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The Silence in Heaven: Finding Meaning In Life

How does the individual find meaning in a life where they can find no hard evidence of a higher being? Through leaps of faith? Through the existence of humanity? Or by rejecting the suggestion that there is a meaning in life? Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* is an examination of the nature of man's existence, and how he finds a reason to live.

The film opens with the knight, Antonius Bloch, awakening from sleep. He rises to pray, and we immediately see the disillusion in his eyes. The knight has just returned from fighting in the Crusades, which has instilled a deep ambiguity of the existence of God. It is then that Death himself enters the scene, in the severest white and black. He tells the knight that his time is up, yet the knight resists by urging Death to play chess with him. As long as the knight continues to play this game, he can continue to live.

The knight has come to the conclusion that life only has if God makes His existence shown. As we see him literally playing for his life, Bloch becomes obsessed with only one thing: knowledge. He goes to receive Confession, and unknowingly confesses to Death himself. Although the conversation is quite lengthy, it is a fascinating depiction of the doubts and questions of the knight, and much of mankind.

KNIGHT: I want to talk to you as openly as I can, but my heart is empty...The emptiness is a mirror turned toward my own face. I see myself in it, and I am filled with fear and disgust...Through my indifference to my fellow me, I have isolated myself from their

company. Now I live in a world of phantoms. I am imprisoned in my dreams and fantasies.

DEATH: And yet you don't want to die.

KNIGHT: Yes, I do.

DEATH: What are you waiting for?

KNIGHT: I want knowledge.

DEATH: You want guarantees?

KNIGHT: Call it whatever you like. Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should he hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles?

(Death doesn't answer.)

KNIGHT: How can we have faith in those who believe when we can't have faith in ourselves? What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? And what is to become of those who neither want nor are capable of believing?

(Death still does not answer.)

KNIGHT: Why can't I kill God within me? Why does he live on in this painful and humiliating way even though I curse Him and want to tear Him out of my heart? Why in spite of everything, is He a baffling reality that I can't shake off? Do you hear me?

DEATH: Yes, I hear you

KNIGHT: I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal Himself and speak to me.

DEATH: But he remains silent.

KNIGHT: I call out to him in the dark but no one seems to be there.

DEATH: Perhaps no one is there.

KNIGHT: Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness.

DEATH: Most people never reflect about either death or the futility of life.

KNIGHT: But one day they will have to stand at that last moment of life and look toward the darkness.

DEATH: When that day comes...

KNIGHT: In our fear, we make an image, and that image we call God.

DEATH: You are worrying...

KNIGHT: Death visited me this morning. We are playing chess together. This reprieve gives me the chance to arrange an urgent matter.

DEATH: What matter is that?

KNIGHT: My life has been a futile pursuit, a wandering, a great deal of talk without meaning. I feel no bitterness or self-reproach because the lives of most people are very much like this. But I will use my reprieve for one meaningful deed.

He tells of his own 'emptiness', and of his quest for knowledge of God's existence. This search has consumed him, so that this proof is the only thing that matters to him in life. When provoked with the possibility by Death that "perhaps no one is there", the knight refutes this. Antonius cannot accept that God does not exist, but he is not satisfied with a leap of faith. He wants knowledge. In the book, *God, Death, Art & Love*, Robert Lauder cites the symbolism of 'the shot composed of the knight's face and the face of Death through the grill suggesting the barrier to understanding that the knight experiences as he grapples with Death" (pg 51).

That the knight asks many questions of Death, yet Death does not give any answers, says something interesting about death itself. In his book, *The Creation of Value*, Irving Singer tells that "Sartre concludes that death never defines human existence. An individual's being consists in what is possible to him." (pg. 54) "Sartre insists that death cannot give meaning to life. 'Thus death is never that which gives life its meanings; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life. If we must die, then our life has no meaning because its problems receive no solution and because the very meaning of the problem remains undetermined.'" (pg. 55)

However, Singer goes on to rebut this point. He argues that this can not totally be true, as death itself provides a time constraint that adds awareness and a need for action to our lives. In this fashion, when the knight realizes that he has been tricked into giving away his strategy, he says, "This is my hand. I can move it, feel the blood pulsing though it. The sun is still high in the sky and I, Antonius Bloch, am playing chess with Death." The knight's encounter with Death has made him more alive, and for that moment he shows an existentialist point of view, much like the squire Jons.

As well, there are two other points in the film when the knight “lives in the moment”. While eating strawberries and milk with Jof and Mia, the knight finds peace. The scene itself is a beautiful one, and the atmosphere is quite different from the rest of the film. The lighting is beautiful, the music is serene. The black and white don’t play off each other quite so harshly. The company of Jof and Mia themselves add to the tranquility of the scene. This should be the meaningful moment for the knight, as he states, “I’ll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk...And it will be an adequate sign—it will be enough for me.”

As Bloch tells Death during his confession, he wishes to commit one meaningful deed. When Death is at the group’s camp, the knight distracts him so that Jof, Mia, and Mikael may escape. Although the act could have been made a bit more meaningful had Block’s stakes been higher—he was about to lose anyway, or would this have been too obvious of a scenario?—the knight clearly does his “one single action which will give peace”, saving the pure family. In the final confrontation with Death, however, Antonius is still forlorn and unbelieving. He had actually two meaningful moments, in the strawberry and milk scene, and as well when he saves the family. In *The Influence of Existentialism on Ingmar Bergman*, Charles Ketcham cites Brigitta Steene’s analysis that “man cannot seek full intellectual cognizance of God without disobeying Him; the more he tries to understand the nature of God the further he removes himself from God.” (pg. 63). I believe that Bergman did produce evidence of God throughout the film for Bloch to discover, yet he was so entirely consumed as to how he believed God would show himself that he was blind to it.

The squire Jons' outlook on life is an interesting foil to the knight's obsession. Jons seems to have already found an answer—that God does not exist and that the universe is the outrageous horror that Bloch so feared. He is the existentialist, and while the knight seems totally indifferent to anything not involving his quest for knowledge, Jons is only concerned with life here on earth. When the knight and squire come upon a church, Jons and a painter get to talking. Jons explains his outlook on life:

“This is the squire Jons. He grins at Death, mocks the Lord, laughs at himself and leers at the girls. His world is a Jons-world, believable only to himself, ridiculous to all including himself, meaningless to Heaven and of no interest to Hell.”

The squire is a man of the earth, and a man of action, living for the moment and nothing else. He sees there as being no meaning in life, and as a result, he is lonely and cynical. However, that does not mean that he is not compassionate. Because of the emptiness and meaninglessness of life, he sees the tragedy, as in the scene with the girl to be burned at the stake, to be described below.

Bergman sometimes comes close to an absurdist view in Jons, but does not allow him to be one fully. The absurdist view gives insight into Jons' loneliness, as Sartre explains that we are “condemned to be free”, for better or worse, dramatizing “the loneliness and anxiety that plagues the free person in a world without God or ultimate meaning.” (Lauder, pg. 25) In *God, Death, Art and Love*, John Haught describes the absurdist as admitting “that we have a powerful longing for affection and love, but they advise us to reach some compromise between the demand for acceptance and the ultimate opaqueness of ‘reality’ to any such desire.” (pg. 24). Lauder continues on that thought to explain that Bergman agrees with this view, but it is “his views on art and love” that stop

him from fully accepting it. Ketcham describes in *Influence of Existentialism* a scene of contradiction for Jons.

When the knight and squire come upon the delirious girl about to be burned at the stake, Jons remarks that he would kill the guards, but that the girl was too far gone to save her.

JONS: What does she see? Can you tell me?

KNIGHT: She feels no more pain.

JONS: You don't answer my question. Who watches over that child? Is it the angels, or God, or the Devil, or only the emptiness? Emptiness, my Lord!

KNIGHT: This cannot be.

JONS: Look into her eyes, my lord. Her poor brain has just made a discovery. Emptiness under the moon.

KNIGHT: No.

JONS: We stand powerless, our arms hanging at our sides because we see what she sees, and our terror and hers are the same. That poor little child. I can't stand it.

Although it is Jons who laments the tragedy of the girl, he does nothing, while it is Bloch who administers a pain-killer to the girl. This is the opposite of the reaction that the existentialist would have, and the philosophical roles of knight and squire seem to have been switched. Perhaps it is the inability to solely commit to one philosophy that allows the men to continuing living, even if they can find no meaning in life.

As they continue on, Jons and Bloch come upon the family of Jof, Mia and Mikael. Several characteristics of the family point to them as being a symbol of the Holy Family—Jof's talk about his son being able to do that one impossible trick, his visions, the translation of their names, and their overall goodness and love for one another. Jof has visions because he lives his faith so naturally that they become part of his life. The scene with the strawberries and milk is representative of the family's goodness and love for one another.

However, this compassion does not seem to extend very far outside of their family. While the squire helps others, including Jof, the family seems to be more indifferent to others, as long as they have each other. The members of the family are the only ones to survive because of their love for one another, and because of their faith. Had it not been for Jof's visions, they would never have known to escape. In *God, Death, Love and Art*, Lauder cites St. John the Cross: "In the evening of our lives we shall be judged on how we have loved." (pg. 27) Bergman is making a statement, by having the family survive, on the nature of faith and love in life. The family is the only one who seems to find some meaning in life, of which they are not even searching. They seem to have no philosophical dilemmas. Perhaps it is because of their simple acceptance of life, of Mia's view on life that "One day is like another...The summer, of course, is better than the winter, because in summer you don't have to be cold. But spring is best of all."

In stark contrast to the actor family are the flagellants. These are people as well who do not question their role in life, yet their role is completely different. They believe that the Black Plague is God's punishing man for his sins. In order to purge themselves, they "whip themselves and each other, howling ecstatically. They twist in pain; their eyes bulge wildly; their lips are gnawed to shreds and dripping with foam. They have been seized by madness." Those with such a mindset that reality exists after this lifetime will do extraordinary things while here on earth. The flagellants represent the danger of extreme religion. They actually believe that they do hear the word of God, and we see the hazard in that, as the "word of God" can cause people to do horrible things.

The Seventh Seal is perhaps the greatest film that I have ever seen. Never before has a film prompted me to question my philosophy of life as much as it did. I generally found myself identifying the most with the squire Jons: his cynicism, compassion and loneliness seemed to truly exemplify my idea of the human condition, yet, like Bergman, I am afraid to embrace that philosophy fully. I also believe in the nature of the simple and beautiful love between the actor family. I also too identify with the knight's constant search for knowledge. Although I do not see the existence of God in the world around me, it is the combination of this often changing, sometimes contradictory outlook on life—searching, becoming indifferent and accepting, and merely being happy because I am alive—that gives life meaning to me.

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We see the established, differing philosophies of the knight and the squire in their confrontation with Death. Jons with his bitter indifference, and Bloch with his questioning disbelief.

JONS: 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.

KNIGHT: God, You who are somewhere, who must be somewhere, have mercy upon us.

He is somewhat contradictory sometimes. When meeting with the painter, he laughs at the

>Jons is a man of this earth. Although he does not take life seriously, that does not mean that he is indifferent.

Why does Jons have these very powerful emotions? Although he says that he does not take life BECAUSE HE REALLY EXPERIENCES LIFE OVERCOME??

The scene where the girl is burned is interesting for another reason in that Jons and Bloch's roles are reversed. Bloch, overcome with emotion over the situation, gives the girl a drug to ease her pain, while Jons does nothing. He claims that he is too late for her, that he considered killing the guards (which we believe he is capable of). However, why didn't he do something before when they had originally seen the girl? Why did he become so interested then? Why is Antonius the one who acts, and not Jon?

Later on, Jons and Bloch come upon the family of Jof, Mia and Mikael. Several characteristics of the family point to them as being a symbol of the Holy Family—Jof's talk about his son being able to do that one impossible trick, his visions, the translation of their names, and their overall goodness and love for one another. Jof has visions because he lives his faith so naturally that they become part of his life.

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If the presence of God is essential to meaning in life, how then can we prove His existence?

If the presence of a God is essential to the meaning of life, how can we prove His existence? Through the necessity of "His" existence? Through "Godly" acts seen around us? Antonius Bloch continuously asks, "

Struggling with the Human Predicament

To many, a philosophical solution may be appealing, and appear to be the correct one. However, the ability to live by that THEORY may not be so easy.

Jon the squire is clearly the existentialist of the group, at least at first glance.

"Let me point out that I've read, heard or experienced most of the tales people tell each other. Even the ghost stories—God, the father, Jesus Christ. These I've accepted without much emotion."

"We live in darkness ...It is better to enjoy life and forget eternity. Now it is too late. In this supreme moment, at least enjoy the tangible truth before falling into the void."

Jon the squire is a very interesting character, and somewhat PARADOXICAL. He often goes making unambiguously existential statements to then making contradictory actions.

“The Knight is assuming an existential posture in order to pose a metaphysical question”
(p.65)

How does the individual find meaning in a life where there is no concrete evidence of a meaning with death as the only certainty? Through faith? Through humanity? What if one were to find that there was no meaning in life? Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* examines the philosophies of SEVERAL CHARACTERS.

The film opens with the knight, Antonius Bloch, awakening on a beach

How does the individual find meaning in life? Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* examines several main characters, each with their own defining philosophies towards existence. The film opens with the knight, Antonius Bloch, freshly returned from fighting in the Crusades. He kneels down to pray, yet right from the start, we see his skepticism. There seems to be no emotion involved, almost a look of BORDEM. Bloch wanders about a bit, until suddenly he is confronted with the figure of Death himself. FALSDF