

Existentialism, Choice, and Morality in Ichikawa Kon's *Fires on the Plain*

Robert Catherall

ABSTRACT

In this essay I explain how the protagonist of Ichikawa Kon's film *Fires on the Plain*, Tamura, embodies the essence of humanism. The story portrays the development of an unassuming army private as he refuses to accept the fate his superiors have chosen for him. For Tamura, the ability to determine his own actions becomes his resolve. He achieves this by acknowledging the power of choice within himself, a fundamental notion of humanism that he develops throughout the film. In this paper I propose that the character of Tamura, through his personal decision making, is a living allegory for humanism. To support this thesis, I cite specific scenes in the film that reflect the protagonist's evolution from dogmatist to humanist and link them with their corresponding elements of humanism. In conclusion, I find that Tamura effectively represents the functionality of humanism as defined by a selection of modern thinkers.

Ichikawa Kon's 1959 film *Fires on the Plain* follows the story of Tamura, a diseased Japanese army private, in his attempt to escape from the Filipino island of Leyte during World War II. The film begins with a shot of Tamura being ordered by his commanding officer to report to the nearest hospital as he believes Tamura has contracted a case of tuberculosis. This being the second time that he has been ordered to seek the hospital by his commanding officer, Tamura knows the hospital will not accept him unless he shows more severe signs of illness. To this the commanding officer responds that, as an alternative to spreading his disease, Tamura must commit suicide if he is refused entry to the hospital again. This order prompts Tamura to question his fundamental beliefs in morality as well as personal choice. Both are recurring themes throughout *Fires on the Plain* but each develop on their own and subsequently converge to provide Tamura with critical moral insight. In this essay I intend to illuminate the humanist themes presented throughout the film and explain their relation to first the foundational role that personal choice has in Tamura's morality and secondly give an explication, with particular instances, of his new-found morality. To achieve this I will draw from a selection of humanist,

phenomenological, and existentialist writings that reflect the ontological underpinnings of Tamura's choices. Let us now turn to an analysis of the philosophical notions that facilitate Tamura's transformation.

Fires on the Plain begins with no explicit plot or premise; viewers are only given the same insight as Tamura: regardless of what he decides he will die in the not-so-distant future. Or so he is told by his commanding officer. This premise acts as the fundamental basis for how Tamura chooses to live thereafter. This reflection on the existentialist notion that death is the only fixed variable in an individual's life enables Tamura to question whether he only has two options: to die from his disease or by his grenade¹. In Albert Camus' work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Sisyphus is condemned to the eternal cycle of pushing a boulder up a hill and then letting it roll back down the hill to its initial position. The tale of Sisyphus is intended to inspire fear and conviction—a version of hell, perhaps—but Camus reminds us that through Sisyphus' being aware of his eternally fruitless state, he is far better off than if he were ignorant of it². This sentiment is reflected in Tamura's decision to keep his yams during his deliberation between the grenade, the yams, or both. By keeping the yams Tamura is actively choosing to live when he has been told that he will shortly die and the question is simply which method he would prefer. Analogous to the bleak fate of Sisyphus, Tamura finds himself at war, a situation that he likely has not chose to participate in and wishes to escape. Actively becoming aware of his options within a factual framework drives Tamura to find freedom within a given set of circumstances (that he is at war on an island, in the army, potentially diseased, near death, etc.). Being conscious of those circumstances, in Camus' view, makes Tamura much better off than his fellow army men.

Furthermore, Tamura's circumstances can never act as a valid excuse for his inability to choose freely for himself, as Sartre acknowledges, "man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and [...] he is a free being who cannot, *in any circumstances*, but will his freedom"³. This notion of the inexcusability of circumstantial inaction of an individual is reflected through Tamura on numerous occasions, the first of which is his decision to stay with the squatters once he is rejected from the hospital for the second time. This life-affirming decision denotes the beginnings of Tamura's quest for the freedom to make choices of his own volition. Again we see Tamura exercising

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 24.

² Camus, *Sisyphus*, 121.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman, (New York: Meridian Publishing Company, 1989), February 2005. Accessed October 15, 2010. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>, my italics.

his ability to choose within a given framework, rather than blaming his poor circumstances, when he meets the separated army trio in the yam plantation. The leader of the party states that Tamura can join them if he wants, and he does. Again Tamura is advised by both the leader and a follower of the trio to join their party when they are attempting to cross the road towards Palampon. He is urged to do so because the leader is experienced in battle, but Tamura declines even though it seems it would be in his best interest to follow their suggestions. Echoing this notion of choice, conceived of decades earlier than Camus or Sartre, however, is the main character from the first half of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*. The narrator, or 'underground man', provides a brief, yet crucial existential precept: regardless of how an individual is expected to act, each individual has a fundamentally inescapable ability to make one's own decisions⁴. The narrator finds himself having to make a simple decision regarding the current state of his toothache—exclaiming that its pain is insufferable—for which he knows he should see a dentist but delays merely because he can choose not to seek professional help⁵.

While Dostoevsky's example of the underground man seems ridiculous at first, it illustrates an individual's irrevocable ability to make decisions, even if they are detrimental to the individual. Tamura does not, however, act out of malice or stubbornness as he could, rather he follows his own moral criterion that solidify themselves with each decision he makes. Tamura's morality relies heavily on learning from the decisions he has made. Such is the case with the three instances in which he ends the life of another being, beginning with Tamura's stabbing of a vicious, threatening dog with his bayonet. Shortly thereafter, he shoots a young village girl in the chest and she dies. Immediately after these two acts of killing, Tamura, in an act of rebellion, throws his rifle into a nearby river. Hoenigswald's "suspicion of any objective hierarchy of values" is here combined with Sartre's notion that how an individual chooses to live is solely the responsibility of that particular individual and no one else⁶. By refusing to carry the army's rifle, Tamura is symbolically rejecting their morality as well. In the final scenes, when Nagamatsu tries to convince Tamura that cannibalism, disguised as 'monkey meat', is the only way to stay alive, Tamura rejects this option and kills Nagamatsu as a pronouncement of his faith to the moral code he has chosen for himself.

The quintessential display of Tamura's choice affecting his morality is depicted when the Japanese soldiers are marching drearily through the mud and

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, trans. Michael Katz (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ Richard Hoenigswald, "On Humanism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 9.1 (1948): 43, and Sartre, *Humanism*.

rain towards Palampon, which gives rise to Ichikawa's metaphorical remarks on man's feral nature. It begins with one soldier exchanging his current boots for those directly off the feet of a Japanese soldier that he watches die. The soldier discards his old, worn boots back into the mud. Another soldier finds these discarded boots and greedily trades his boots for the slightly better, newly discarded pair he has found. This trade is repeated once more by another soldier. Finally, Tamura arrives at the now heavily worn pair of discarded boots and examines his own army boots only to find they are equally worn out. He removes his own boots and, at the point when the previous soldiers had put on the other boots, simply tosses them into the mud and proceeds to march barefoot. This is the defining moment for Tamura's application of responsible decision making and living by his own moral code. Moreover, it shows how the sentiments of the underground man can be applied in a positive, useful manner. For where the other soldiers followed the military dogma that a soldier *must* wear boots, Tamura again symbolically rejects this dogma.

Once Tamura has realized the power of his own will, and how this power enables him to justify a personal set of moral standards, his morality is frequently implemented and rigorously defined. A rejection of the dogmatic, old world values can be seen in the opposing views of the reason for the fires on the plain. Represented in the leader of the displaced trio, that the fires are simply for burning corn husks and nothing to be concerned about, is a culturally dogmatic view derived from the leader's past experiences. However, Tamura does not have any reason to follow this line of thought and alternatively believes them to be the smoke signals of guerillas. Tamura's imaginative and forward-thinking view of the fires reflects Battersby's notion that an individual is not inevitably required to propagate the ideas of a culture that an individual has gained such ideas from⁷. From these experiences—dropping his rifle, removing his boots, and creating his own answer to the fires—Tamura finds himself wholly rejecting the dehumanizing values brought on by the army's mentality and turns to a pacifistic morality that views all humans as equals.

In this essay I hope to have expounded and analyzed the philosophical groundwork that lead the protagonist of *Fire on the Plains*, Tamura, to conceive of not only his own moral code, but how humanism facilitates this formulation. To do so I first examined the notions of early existentialist thinkers Albert Camus and Fyodor Dostoevsky in order to justify the necessity of responsibility in Tamura's decisions. This framework allowed for a humanist analysis of how Tamura has come to his personal conclusions regarding morality that transcend the futile options the army has given him. Through Tamura's search for an

⁷ James. L. Battersby, "The Inescapability of Humanism," *College English* 58.5 (1996): 563-4.

escape from his duty to the Japanese army, he conceives of a morality that is relative to him, rather than following the dogmatic orders of his superiors. And as I have shown, taking responsibility for decisions made of one's own volition, outside of prescribed cultural norms, is the essential precept of humanism.

References

- Battersby, James L. "The Inescapability of Humanism." *College English* 58.5 (1996): 555-567.
- Camus, Arthur. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes From Underground*. Translated by Michael Katz. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989.
- Hoenigswald, Richard. "On Humanism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 9.1 (1948): 41-50.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism is a Humanism." From *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman. Meridian Publishing Company, 1989. Accessed 15 October 2010. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>.