with his closing the door on Ethan) indicate that he knows his wife really loves the free individualist Ethan. Ethan picks up on the subtext of Aaron's story-Aaron's displeasure with the love between Ethan and his wife-exploding, "You asking me to clear out now?"
9. Instead of rushing back to the Edwards's household when the Comanche gambit is revealed, Ethan knows to stop and feed the horses. Furthermore, Ethan displays tremendous knowledge of Comanche language, culture, and battle techniques, all used in service of staying alive.

10. Clayton's initial plan to sneak up on the Comanche, drive away their horses, and then persuade them to return Debbie backfires, as Ethan predicts. Clayton yields to Ethan, we can see, in the final moments of the film. When the same alternative is raised-sneak up on the Comanche (Clayton's plan) or a direct charge (Ethan's plan)-Clayton opts for Ethan's plan.
11. Ford repeats the framing image throughout the film, reminding us again of the contrast between the protected interior characteristic of family and the dangerous exterior of the frontier. For a list, see Buscombe, *The Searchers*, 63-64; for an insightful discussion of this "master antinomy," see Böhnke, "Myth and Law," 59.
12. Whereas Ethan prudently abides by the law's demand, Martin emulates Ethan's disregard of the law and brashly rejects Clayton's suggestion that they go to the state capital.
13. Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* is the locus classicus not just for the claim that commercial society engenders greed, but also the judgment that the new modern greedy character is good. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees and Other Writings*, ed. E. J. Hundert (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).
14. William Darby insightfully reads the *mise-en-scène* of the funeral scene, in which Ethan walks out of the frame trained on the burial site: "By storming out of the tableau that Ford has established on the hillside, Ethan cuts through the social bonds by which communities come into being and survive." William Darby, *John Ford's Westerns: A Thematic Analysis, with a Filmography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1996), 234. This insightful point can be marshaled in service of my thesis to bring out the excessiveness of Ethan's initial individualism, which sacrifices all forms of human community and thereby ends up destroying itself.
15. Ethan is adaptable to the circumstances, not allowing moral qualms to get in the way of his actions, as we can see clearly in two places: first, when he shoots Futterman and an accomplice in the back when they try to rob him and, second, when he scalps the dead Scar, both highly taboo actions. We know that shooting the men in the back is taboo based on the internal evidence of the film (Clayton places Ethan under arrest for questioning), but see Eckstein, who brings out the taboo nature of Ethan's scalping of Scar ("Introduction," 24-25).
16. See Eckstein for evidence of Ethan's stint as a mercenary before the events of the film ("Introduction," 4).
17. Some thinkers associate the early modern political thought of Hobbes and Locke with a kind of "mercenary" understanding of communal association- individuals associate by forming a social contract, because such association is beneficial to their various forms of self-interest. The common good is of no concern to such individuals. Individuals, therefore, are much more likely to neglect their duties in service of the common good, and even to defect from the association as a whole when their self-interest clashes with the community's demands. See Hegel's critique of the "empiricist" political theorists in his essay "On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law," in *Hegel: Political Writings*, ed. Laurence Dickey and H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 102-80.
18. Ford himself called the film the "tragedy of a loner." Qtd in Christopher Sharrett, "Through a Door Darkly: A Reappraisal of John Ford's *The Searchers*," *Cineaste* 31 (Fall 2006): 5. The loner is tragic because he does not have anyone else to recognize him and assure him of being a loner.
19. Though the family fails to satisfy Ethan's desire for freedom, I disagree with Buscombe's judgment that "all Ford's films are about home: finding it, building it, losing it" (*The Searchers*, 64)-I think that Ethan's character shows that the human longing for freedom extends well beyond the scope of the family.
20. This institution is overcome by one of Ethan's more successful doppelgangers in this film, Martin. The love between Martin and Laurie, postponed by Martin's long search with Ethan, is threatened by Laurie's marriage ceremony to Charlie, which Ethan and Martin luckily interrupt. Unfortunately, Ethan is much too late to interrupt the ceremony between Aaron and Martha, a pair as mismatched as Laurie and Charlie.
21. Some commentators have, in fact, read the attack on the Edwards household as Ethan's own form of revenge on the social strictures imposed upon him, with Scar as Ethan's id, carrying out his basest desires. See Eckstein, "Introduction," 16-17.
22. This shot is so striking because it appears to be from no one's perspective but the ghosts of the departed, or the voices of the Fates resounding in Ethan's ears, voices that he will again hear when his group fails to save the first Edwards daughter. Ford effectively visualizes Ethan's own recognition of his tragic flaw, which has brought about this catastrophe: his perpetual lack of self-knowledge.
23. Though I find the many parallels drawn between Ethan and Odysseus compelling, I think that my secular-Christian (or Hegelian) interpretation fits Ethan's quest better. Kirsten Day helpfully elicits many clear parallels between *The Searchers* and *The Odyssey*, including the strong disconnect between civilized and barbaric peoples, a common "balance between words and action." Kirsten Day, "'What Makes a Man to Wander?': *The Searchers* as a Western *Odyssey*," *Arethusa* 41 (2006): 11-49; 16. She points out that Ethan exhibits two of Odysseus's famous traits: "He is a wanderer who longs to be rooted in the community but is effectively estranged, and he demonstrates a moral ambiguity equally appropriate to a trickster or villain" (15). However, the motivation for Ethan's journey becomes muddled when Day attempts to connect it to Odysseus's journey. She says at one point that Odysseus leaves home to retrieve Helen (21n28) and at another that Odysseus' journey is to "reunite with his wife and ensure the integrity of his family unit" (21). For Day, Ethan is similar in that he must rescue Debbie from a foreign people, like Helen, and from "sexual threat" (21), like Penelope. Day mixes up two very important motivations on Odysseus's part-his patriotism for the Achaeans in the case of Helen and his political kingship (indistinguishable from his family) in the case of Penelope. Odysseus is also not concerned with maintaining sexual purity because of racial prejudice against the suitors-as in Ethan's case-but rather with maintaining his political rule. It is also difficult to compare Martin to Telemachus (28ff.), because the film goes out of its way to establish Ethan and Martin's lack of blood relationship. Although there are many parallels between *The Odyssey* and *The Searchers*, there are also disconnects. For that matter, there are also many parallels to the Christian tradition of journeys, most notably Dante's *Divine Comedy* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, both stories about a troubled psyche, a long journey, and

redemption.

24. We as viewers feel this contrast as well, as Ford intentionally crafts his *mise-en-scène* to portray the Edwards family household as cramped and cramped, whereas the frontier is triumphant, beautiful, and free.

25. Eckstein uses this event to help show that the film is not entirely "complicit" in the racism that it displays, but in fact levels a kind of criticism against such racism by bringing out the terrible actions wreaked by a racist character ("Introduction," 13).

26. Ethan displays his contradictory view of the Comanche when, on one hand, he violently kills as many buffalo as he can find in his effort to eradicate the enemy, yet, on the other hand, regrets the senseless killing of the group of Comanche by the American cavalry. The Comanche, then, both deserve and do not deserve mercy.

27. I have avoided the theme of race in this film, which has been treated elsewhere. See, for example, Eckstein, "Introduction," and Tom Grayson Colonnese, "Native American Reactions to *The Searchers*," in Eckstein and Lehman, 335-342. Nonetheless, I think my analysis of the film's deliberate paralleling of Comanche restlessness with Ethan's points toward the film's ultimate critique of Ethan's racism and the general political policies of violence toward Native Americans.

28. Few commentators attend to the character of Martin, except to bring out his bearing on Ethan, for instance, as "highlighting Ethan's bitter racism even more" (Eckstein, "Introduction," 14). Day understands Martin as Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and hence significant insofar as he is part of Odysseus's story. I think Martin is meant to express a separate ideal. However, the film establishes distinct parallels between Martin and Ethan, underscoring their common goal of achieving some form of individualism. The literature, however, tends to bring out the parallels between Ethan and Scar, but not between Ethan and Martin.

29. Martin is further compared to Ethan in a shot after the dinner scene (in which Ethan claims Martin could be a "half-breed"). This scene begins with Martin mournfully sitting outside of the house, in a similar position and melancholy mood to Ethan's own dark, willfully aloof position outside of the house two scenes later. Martin, like Ethan, does not feel quite at home in the household, as he was not born into freedom and so must journey to the freedom of the frontier to display his worthiness to Ethan. Martin is clearly concerned about Ethan's initial judgment of him, as indicated by the cut from Ethan's insult to Martin's melancholy pose.

30. My interpretation is offered as a complement to the dominant interpretation of this final scene: that Ethan cannot kill Debbie because she too closely resembles Martha. This latter interpretation seems flawed in that Ethan seemed perfectly willing to kill Debbie earlier in the film, even though she also resembles Martha at that point.

31. In overcoming nature, Ethan also makes great strides toward overcoming his own racism, insofar as his racism is grounded on supposed biological traits of the Comanche. Ethan can accept Martin, who possesses Comanche "blood," and can recognize him within a just community of freedom. Such recognition opens the possibility of further overcoming Ethan's racist attitudes.

32. However, Ethan remains far from embracing the other. In fact, he is still drawn to the excessive action of scalping Scar after he is dead. Ethan's individualism points toward recognition of the other, but he does not fully attain it. His melancholy search must continue at the end of the film, indicating that he remains fundamentally unreformed.

33. See J. David Alvis and John E. Alvis for an insightful interpretation of Ethan as embodying the uneasily paired virtues of civilization, justice, and courage. I differ from Alvis and Alvis on the character of Ethan's desire, which they describe as an "all-out-war on the forces inimical to civilization." J. David Alvis and John E. Alvis, "Heroic Virtue and the Limits of Democracy in John Ford's *The Searchers*," *Perspectives on Political Science*, forthcoming. Ethan's tyrannical desire to achieve for utter completeness, as opposed to settling for Clayton's more moderate form of justice, is best read as a function of the cycles of violence and revenge resulting from a mutual lack of recognition.

34. The film points toward this possibility in the Jorgensen characters. Lars Jorgensen repeats his distaste for "this country" a few times before Mrs. Jorgensen qualifies his complaint: she affirms that they are "Texicans," which is "nothing but a human man, way out on a limb." Yet this condition of semi-barbarism will not "be forever," since "someday, this country's going to be a fine, good place to be" with the founding of civilization and the rule of law.

35. Sidney A. Pearson, "It Is Tough to be the Second Toughest Guy in a Tough Town: Ask the Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," *Perspectives on Political Science* 36, no. 1 (2007): 23-28.

36. Clauss argues that Ethan "has been transformed" over the course of the film "into the Culture Hero who helps to establish civilization" (15; see note 4). As I have argued, Ethan is not yet the hero of a new epoch, but his journey of self-knowledge points toward the establishment of civilized political order founded on mutual recognition. Clauss makes the interesting point-similar to Pearson's-that Ethan is "instrumental in promoting the development of civilization in the region by ridding the area of Western monsters," but that he "can never belong to the culture he helped create because of his fierce violence and propensity toward fanatical anger" (*ibid.*). Yet, as I have argued, Ethan's ambition and courage are required for the foundation of political order. However, transcending natural animosity is one thing; realizing principles of justice in institutions of public life is another. Such a task of political founding necessitates just the same spirit of individualism that Ethan displays in a less developed, more self-contradictory form. The reading of the final moment of the film proffered by Clauss overlooks the fact that the family is not tantamount to civilization (the wedding of Laurie and Charlie indicates the limitations of the family on the primitive frontier). Ethan cannot return to the family because it has not been integrated into the proper, higher institutions of public life that distinctively constitute civilization. Though Clauss is wrong to see Ethan as part of the primitive past, he is right to see *The Searchers* as dramatizing a historical transition. As I have been arguing, it is a transition in the understanding of modern individualism.

[Author Affiliation]

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