

Exploring Moral Problems Associated with Choice in Jiang Wen's Film Devils on the Doorstep

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Abstract: To estimate the human value the human actions need to be guided through universal principles of moral judgments called philosophical ethics. Nonetheless, the reach of these functional theories remain restricted as philosophy, including moral philosophy, often leaves an impression that is elusive and Abstract on the minds of the people. One of the most popular mass media platforms in the modern society, are those of the films. Using the advantages of the audio-visual presentation, they could exhibit the elusive and the serious philosophical issues.

1. Introduction

"In the last two decades, philosophers have often turned to discussing films as an increasingly respectable way of illustrating abstract philosophical theories and exploring the ramifications of proposed ethical standards". Increasingly building a bridge between the public and philosophy along with the philosophers, the films have been presenting vividly the philosophical texts using various films techniques such as mise-en-scene, camera movements, editing, and such others.

Through a tongue-in-cheek and fanciful narrative, the film *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000) by Jiang Wen, presented an ambivalent relationship of the Japanese soldiers with the Chinese peasants during the Second World War. Certain moral dilemmas were presented in the film by Jiang. The protagonists in the film come to a crossroad whether to sacrifice the interest of a few to for the gains of the majority or to follow the universal moral law. The ethical theory of Kant and the moral theories of utilitarianism have been found to be relative to the two distinct principles of choices. This article will use these two moral concepts respectively: To explore the complex and thought-provoking moral problems related to choice in Jiang Wen's film *Devils on the Doorstep*.

2. The Major Plot in the Film

The story takes place in a remote village called Guajiatai during the Anti Japanese war. One night, the mysterious man suddenly appeared in the farmer's Ma Dasan home. Dasan was pointed at his head with a gun and forced to take care of two Japanese prisoners. If the Japanese find out about the private detention of Japanese soldiers, the whole village will fall into crisis. Therefore, Ma Dasan and the leaders of the village discussed how to deal with the two Japanese soldiers. The villagers, who are kind-hearted by nature, know that killing is immoral, and have never ruthlessly

killed two Japanese prisoners. Until the villagers collectively chose to exchange two prisoners for food to the Japanese army, which seemed to be a happy act, leading to the tragic end of the massacre of the whole village.

2.1 Moral Judgement through Utilitarianism Principle in Devils on the Doorstep

Morality has been segregated into two categories by the moral philosophers: non-consequentialism and consequentialism. The belief that the right action depends entirely on the consequences of the said action, forms the foundation of the consequentialist theory, whereas, the non-consequentialist theory argues that consequences cannot decide if an action was right or wrong. One of the most powerful and well known consequentialist theory is utilitarianism. Bentham proposed The 'Principle of utility' proposed by Bentham was also called by Mill (2009) as 'The greatest happiness principle'. It was believed by Mill that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."^[1] The varying of human pleasure in both quality and quantity was believed by Mill. In Jiang Wen's movie Devils on the Doorstep, most of the villagers' choices comply with mill's principle of maximum happiness, but they lead to the worst outcome. Next, I will analyze these complicated moral choices in the film.

The paralytic old man Qiye, in the early parts of the film where the villagers are seen discussing how to treat Dong Hanchen and Hanaya Kosaburo, advises eagerly to throttle and bury the enemies. This proposal is readily accepted by Liu Wang who sets about digging the pit voluntarily. The villagers could have been protected by killing the prisoners, nevertheless, it would have placed in danger Ma Dasan. Hence, Dasan declares that the mysterious 'Me' would kill all the villagers if anything happened to the two prisoners, just to protect himself. In fact, it was Dasan who had spread this crisis in the entire village. The poor hapless villagers then decide to keep the prisoners in the cellar of Dasan and wait for the 'Me' to take them away, fearing both the Japanese and the 'Me'. As the prisoners were good natured, the fellows agree to free them, but the main issue was of protecting the villagers. Eventually, 'Me' does not take away the two men. Whereas, Dong and Hanaya try to escape twice, posing immense danger to the village, hence, the villagers unanimously decide to kill the prisoners.

Nevertheless, in the succeeding scenes certain unpredicted incidents take place. Straws were drawn to decide the executioner and Ma Dasan gets the job. The reason of rescuing the enemies by Dasan, was initially unclear and was thought to be due to his feeble-mindedness or his kind-hearted nature, but ultimately it turned out to be his superstition. On the night those men had come to the village, the child of Dasan and Yu'er was conceived. It was believed by them that the curse would befall on the baby if the men were killed. Had the straw not been drawn in favor of Dasan, nor the baby conceived by Yu'er during that time, the consequences would have been totally different, with Dong and Hanaya being killed, and the villagers being saved. In another turn of events, the villagers invite the executioner, 'One stroke' Liu to the men. Nonetheless, after a presentation of martial arts, Liu fails to kill the men. "They are just not fated to die" Liu states angrily and refuses to kill them again. Hanaya taking advantage of the predicament, asks the villagers to get the translator and suggests that if he is released the Japanese soldiers would give them a large portion of grains as reward. Securing, "the greatest happiness for the greatest number", the villagers readily agree to this suggestion. In a sudden moment, Captain Sakatsuka states that Dong and Hanaya were imprisoned at the Rack-Armor Terrace. The circumstances go beyond anybody's control and despite their attempts to secure the principle of greatest happiness for everyone, the outcome of their actions could not be as predicted by the villagers.

Through the principle of Mill's utilitarianism, the film reflected the dilemmas of moral judgment. This method thus leads to an impasse, known as the 'problem of omniscience'. When

people use what has not happened to judge whether the current personal choice is moral or not, it is impractical and often misjudged.

2.2 Moral Judgements Based on Kant's Ethical Theory

One of the popular non-consequentialist moral theory known as the 'Kant's ethical theory' was developed by Immanuel Kant, the renowned German philosopher (1724-1804). "Right actions have moral value only if they are done with a 'good will' – that is a will to do your duty for duty's sake" was what Kant believed. The human intentions are the only determiners of the moral status of the people, as emphasized by Kant. A morally right action is done by a person if has good intentions in performing his duty. The principle of Kant was divided into two versions. "Must consider itself as giving universal law through all the maxims of its will in order to judge itself and its actions from this point of view", was the first version as indicated by Kant behind every rational being ^[2]. It meant that such maxim be applied as a general principle to all humans and that an action of a person would be morally right only if the action is performed using the maxim as a guiding principle. "Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means", formed the second version of the categorically distinct statement by Kant (2002) ^[3].

When people use Kant's theory to analyze the choice problems in the film *Devils on the Doorstep*, they will get different results from Mill's utilitarian principle. The villagers gather together in the beginning of the film to chalk out a plan to handle with the two men. Taking them to the blockhouse where the Japanese troops were stationed, was suggested by Er Bozi. Since Er Bozi treated the villagers as rational agents "who are free to choose their own ends", according to Kant's theory, this action would be considered morally right. Nevertheless, the villagers rather decide to imprison Dong and Hanaya as they were afraid of the revenge of 'Me'. Although their intention was to protect the village, the action was morally wrong according to the second version of Kant's moral theory, as the action transgressed the right of freedom of the two men.

The innocent peasants were turned into hostile forces against the Japanese soldiers by the imprisonment of Dong and Hanaya. Instigating them to kill the two men, this action triggered the peasants to go against their own common sense. The act of killing is morally wrong, according to the moral theory by Kant. The villagers just use the two men as tools to protect themselves the Japanese soldiers and the mysterious 'Me', according to the second version of the theory. The intrinsic attributes of Dong and Hanaya are not respected by them. In an attempt to take their lives, the villagers in the film enforce autonomous actions, perform violence against them, while coercing the two prisoners in submission. It could be seen that the villagers only wanted to satisfy their own interests by sacrificing the rights of Dong and Hanaya, resulting in such unequal treatment. "The rights of individual cannot simply be sacrificed for the good of the whole", stated Kant. Any decision that satisfied the interests of the majority at the expense of a few, was criticized by him.

Similarly, the villagers want to kill two Japanese soldiers in exchange for more lives, With Kant's the first version of the categorical imperative judge, it is also morally wrong. "An act is morally right if the general principle the actor is following in performing that action is a principle that the actor can and does will others to act in accordance with", as argued by the version. Hence, if the action of a person is treated as a maxim and as a moral principle applied to everyone in general (including him or herself), the action would be considered as morally correct.

Based on the moral theory by Kant, and the utilitarianism theories, the pertinent essay discussed the moral problems associated with the choices in the film *Devils on the Doorstep*. When people use them to judge their moral status, both theories are said to have well-founded purposes. Whether utilitarianism, Kant or other moral norms are ways to help people judge moral behavior. However,

in different people's hearts, different times and different circumstances, it is difficult to produce a unified standard for moral problems. With fictional means, the film can dramatize and solve the moral problems in life.

3. Conclusion

By exploring these moral paradox narratives, images can vividly invite the audience to join this complex philosophical problem. After using their senses, emotions and imagination to think deeply about these problems, the audience can often have a new understanding of their former morality, which is the value of the film to explore the moral philosophy.

References

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- [2] Lewis Vaughn. *Doing ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues*, Fifth ed., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019, PP.132, PP.51.
- [3] Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, PP.46-47.