

Existential Angst and the Question of Human Freedom

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly explores the metaphysics of freedom and death through an analysis of the short film, *Amito 502*, from an existential point of view. It brings into philosophical light the motivating drive by which the film's main character commits murder as a means of self-realization and a daring act of the will to absolute freedom. I proceed, first, by making the case that various forms of oppression in life experiences potentially yield a deep sense of angst and alienation. This brings about, in the film's character, alienation and a loss of practical agency that would motivate a quest for an authentic self of pure freedom, through his willing of a murderous act. By committing murder, the character experiences the full measure of willing evil and dangerously meets the darkest metaphysical conditions for freedom, as per the exposition of the German Idealist philosopher, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. This allows me to draw the prospective conclusion that in a depressed life, a person can still be capable of acting on his own will and exerting a will to human agency and freedom.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Freedom of will, Anxiety, Metaphysical motivation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The film *Amito 502* depicts a father and son living on the brink of destitution, strained by the emotional and financial burden of tending to the young man's comatose mother. Crushed by uncertainty, which is further exacerbated when the father begins gambling their remaining funds, the son begins acting increasingly erratically and abnormally. Eventually, he murders his mother.

The short mainly explores the interaction of faith, hope, and despair in the face of intractable misfortune, which is displayed in the son's fulfillment by himself of the possibilities of his character. In the first act of the movie, the son witnesses his father watching pornography at night through a crack in the door, which implies that the son looks at others from a third-person perspective. He is a voyeur looking through keyhole, while he is unable to take this third-person perspective on himself, which reveals the question of alienation from the dimension of myself: my identity in an objective sense is essentially certified by others. Desperate for a break, the father, a pigeon racing gambler, bets their house on the outcome of an upcoming race. Anxieties proliferate as the two await the return of the father's champion racer pigeon 502, urging the son to behave crankily. Once, after the son

wipes his mother, he puts the towel on his face as if he is about to suffocate himself with that towel; on another occasion, the son witnesses his father slaughtering a chicken. Amid the loud noise of the father's kitchen knife hitting the cutting board, the son finally can't suppress his anxiety and runs aimlessly at night, venting his pressure. Behind the son's anxiety is his questioning of the value of self-existence and freedom, which would put his inquiry to a philosophical level.

Hence, a question is raised: why does the son in the film commit murder? By comparison with an analogous character in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* called Raskolnikov, I will be evaluating with philosophical eyes the existential experience of committing a heinous crime and what this means for freedom.

2. MOTIVATION TO MURDER

In *Crime and Punishment*, the protagonist Raskolnikov is a student in the Faculty of Law in Petersburg. Because of poverty, he temporarily dropped out of school and rented a dilapidated and cramped room. In financial distress, even food was a problem, and also he owed a lot of rent. In order to make a living, he often mortgaged his only items to Alyona, a pawnbroker nearby who lent high-profit loans. Because she valued Raskolnikov's pledges much lower than normal and withheld a high interest rate, Raskolnikov

despised Alyona as a parasite who lives by exploiting others. In short, Raskolnikov believes that Alyona doesn't deserve to live at all. However, he sees himself as a great man like Napoleon and should have the right to eradicate the parasites like Alyona in society. When Raskolnikov walked into a tavern, he heard a college student comment to an officer on how vicious and greedy Alyona was, which echoed his thoughts: "A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman's money which will be buried in a monastery! Kill her, take her money and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all..... One death, and a hundred lives in exchange—it's simple arithmetic! Besides, what value has the life of that sickly, stupid, ill-natured old woman in the balance of existence! No more than the life of a louse, of a black-beetle, less in fact because the old woman is doing harm." [1]

One day, Raskolnikov received a letter from his mother. In this letter, it was written that in order to maintain his living, his mother had already mortgaged her own annuity. Prior to this, her younger sister Dounia also went to a rich man's house to work as a tutor in order to support his life, but was asked to get married with the man of the house and was even asked to elope together. This incident greatly affected Dounia's reputation. Although it was finally clarified, late on, Dounia had accepted a marriage proposal from Luzhin, a rich official. Raskolnikov knew very well that Dounia accepted Luzhin's proposal not because of love at all, but because she hoped to continue to support her brother's study and work in the future. Soon after reading this family letter, Raskolnikov accidentally learned that on the second day, the grandmother Alyona would be home at 7 o'clock in the evening. The idea of murdering her had actually been lingering in Raskolnikov's mind for a long time before, and this time, he could no longer control himself. After a simple plan, Raskolnikov successfully hacked Alyona to death with an axe. Unexpectedly, in addition to the old woman who he thought was worthless, he also killed Alyona's sister Lizaveta, who shouldn't have been there at that time. In panic, Raskolnikov took away some precious jewelry at random, hurriedly fled the scene and returned the murder weapon.

It stands to reason that Raskolnikov, who succeeded in the murder, could live the life he desired from that moment on. After making a fortune, he could go back to school and continue his journey of becoming a great man. According to his previous assumptions, killing the pawnbroker who lent high-profit loans is not just a crime, but a good thing to the society. He believed that all people in the world should be divided into ordinary people and extraordinary people. Ordinary people have no right to break the law; while extraordinary people have the right to commit various crimes. All kinds of

sins, because they are allowed to overcome these obstacles of conscience. Therefore, when it is necessary, extraordinary people should sacrifice ordinary people for the whole society's welfare, which is acknowledged as a right or even an obligation.

The same question in *Crime and Punishment* raises here as well: what drives the son in the film to commit matricide? Due to the lack of dialogues about the motivation of the characters in this film, it is only possible to speculate it from the background stories and behaviors of the characters. However, compared with Raskolnikov, the son has a clearer and firmer motive, since the idea of killing one's own parents can in itself bring guilt, which requires a justification that is tenable enough to overcome. Although the son might commit murder for worldly reasons, such as getting rid of his mother, a substantial financial burden in his family, or just blowing off steam to relieve the pain of depressed life, those reasons are not strong enough to explain some puzzling behaviors of the son in the film, such as putting a towel on his face and running at night. Thus, there must be profoundly struggling thinking in the son's mind that is out of the context of the film.

Manifestly, there are many instances in the film of anxiety-induced behaviors of the son. For example, the day before the murder, the son runs aimlessly through the night; on another occasion, after the son wipes his mother with a towel, he puts that towel over his face, which brings him a distinct sense of suffocation. As shown in the film's background information, the son has been mechanically repeating the task of taking care of his mother for many years, while the mother has no meaning to him at all—merely a motionless paralyzed patient lying in bed for ten years. When the idea of murdering his mother comes into his mind, with this collapse of his practical immersion in roles and projects, he loses the basic sense of who he is that this role provides. Anxiety, as a result, is derived from such destruction of his practical role as he came to realize that what he has done was eventually meaningless and could no longer gear into the world then. Under the circumstance that deprives the son of the possibility of practical self-identification, anxiety teaches him that he does not coincide with what he virtually is.

The experience of anxiety also yields a sense of nothingness. As defined by the code of ethics, taking the burden of caring for the paralyzed mother is deemed as the good while abandoning is the evil. Under the restraint of ethics, the son diligently takes care of his mother for around five years without any complaint. Engaging in such a practice, he could find everything shows up as meaningful. He gains an identification of "they-self" because such an ethical practice involves aims that carry with them satisfaction conditions, and norms and rules are essentially public, which means that when he engages in a practice, he must be virtually

interchangeable with anyone else who does. In the mood of anxiety, “because I am no longer practically engaged, the meaning that had previously inhabited the thing as the density of its being now stares back at me as a mere name, as something I “know” but which no longer claims me.” [2] Anxiety thus undermines the taken-for-granted sense of morality, which then becomes absurd. The son, therefore, commits murder without been concerned with good or bad, right or wrong. He has got beyond a third-person-perspective moral judgment, and it seems to him that he didn’t need to know whether or not he has a conscience. Instead, what engrosses him in the run-up is simply whether he is able to perform the act that he has proposed to himself.

The kind of self-understanding emerges: because the son’s practical identity is constituted by the practices he engages in, when this practice becomes a meaningless one, he is not anything. In a manner of speaking, he has to face his own finitude, his “death,” as the possibility in which he is no longer able to be anything. This experience of his death, or nothingness, in anxiety acts as a spur to authenticity: “I come to see that I am not anything but must ‘make myself be’ through my choice. In committing myself in the face of death — that is, aware of the nothingness of my identity if not supported by me right up to the end — the roles that I have hitherto thoughtlessly engaged in as one does now become something that I myself own up to, become responsible for.” [3] After being aware of the nothingness of his practical role given by his engagement with daily life, the son comes to expect making himself — looking for an identity to which he can commit himself. The necessity of matricide, in this sense, could be explained: the son seeks his authentic life and freedom, in which way he might be able to commit himself in a certain course of action and choose resolutely.

How could murder establish an authentic life and reality of freedom for him? To answer this question, let’s first turn to Schelling’s argument. “The central claim of this radical work is that, just as human freedom should not be identified with “free will” in the sense of empirical openness — the mere possibility that I could have not gone through such and such a sequence of psychological states, and in consequence not moved my body in such and such ways — no more should it be identified with rational agency, in the Kantian sense of possession of the capacity to act out of reason alone, that is, on the basis of sheer recognition of the rightness of an action.” [4] For real freedom, he argues, must be firmly associated with a crucial content, which must not force us to act but must be chosen by us. Real freedom therefore presupposes a choice between intrinsically conflicting final values. Schelling’s principal purpose is to show in what metaphysical conditions the real, “non-formal” freedom can be possible. In order to make

the good real, people must have the ability to be good due to their own interests, and if they really have to choose the good from the opposite, then they also must have the ability to evil. In order for a person to have real capability of evil, he must not merely be unrelated to goodness. On the contrary, he must have the ability to be willing to evil for his own will. The possibility of a pure evil will is vividly presented by the example of Iago, who “raises implicitly the question of his own possibility: he knowingly confabulates the usual banal motives, as if seeking to dismiss the puzzle of his own nature.” [5] Now the son, we may say, is also asking whether the possibility of freedom is real.

The son’s motivation of matricide reaches a metaphysical specialty that complements the standpoint of his self-understanding. It eludes familiar distinctions and categories of motive, and it has both the uncomprehended immediacy of instinct and the inexorability of logic. The son’s question concerns not the individual goodness but rather the possibility of human freedom. He is unable to give an answer to the question of human freedom merely from the facts within the world, so it is not feasible to establish the reality of freedom in such a way. Although it is not a question about only himself, for him, it truly arises from a first-person perspective. Thus, he could achieve his inquiry by his own act.

3. CONCLUSION

In the film *Amito 502*, there is deep suffering, melancholy, angst, and existential crisis. The brutal circumstances around the son are subduing him. After he can’t bear the weight of the circumstances any longer, he exerts a kind of will to human agency and freedom. His experience raises the question of whether, in the face of oppression, there is still human agency and freedom. The sense of nothingness arises when his original project fails to define himself, in which case everything to him loses meaning and becomes absurd. Existential angst, which is derived from the collapse of the son’s practical projects, gives him a feeling of alienation from the practice he engages in and spurs him to seek for his authentic self and the possibility of free will. By committing murder, the son meets the metaphysical conditions for human freedom — that is, in the light of Schelling, being capable of willing for his own will.

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