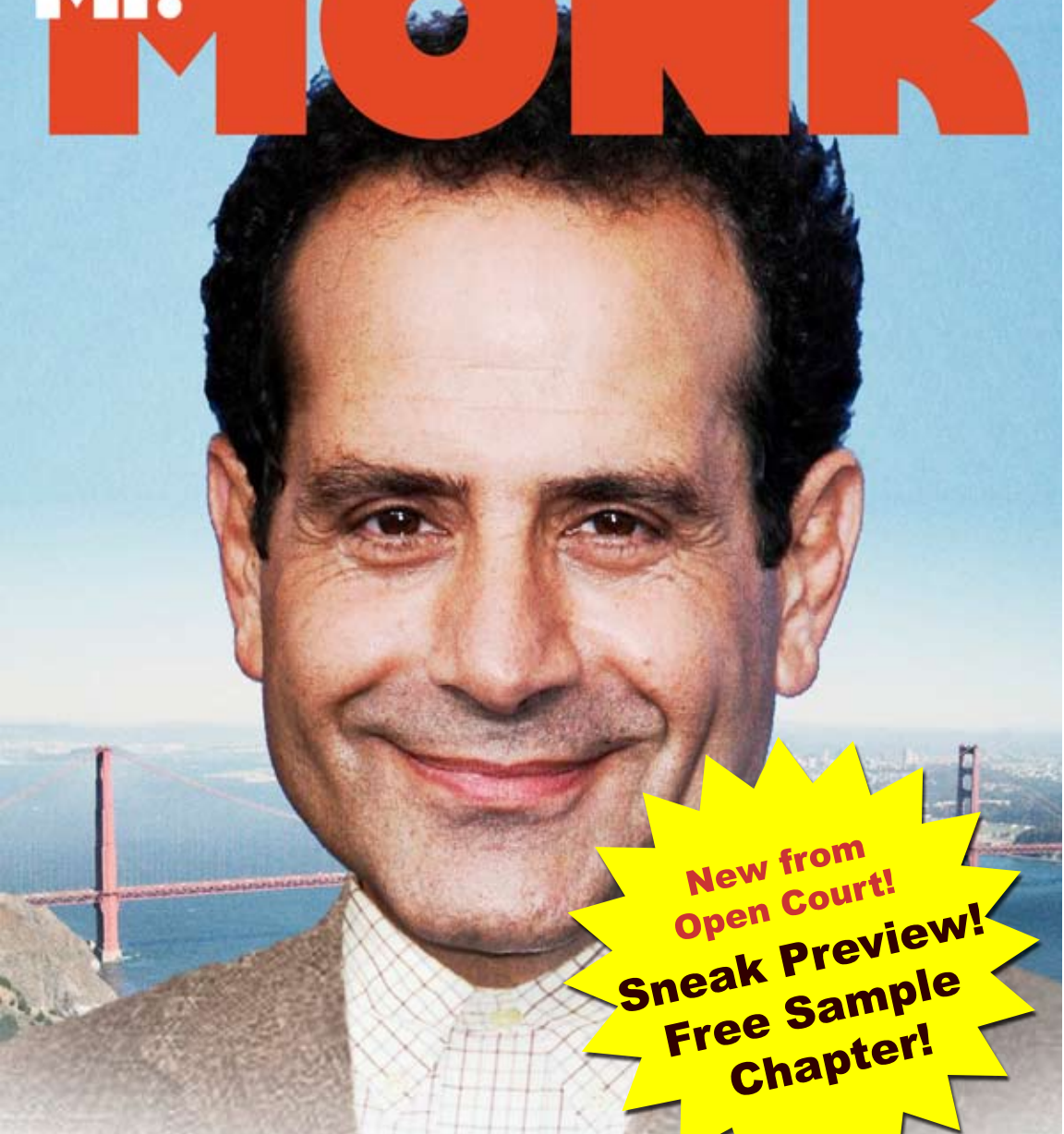




Mr. **MONK**



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Mr. Monk and Philosophy

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Mr. Monk and the Reestablished Harmony

ZERRIN ORAL KAVAS

Years and years ago, I read a good critic seriously reprimanding an author (don't ask for names or references; that was in another country, and besides, both are long dead) who had a disabled character in one of his novels: "Why on earth is this girl lame?" the critic asked, "You just can't disable people as you wish! So what if you're her author?"

The critic was clearly appealing to Anton Chekhov's famous principle for storytelling and drama: If you say in the first act (or chapter) that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, it must have gone off by the end of the play (or story). Otherwise, why should it be there? Everything has to make sense, and to play a role in the plot. No, I'm not going to argue that the producers must have been loyal to Adrian Monk's obsession by ending the series with Episode 100; that's another point (and a silly one). Still, we all have the basic fans' right to ask: Why is Trudy dead in the first place? Still more pressing: Why is there evil? And for that matter: Why is there something rather than nothing? (Okay, that's like a record-breaking triple jump, but I can explain that the questions are interrelated.)

Why Things Happen, Especially to Mr. Monk

Chekhov's principle is just a version of what philosophers call "the principle of sufficient reason," which states that nothing happens without there being sufficient reason for its happening and that nothing happens as it does happen without there being sufficient reason for its happening as it does rather than otherwise. In accordance with this principle, we must believe that, for any case that

Adrian Monk is dealing with (including Trudy's death), there is sufficient reason that the incident had to be and had to be as it has been. Otherwise, why should anything happen? Why should Mr. Monk "get stuck in traffic," seemingly because of an accident, which turns out to be anything but accidental? Why should there be six toothpicks in a vault and why should one of them be shorter than the other? ("Mr. Monk Goes to the Bank") There must be something wrong with all these incidents and accidents, a wrong that must be corrected or at least justified.

Just how often does Mr. Monk *get* and *go* and *visit* and *meet* people! Just how often do things *happen* to the poor Mr. Monk! What an abundance of incidents! As if "the time is out of joint" (Shakespeare), as if "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (William Butler Yeats). Then, suddenly, everything falls back into pattern, for what accounts for the incident is the detective's account of the case itself. For Monk, an incident makes sense only if it can be narrated, accounted for as part of a coherent story. Here's Mr. Monk's version of Chekhov's principle: First, if there's something, there must be a pattern or order in which the thing, person or event is a constituent. Secondly, if there's a particular order, it must be exposed and verified. Thirdly, that particular order of things must fit into the overall order of everything else. For Monk, it's a matter of course that any particular pattern is there just because it's part of the complete order of his world.

An excess of encounters, an excess of incidents causes disturbance and Mr. Monk, like Herman Melville's Bartleby, the scrivener, "would prefer not to" be disturbed. Unlike Bartleby and his brother Ambrose, however, Mr. Monk can't just retreat. A regular and dutiful copyist of documents in the attorney's office, Bartleby just declines, all of a sudden, when the attorney asks him to proofread two clerks' copies. Then he continues refraining from doing whatever he's asked to do until he reaches to the point of doing nothing at all. He isn't there to correct the world, but to leave it as it is. Mr. Monk's attitude is the opposite. He's an *orderly* man or, more precisely, a man of *patterns* (given his photographic memory and his obsession with frames of images), loyal to the harmony of the present world, this given order of things. He's ready to leave the world as it is, but only after confirming the order already inherent in the world. That's also what distinguishes Monk from all other detectives: his method and attitude.

Method and Mr. Monk

All detective fiction is about the problem of evil, but each detective work is limited to a particular evil and the question of explaining it or eliminating it. Unlike our Monk, detectives are committed to correcting a given, particular wrong, not to reestablishing the order of the world as a whole after an incidental disorder. What do the detectives detect, exactly? What do they look at? However obsessive an interest in entomology Gil Grissom might have, CSI detectives (in Las Vegas, New York or Miami) trace the evidence of the most minuscule kind. Grissom resembles Adrian only insofar as he attempts to reconstruct the crime scene (although he does so actually, not mentally as our Adrian does) in order to replace the evidence and reinstall the event in miniature. Then the case is closed and Gil goes back to his insects. CSI teams just collect evidence, discover the causes and catch the people who have committed the crimes (two cases per episode) and go home. Allison Dubois's method in *Medium* is the opposite: She's asleep at home, has an insight, through dream knowledge, into what has happened or what will soon happen and then goes out to verify her intuitive cognition. The FBI team in *Criminal Minds* starts from a series of cases, constructs them as a single story pointing at a certain pattern of behavior, which then reveals the profile of the person who must have committed the crimes and who will most probably take the easily conjecturable next step. *Criminal Intent*'s Robert Goren follows similar lines in getting into the minds of people: he reads the symptoms, browses through possible and probable causes and (especially) motives of the prominent or ignored suspect, reconstructs her train of thoughts in his mind, corners her and helps her confess that she has actually gone through that particular process. Enter Gregory House (yes, diagnostic medicine is also detective work): Given a set of symptoms, what is the best explanation? Suppose that it's true and eliminate the causal element. You have a new or additional set of symptoms. Go through the algorithm with the new data. The case becomes worse and hopeless. Eliminate, eliminate, and yes, eliminate! Then a seemingly irrelevant remark about an irrelevant matter in House's affairs, and that's it, by analogy or revelation.

I've saved the group of good old fellows for the last row: Remember Lieutenant Columbo, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin. Even

Andy Breckman, the creator, says that Monk is some combination of Columbo and Holmes. That may be true insofar as some manners are concerned, but as regards their methods, there's nothing of the fake ignorance of Columbo or of the deductive reasoning of Holmes in our Monk. Holmes traces clues, brings them together and puts them into a form the logicians call *modus ponens*: if it's the fact that *bla bla*, then it's the fact that *pla pla*; but it's the fact that *bla bla*; therefore it's the fact that *pla pla*. In that way "from a drop of water a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara."¹ Holmes's follower, Hercule Poirot, approaches Mr. Monk just a little bit. In addition to observing material and behavioral clues, he collects the accounts of the people involved in the affair. Using his "little grey cells" by "order and method," he then eliminates whatever is impossible and reconstructs the course of events. Both Holmes and Poirot are partly following their French master C. Auguste Dupin, whose method, however, was purely rational (that's why Edgar Allan Poe calls it "ratiocination") as opposed to their empirical research. Dupin basically derives a whole train of thought from some initial or elementary statements by someone and detects whatever is reasonably the case.

How different is Mr. Monk's mind! No evidence, no insight or intuition, no inferential walk, no discovery of causes, no explanation, no revealed intent, no set of symptoms, no discursive reasoning, no argument at all, no elimination of possible, probable causes counts as such by itself, unless they fit into the only possible (not merely plausible) narrative account. Any incidental deviance in the course of Monk's world must be restored to the place where it would cohere with the overall narrative order. "What might have been?" is the question: What might have been, so that once the story is told, everything else remains intact, the world is left as it is? "What might have been" so that the world's harmony may be reestablished as Adrian Monk knows it and Mr. Monk can survive the incident? The answer is not a form of inference (of whatever sort), but a plausible narrative account. When Mr. Monk introduces the ultimate story ("Here's what happened"), he's not only prepared to tell the particular tale about the case at hand, but also to retell the whole story of the order of the world. When a particular

¹ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet and The Sign of the Four* (Wordsworth, 2001), p. 14.

piece fits into the pattern, the whole puzzle is solved, unless other defects are recognized.

Mr. Monk Tells Tales

What does Adrian Monk exactly do while telling everybody what has happened? What kind of a narrative does he give? Rick Altman distinguishes between “some” narrative and “a” narrative.² In a sense, his distinction could also be defined as the difference between “potential narrative” and “actual narrative.” Daily life in Monk’s world, as well as in our own, is full of narrative material: it’s populated with characters, contains series of events and actions, which display the potential of “some” narrative only when an element of “following” is added. When Adrian chases Maria Cordova in the episode “Mr. Monk Stays Up All Night,” without knowing why, the act of following constitutes a potential narrative. However, until the truth that Maria Cordova had received Trudy’s corneas is revealed, that is, until the complete tale is told, Mr. Monk doesn’t have “an” actual narrative. What is required for the recognition of a narrative is “framing”—cutting life into meaningful slices that make implicit narratives explicit.

Obviously, all episodes of all serials are based on framing, but these frames are for an external eye, the gaze of the viewer. Within the episodes, the attention of the detectives is usually limited to other frames: those of the microscope, camera and the computer screen matching the fingerprints. Even Holmes’s forward bend of his head with his magnifying glass and Robert Goren’s sideward bend of his head with his penetrating eyes are elements of following, not framing. Mr. Monk’s narrative method, however, works with frames from the beginning to the end. Consider his initial and final use of his hands, first cutting out the whole frame of the crime scene where only the actual event is missing (“Here it was that . . .”), then putting the whole frame filled with “what must have been” back into its proper place (“Here’s what happened there.”).

A prompt objection to this argument would be what Tony Shalhoub told to Susan Stewart: “I’m looking between the fingers, because it actually isolates and cuts the room into slices, looking at

² Rick Altman, *A Theory of Narrative* (Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 15–21.

parts instead of the whole.”³ Can actors be mistaken about what the characters they’re playing really do? Well, they can, but that’s not the case here, because what Shalhoub says isn’t incompatible with my argument; to the contrary, they’re quite consistent. Everything depends on what kind of “parts” Mr. Monk is looking at, and what their relationship with the whole is.

Wittgenstein Helps Mr. Monk

A particular overall theory of the world will help us here: the version Ludwig Wittgenstein defended in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. One of the most curious claims in this book is the statement that any item in the world can be the case or not the case—and the rest of the world can remain the same (1.21). Come on, Ludwig! Do you mean that Sharona Fleming can relocate to New Jersey and Natalie Teeger can stab an intruder, while everything else remains the same? Yes, that’s what he means from a logical point of view, for this is a composite claim, which puts two distinct ideas together.

The first argument is that the constituents of the world are not things, but facts. Wittgenstein really holds that the world divides into facts, not into things or persons. The world doesn’t consist of items like parking slot machines, but of facts, like a certain number of parking machines being in a row with regular distances between them. Mr. Monk is fond of regularly checking and verifying such facts usually ignored by others. Wittgenstein’s second argument is that the truths about the facts of the world are independent of each other and contingent by themselves. To call a fact or truth “contingent” is to say that it’s not necessary, but might have been otherwise. The fact that Sharona relocates to New Jersey is contingent, for she might have stayed in San Francisco. This particular fact is independent of the fact that Natalie stabbed an intruder, for it might well have been the case that Sharona didn’t relocate and Natalie did stab the intruder (or not).

For Wittgenstein, a fact is an existing state of affairs and a state of affairs is a potential fact (*Tractatus* 2). What makes up the world is the *totality* of actual states of affairs or “the facts in logical space” (*Tractatus* 1.13). The “logical space” encompasses all

³ Susan Stewart, “Happy to Be Neurotic, at Least Once a Week,” *New York Times* (16th September, 2007).

possible states of affairs, only some of which exist, that is, only some of which are facts constituting the world. What Mr. Monk does is to picture to himself a possible case in the logical space. If it's a logical, consistent picture corresponding to what is a case in the world, it's a true thought. Wittgenstein tell us that "The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world" (*Tractatus* 3.01). That's what Mr. Monk is trying to achieve: a well-ordered total picture frame encompassing all actual states of affairs, together with all their sufficient reasons, and true to the facts.

The way Mr. Monk solves the case in the episode "Mr. Monk and the Genius" is the paradigm of Monk's strategy. Consider the chessboard as the universe or the logical space, and each of the different chessboards, together with the particular games played on them, as a possible world or a complete state of affairs. A complete account of the facts in any of these worlds will be a narrative describing all of the moves and states of all pieces on the board in consecutive order. Revealing Patrick Kloster's strategy in the Poisoned Pawn variation isn't a sufficient description of the game by itself. What Mr. Monk needs is the totality of Kloster's moves displaying a coherent account of all the acts committed. For the sake of the completeness of the world, he's even prepared to plant evidence—or rather install a fact, because that particular fact *must be* among the constituents of the world, if the world is to be a coherent whole. Then he recognizes the pattern of "castling": it isn't just a matter of two pieces (on the chessboard or in the cemetery) switching places, but rather a question of switching the facts. The move changes the complete state of affairs by shifting the pattern of the facts in the world, which thus becomes another world, because "The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts" (*Tractatus*, 1.11).

Mr. Monk has to consider all possible states of affairs and think through the whole logical space. The ideal state would be a descriptive account of all facts within a total frame, but until the primary defect (Trudy's death—or was it his father's abandonment?) is eliminated, the narrative won't be complete and coherent. Thus Adrian is still stuck in the "following," tracing all evidence towards the ultimate tale of the world. What if it turns out to be a fact about the world that it ultimately lacks order? Unlikely, for Adrian Monk will invent the order anyway, for there must be an order.

Herr Leibniz Consoles Mr. Monk

Wittgenstein's theory of the world supplies a ground for Adrian Monk's method of handling the cases one by one and as a totality of facts, but what does it say about Trudy's death? Simply that *it's* the case among all possible states of affairs, and nothing else. Trudy is dead, because the world is as it is. Take it *and* leave it as it is. If Mr. Monk is to follow Wittgenstein's suggestion, he has to accept what every other detective takes for granted: There's evil and a particular evil in each case. Even if Wittgenstein condoles with Mt. Monk, he can't console him, because he can't explain why there is evil at all.

The consolation comes from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He was a very optimistic man who believed that the world we live in is the best of all possible worlds, governed by a preestablished harmony, and based on "the principle of sufficient reason." He would argue that there is something rather than nothing because there is sufficient reason for that—and what's more, the world is better like that; just ask God, who knows everything! Then, Trudy's dead because there was sufficient reason for the fact that she was killed—and the world Adrian Monk lives in becomes better with that fact; just ask the writers and producers! The argument sounds as absurd as any initial conjecture by Mr. Monk does to Captain Stottlemeyer, or as Randy Disher's "name and catch" theory about the "Lipstick Assassin" ("Mr. Monk's 100th Case"), but once the whole story is told, it may turn out to be quite plausible.

Underlying Leibniz's argument is the claim that God had a couple of options. First, God might have chosen another world to create from among an infinite variety of possible worlds conceivable by God. Before proceeding ahead, let's clarify the idea of a "possible world." The actual world, the world we (or Mr. Monk and company) live in is a totality of contingent facts. The facts in (or truths about) our world are contingent in the sense that none of them is necessary, but might have been otherwise than it actually is. Since the actual world consists only of contingent facts, the world itself is totally contingent, which means that it isn't necessary as a whole. In other words, the world could have been totally different than it actually is. Therefore, worlds other than the actual one are not only imaginable, but also possible.

Still, God *couldn't* create *any* other world basically because of two divine perfections: rationality and benevolence. On the one

hand, the principle of sufficient reason doesn't allow the perfectly rational God to choose at random; on the other hand, God's supreme goodness doesn't leave any choice but opting for the best possible choice. So, therefore, the actual world must be the best of all possible worlds:

It follows from the supreme perfection of God that he chose the best possible plan in producing the universe, a plan in which there is the greatest possible variety together with the greatest possible order. The most carefully used plot of ground, place, and time; the greatest effect produced by the simplest means; the most power, knowledge, happiness, and goodness in created things that the universe could allow.⁴

Now let's consider Mr. Monk as a pessimistic Leibniz. The optimistic Leibniz was strange enough, but the pessimistic one is certainly stranger. The world Adrian Monk survives in, from his point of view, must be the worst of all possible worlds, not simply because Trudy is killed, but also because he can't make sense of her death. As long as Mr. Monk believed that the bomb missed its real target (himself), the world was still meaningful, although uncaring and sorrowful. *That*, at least, was an explanation, an unbearable but understandable account of what happened. Once he learns that the bomb was meant for Trudy, in "Mr. Monk Goes to Jail," the world as a whole lacks any sense: The question "Why her, rather than me?" is replaced by the painfully simple question "Why her?" Translated into Wittgensteinian terms, the question becomes: "Why this fact among all possible states of affairs?" Translated into Leibnizian terms, it becomes: "Why this actual world among all possible worlds?"

Given the present state of affairs, Mr. Monk has very limited alternatives: First, he can wait for a *deus ex machina* to solve everything, which is unlikely to come down, unless the creator sends it in. This brings us to the second option: The intervention of Andy Breckman and the team. (Some fictional worlds are certainly polytheistic, as you see.) Still unlikely, because the world Monk lives in (which is *fictional* from *our* point of view, but *actual* from *his* point of view) would lack perfection, if any divine (or creative) intervention is needed there. This is the ground on which Leibniz

⁴ "Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason," paragraph 10, in G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Hackett, 1989), p. 210.

defends the idea of a *preestablished harmony*, which guarantees the greatest possible variety and richness of facts that the greatest possible order would allow. With a whole population of individual substances (which Leibniz calls “monads”, but you can imagine them as ordinary individuals, for the sake of the argument) and all possible states and actions of those individual substances, God chooses to create the best possible world, organized in such a way that all states and actions of each individual are in conformity with all states and actions of every other individual. That overall conformity of all facts in the world is what Leibniz calls “the preestablished harmony.”

Now, Mr. Monk probably doesn't know anything about Leibniz's theory or about his creators, but he seems to believe a theory about the world which is similar to Leibniz's: The world must have a preestablished harmony. Within his limited viewpoint and with his strict commitment to the given order of his world, Monk has no access to the will and deeds of Andy Breckman and the team. That leaves Adrian on his own: Unless we're wrong (which, you know, we're not), and unless he's wrong (which, we know, he's not), his world must be perfect and there has to be a reason why Trudy is dead. This particular fact needs explanation in the particular way Monk explains facts.

Leibniz may be right in suggesting that the presence of evil is inevitable in any possible world just because it's among the possible actions of individuals. The writers and producers may be right in filling in Monk's world with evil for the obvious fact that there can't be a detective without there being crimes. Still, our poor Mr. Monk, even though he's quite aware that there's disorder and that it can be accounted for, is at an impasse when it comes to Trudy's case. “He can't die until he knows” (“Mr. Monk's 100th Case”) and as the Greeks said, “Nobody should be called happy before he dies,” or, to generalize, no world should be deemed best of all possible worlds before it ends.