



## The Fountainhead of Eudaemonia

A Review of

42 (2013)

by Brian Helgeland (Director)

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Reviewed by

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The movie *42* recreates the rookie year of Jack “Jackie” Roosevelt Robinson, who, in 1947, became the first American of African descent to play major league baseball in the modern era. The film’s title refers to Robinson’s uniform number, which was retired across all major league teams—the highest honor given any American athlete by his or her sport.

The movie’s story should have historical and human interest for anyone, but why should the movie warrant special interest to psychologists reading *PsycCRITIQUES*? In a previous review (Wall & Wall, 2011), we drew a parallel between Hollywood’s obsession with a protagonist’s psychological weaknesses as the source of dramatic tension in plot development and psychology’s obsession with the illness model in treating psychopathology. Both focus on the protagonist’s or patient’s struggles in overcoming weaknesses to resolve unhappiness rather than in marshaling strengths to achieve happiness.

With the exception of one notable scene, *42* should be of interest to readers here because it is a rare film that consistently provides a model of mentally healthy individuals heroically displaying virtues in overcoming significant external challenges in achieving happiness. Thus, we recommend this movie to psychologists inspired in their work by a vision of human happiness, virtue, and rationality rather than by the inchoate vision typified by freshmen psychology majors who mawkishly condescend that they “just want to help (infirm) people”—that is, any appropriately motivated psychologist.

### The Achievement of Happiness

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As much a story about a young couple starting their lives together as it is a story about Robinson’s (Chadwick Boseman) start in major league baseball, *42* is, by most accounts, a fairly accurate portrayal of Robinson’s personal and professional life. Significantly, the movie opens with depictions of Robinson and his future wife, Rachel Isum (Nicole Beharie) as a happy, optimistic young couple beginning their life together. Jackie plays baseball for the Kansas City Monarchs, a professional team in the Negro Leagues, and Rachel is training to be a nurse.

Remarkably, the film emphasizes how Jackie and Rachel work on achieving their happiness by eschewing the bitterness created in reaction to the ugly racism they often face. The couple does not allow their loving relationship and shared optimism to be tarnished by the prejudice that beset them in pre-civil rights America. The movie shows a couple deeply in love with each other. Their faces light up with joy when Jackie returns from a grueling road trip with the Monarchs. After Jackie is asked to sign with the Brooklyn Dodgers by team president and general manager Branch Rickey (Harrison Ford), the first thing he has to do is find a phone and share the good news with Rachel and ask her to marry him.

Apparently, their love was not Hollywood make-believe. When the 90-year-old Rachel was recently asked which part of the movie she liked most, she touchingly replied, "I loved how much we kissed" (Zeitchik, 2013). In real life, the couple consciously worked on living their lives unsullied by hatred. Rachel recalls,

I remember the time at Florida [for spring training] when Jack and I first got there and we went to a restaurant that wouldn't serve us. We were very angry. And we went home to the little room we were staying in, in Daytona, and we sat on the bed and then we thought, "This is so ridiculous." And then we fell off the bed laughing. No one outside would believe we could laugh at that. But that was our survival mechanism. We had to laugh. (Zeitchik, para. 19)

A similar scene is recreated in the movie. By showing Jackie and Rachel's heroic achievements of happiness, *42* swims against a tide in modern literature in which protagonists typically wallow in self-pity and melancholy. The rarity of showing earned happiness without equivocation or a subtext of discontent makes *42* an invaluable film for clinicians desperately looking for such models for themselves or their patients.

## The Power of Egoism

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The movie also provides an extremely rare and clear demonstration of the motivating power of egoism and self-esteem inherent in pursuing a good, moral life—what Aristotle termed *eudaemonia*. When Rickey signs Robinson, he stresses self-interested business reasons for his decision: "I make money by filling the seats at Ebbets Field. I fill seats when I win games. I win games by having the best players I can get on my team." It is in Rickey's rational self-interest to hire the best baseball players he can find. In his mind, the racial heritage of the players he hires does not matter, and it is irrational and unjust to hire players based upon anything but their talent to play the game.

The congruence of Rickey's egoism and acting morally is clear, but it goes further. After they become closer in their relationship, Rickey movingly shares with Robinson the depth of his principled idealism. He relates the shame he felt in his youth when he did not fight against the harassment of a Black ballplayer who was trying out for a college team with which he played. He is dismayed that his sport catered to an obvious evil, and righting a wrong is a way to improve his feeling of self-worth. He tells Robinson he hired him so he could love baseball again. By having the moral courage to break the color barrier in baseball, Rickey creates value for himself in multiple ways. First, he would build a better, more successful team. It would also renew his love for his chosen profession, and, perhaps most significantly, it would enhance his feeling of self-worth. Egoism drives Rickey's moral courage and his ability to achieve *eudaemonia*.

Egoism drives the Robinsons' moral courage as well. The movie emphasizes that the battle is one that Jackie and Rachel face together. Although they are aware of the challenges, they are also confident in their strength to endure. In a very real sense, it would have been easier for the couple *not* to accept the burden of Jackie being the first, but pride and self-esteem drive Jackie and Rachel to achieve something that no one else has done. Their love and optimism give them the strength to face the challenge before them, and they are willing to put up with the abuse for an opportunity to achieve their long-range happiness. It is beyond the scope of this review, but Objectivist philosophers have presented compelling arguments (Biddle, 2002, 2012; Rand, 1963; Smith, 2000, 2006) that egoism and self-love such as that displayed by *42*'s primary protagonists, Jackie, Rachel, and Rickey, are the fountainhead of all human achievement and happiness.

## The Virtue of Rationality

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The film shows that Robinson is not deeply embittered or victimized by the racial discrimination he faces. He is justifiably angered by discrimination, but he does not allow the injustices to turn him into a victim by reacting either subserviently or with irrational hostility. Instead, he acts rationally and accordingly. In an early scene in the movie when Robinson is still playing in the Negro League, the Monarchs' team bus stops at a gas station to refuel. When the attendant refuses to allow Robinson to use the restroom, Jack orders him to take the gas hose out of the tank and informs him calmly that they will take their business somewhere else. Not wanting to lose the large sale of gas that the bus tank offers, the attendant acquiesces and allows the station's Whites-only facilities to be used by all of the Black players on the team. Rationality beats unthinking bigotry and wins a small battle against injustice, but bigger battles await Robinson.

Predating Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent civil rights movement, Robinson also uses rationality to fight the harsh racism he faces on major league playing fields. In Robinson's first turn at bat in a Dodgers uniform, the pitcher uses racial slurs as he yells to Robinson that he doesn't deserve to be on the field. The pitcher backs up his hateful remarks by throwing a bean-ball at Robinson's head. A few of his teammates are prepared to storm the mound in retribution, but Robinson waves them off and shakes off the injury as he trots to first base after being struck by the ball. Although obviously angry, he refuses to seek revenge by allowing violence from himself or others in his defense.

Robinson has a better plan for getting even with the pitcher. He does it by cunningly and intelligently stealing bases. To the acute irritation of the pitcher and after a number of pick-off attempts at first base, Robinson successfully steals second base. On the next pitch, the pitcher throws a pickoff to second base that starts a rundown of Jack among the second baseman, shortstop, and third baseman. It should be an easy out as the three fielders gang up on Robinson to tag him. But with clever feigned moves and quick thinking, Robinson is able to make it to third base safely as the crowd roars its approval. The pitcher now becomes completely undone psychologically. Robinson intimidates the pitcher by taking a huge lead from third base toward home. The flustered and mentally beaten pitcher throws a pitch that is hit for a single and allows Robinson to score easily. Rationality, skill, and determination beat irrational hatred as Robinson begins to win the respect and admiration of fellow players and fans across the country.

The movie consistently shows Robinson acting rationally, with one egregious exception. The movie recreates the notorious racial taunting that Robinson received from the mouth of Philadelphia Phillies manager Ben Chapman. Chapman infamously spends an entire game standing next to the dugout, shouting racial slurs at Robinson. During one at-bat, the taunting causes Robinson to lose control of his usual steely focus, and he hits a pitch for an easy out at first base. After the out, Robinson rushes to the seclusion of a players' field entrance under the stands and reacts angrily and violently by breaking his bat against a concrete wall.

The blindly emotional reaction sets up a scene where Rickey comes to him to offer his encouragement and advice. Rickey's support of Robinson is accurate, but surviving teammates (Robinson died in 1972) deny that the bat breaking happened, saying that it was completely out of character for the always cool, emotionally-in-control Robinson. Apparently, the film's director, Brian Helgeland, thought Robinson's actual heroism was unbelievable by today's standards, so he needed to show a more "human" character that was not always in control and was dependent on the emotional support of the father figure, Rickey.

Contrary to the dominant perspective of our cultural leaders, it is not only false but, in some sense, demeaning to suggest that character weaknesses rather than strengths define humanism. To deny the human capacity for great heroism is to deny the myriads of great achievements that surround us today, including the achievement of a once-bigoted country now often electing individuals of minority heritage to its highest positions of leadership.

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