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Living with Death

In his film The Seventh Seal, Ingmar Bergman openly addresses the human response to death. The film documents the return of Antonius Block and his squire Jons to their homeland after their ten years of fighting in the Crusades. During their return journey to Antonius Block's castle, the characters encounter death in many forms, including the devastating plague afflicting the population and (even less subtly) Death personified in his classic black garb. Each of Block's and Jons' confrontations with death provides opportunities for Bergman to display the different philosophies of death that he has intertwined with his characters. Through the manifestation of these philosophies, the audience is given a chance to understand the human responses to death.

The knight Antonius Block is the first of the characters to come across death. In the opening sequence, Death appears to Block in the form of man dressed in black. He tells the knight that his time has come and asks if

Block is ready. To this question, Block responds, “My body is frightened, but I am not” (Bergman). Despite this gallant rejoinder, Block deftly postpones his demise by challenging the grim figure to a game of chess. At this point, the only clue to his rationale for dodging death lies in his frustrated attempt at prayer earlier in the scene. Bergman fully develops the knight’s dilemma in a future sequence: in this critical scene, Block converses with Death dressed as a priest. Block passionately reveals that he seeks the knowledge of God’s presence in life. The dialogue highlights the problems Block finds with the belief system of his era and introduces the Heideggerian aspect of his character.

Martin Heidegger reflects on death and its effect on life in his Being and Time. He notes that people know that the inevitability of their death is a fact, but instead of acknowledging that death is an ever-present possibility, people tend to categorize death as an event that happens to other people (Singer 52). Heidegger uses this disparity to describe how an authentic existence might be achieved. According to Jonathan Dollimore:

Heidegger takes up an old idea that death is not the event which ends life but a profound reality which in-forms it, and he seeks to take this truth so fully into our being that we are compelled

to embrace authentic existence and leave the world of false sociableness (Dollimore 161-162)

In other words, Heidegger suggests that people generally carry out their lives and behave according to the established social structures (i.e. the “false sociableness” mentioned by Dollimore or Heidegger’s concept of the inauthentic existence). Constant awareness of the possibility of death would free the part of an individual that must be compromised in order to follow the established social conventions; Heidegger refers to this freedom as the authentic existence (Kraus 98). This facet of Heideggerian philosophy can be seen in The Seventh Seal as Block’s encounter with Death allows him to pursue the “authentic existence.”

As mentioned earlier, Antonius Block becomes the means by which Heidegger’s authentic existence becomes actualized in the film. In the confessional scene, the film begins to develop this philosophy through the weary knight. Once willing to travel to distant lands and fight for the sake of his religion, Block now has great doubts about the existence of God. His rendezvous with Death has called into question the validity of his beliefs. For Block, the common religious doctrine no longer satisfies him; this marks the start of his authentic existence within the scope of the film. Further into the film, another example arises where Block shows he begins to break from

the pressures and expectations of society. Shortly after speaking with Death in the confessional, Block chances upon a young girl sentenced to being burned at the stake for communing with the devil. Despite the social stigma associated with the condemned girl, Antonius Block attempts to help her repeatedly. These actions show that Block's awareness of his approaching death frees him from the confines of society's expectations much in the way Heidegger suggests an active awareness of death will lead to an authentic existence that is unconcerned with the preoccupations of daily life.

However, Antonius Block is not simply an archetypical representation of Heidegger's philosophy. Block's interactions with Death have led him to question the conventional religious doctrine. When Death proposes that there may not be such (in response to the knight's equivocation about the existence of God) a being, Block concludes, "Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothing" (Bergman). The prospect of a life with no meaning horrifies the knight, yet living with the knowledge that "[p]ersonal existence and everything encountered in personal existence is...nothing" is precisely the implication of Heidegger's authentic existence (Blackham 97). Although Block experiences the authentic existence described by Heidegger, he rejects it as a valid justification for his life. Consequently, Block spends the rest of the

film attempting to resolve the differences between his desire for meaning in life and the Heideggerian insight on the nature of existence. The knight's struggles lead to no defining conclusion, and he displays his anguish as Death comes for himself and his friend, suggesting that Bergman finds Heidegger's views on death to be unfulfilling.

Jons, Block's squire, subscribes to a different philosophy than his master. In his travels with the knight, Jons frequently encounters death (though not in the corporeal form that often visits Block). His reactions to these situations reveal the philosophical ideas laced into his character. Jons first encounters death in the form of a rotting shepherd. When Block asks him about the shepherd, Jons informs the knight with morbid irony that he is dead. Already it can be seen that Jons' response to death differs from Antonius Block's somber interactions with Death. Jons later reemphasizes the distinction during his speech to the painter. He holds up a small painting of himself and says, "This is squire Jons. He grins at Death, mocks at the Lord, laughs at himself and leers at the girls" (Bergman). Within these two episodes, Jons appears to be a representation of Georg Simmel's views on death.

In his work "Metaphysics of Death," he claims that death is should not be considered a force that threatens life. Simmel also suggests that death

should not be considered the instant a being ceases to exist; rather, “death is immanent in life” and is intertwined to life from the moment one is born (Choron 210). He feels that, in turn, the negative feelings often associated with death (sorrow, fright, etc.) would be purged by such a change in perspective. Jons’ actions reflect the principles that Simmel discusses. The squire shows that he has accepted the emptiness of life. This fact is displayed most clearly in the dinner sequence at the Block castle when he responds to Block’s final cries to a silent God: “In the darkness where You are supposed to be, where all of us probably are.... In the darkness You will find no one to listen to Your cries or be touched by Your sufferings. Wash Your tears and mirror Yourself in Your indifference” (Bergman). His acceptance frees himself of the fear of death, and he is able to approach death with his jeering attitude. As he did with Heidegger’s beliefs, Bergman also suggests that this view does not always hold up. Jons character changes as he watches the condemned girl burn; he sees the fright of death in her eyes and finds it unbearable to watch. Through this sequence, Bergman indicates that death instills such horror that even one who has acknowledged death and should be free from the fear of dying are still susceptible.

Bergman also delves into the contrast between people’s response to death when they must confront it and the general response people adopt at

other times. Through the characters of Antonius Block and his squire Jons, Bergman develops the perspectives on death that result from confrontations with death. Bergman introduces the actor Jof and his family to provide a contrasting view. Unlike Block and Jons, the actors are not constantly plagued by the threat of death, and as a result, they maintain a distant attitude toward death through the majority of the film. In fact, death never seems to cross their minds unless their lives are actually threatened: only when Jof sees Block play a chess match against Death and during the ensuing storm does the family express any sort of concern about death. This attitude accurately portrays Heidegger's belief that people do not acknowledge that the possibility of death exists at every given moment (Dollimore 161). The final sequence reinforces Heidegger's idea. After the storm has finally subsided, Jof and his family emerge from their wagon. Like the storm, their fear of death has also abated, leaving them free to resume life as usual. Even as Jof describes his cryptic vision of Death leading the other characters away, Mia quickly dismisses the image and de-emphasizes the gravity of death with her light tone.

As with Block and the concept of authentic existence, Bergman presents the concepts underlying Heidegger's philosophy but refuses the conclusions. Under Heidegger's beliefs, characters such as Jof and his wife

Mia who avoid facing death would never experience “authentic existence.” Heidegger views this in a negative light as Jof and his family would not enjoy the freedoms from social conventions that come from acknowledging death. However, Bergman’s presentation of these sequences seems to indicate that he does not share the same view. By closing The Seventh Seal with Mia’s casual denial of Jof’s haunting vision, Bergman adds an uplifting mood to the movie. The sequence directly combats the grim fate that several of the characters met moments earlier. As Jof and his family head towards the horizon having survived their brush with death, Bergman seems to say that there is some solace in the fact that people are able to carry out in spite of such bleak eventualities.

Throughout his masterpiece The Seventh Seal, Bergman presents different human responses to death and contrasts the responses with each other. Bergman draws upon numerous existential philosophies and manifests them through his characters. The work of Martin Heidegger takes shape within Antonius Block. The knight’s contact with Death allows him to achieve the authentic experience Heidegger describes. In Block’s loyal squire, aspects of Georg Simmel’s philosophies come to life. Through his understanding of death, Jons is able to confront death in a jocular manner. The actor Jof and his family provide another vantage point from which to

view death. Through them, Bergman presents the typical manner in which people acknowledge death (as described by Heidegger): they cower in fear when death approaches yet readily forget the possibility of death as soon as the threat passes. Bergman does not stop at simply presenting these philosophies. For instance, despite his use of Heidegger's underlying beliefs in both Antonius Block and Jof's family, the conclusions he suggests do not parallel those of Heidegger himself. In fact, Bergman often seems to argue against Heidegger's conclusions. Block cannot accept the loss of meaning in life that results from his confrontation with Death; instead of a feeling of failure or falseness, Jof and his family provide a sense of hope though they will never attain Heidegger's authentic existence due to their refusal to constantly acknowledge death. Thus, Bergman takes these existing philosophies and uses them to create a new set of values for the human response to death.

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