According to The American Heritage Dictionary, one of the ways “collateral” can be defined is “of a secondary nature; subordinate.” It is from this definition that we get the term “collateral damage,” and it is this same definition that Collateral is meant to evoke.

Collateral has received much well-deserved acclaim for its engrossing story, convincing acting, and slick photography. Indeed, the view provided is pulchritudinous—bold primary colors are filtered through the ink of nighttime Los Angeles—but the view of reality held by the film’s central character is what caught my eye.

Max (Jamie Foxx) is fastidious about the appearance of his cab, even though driving a cab is only a temporary stepping-stone to his goal of owning a limousine company. On an ordinary night in Los Angeles, Vincent (Tom Cruise) hires Max to drive to five different stops to “see friends, collect some signatures” in order to execute a real estate contract in one night. On the first stop of the night, Max discovers that Vincent literally will be executing his contracts.

In the scene when Vincent offers justification for his actions as a killer-for-hire, he tells Max that in the expanse of the universe, humans are only insignificant specks on a tiny planet. Our lives thus have no meaning or purpose, and the taking of another life is of no great consequence. In fact, ultimately, one kills or is killed. In this short dialogue, one can see the reality of how our most fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality drive our actions.

This is a logical—albeit extreme—extension of the naturalistic Darwinian worldview that pervades much of our culture. The impact of naturalism upon bioethics is clear. Why not destroy embryos in order, perhaps, to achieve a cure? Why not hurry along the dying process in order to harvest organs, or, more crassly, save a family inheritance?

Max attempts to defend his own, more “traditional” moral perspective (i.e., “You can’t just go around killing people”), by asserting that Vincent is “missing some parts that people are supposed to have.” One wonders, though, why it is that people are supposed to have these “parts,” and from where are they supposed to come?

In the foreword to Nancy Pearcey’s new book, Total Truth, Phillip E. Johnson writes of how changes in worldview account for great shifts in American culture over the past century. In short, over time Americans have shifted from a Judeo-Christian worldview to a naturalistic Darwinian worldview, and such changes in thought have resulted in changes in action.

The fact of the matter is that humans are not insignificant specks. We are the special creation of God—we bear His image. He is aware of, interested in, and at work in all facets of our lives. Grave danger lies in any perspective where human beings are seen as “of a secondary nature; subordinate.” Instead, we are to respect the lives of other human beings because they too are created in the image of God. This perspective should be the bedrock foundation for our lives and our involvement in bioethics.

Editor’s Note: Collateral is rated R. The New York Times succinctly reports, “The film includes a lot of very intense gun violence, some phony corpses laid out in an autopsy room and strong adult language.”

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