

Justice and vigilantism: Anime series *death note* in perspective

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Abstract

In different societies, there have been different interpretations and ideas, juxtaposing the ideas of vigilantism, and justice. This paper, attempts to shed light over this grey area where people break the law for doing good to society, and further elaborate with the example of the popular anime series, *Death Note*.

For centuries, philosophers, anthropologists, and theorists have debated the question: does crime constitute crime, when done with the intention to do good? If yes, at what point does this begin to constitute something illegal? And if no, by what yardstick?

This paper is an attempt to answer these questions and other underlying paradoxes in the lens of the popular anime series, *Death Note*. While borrowing from the core tenets of philosophy, this paper tries to draw at the core conflicts that the protagonist, Light Yagami, faced in his quest for an ideal society.

Keywords: ethics, vigilante, death note

Introduction

In different societies, there have been different interpretations and ideas, juxtaposing the ideas of vigilantism, and justice. This research paper, attempts to shed light over this grey area where people break the law for doing good to society, and further elaborate with the example of the popular anime series, *Death Note*.

Before one were to define the meaning of vigilantism, it is important to explore the various notions of who constitute the guardians, or keepers of the law, i.e., “law-enforcers”. In an ideal world, those that enforce the law would be individuals who are largely dedicated and committed to their work; but most importantly, do not allow any other consideration or material gain to come before upholding the law. However, corruption does form a major part of law-keeping – where individuals might partake in the abuse of their power for personal gain. According to research by the United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI), conducted in 21 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, it reveals that 44% of the respondents said that their local police are involved in crime. Thirty-eight percent (38%) said that the police were protecting the citizens and 18% said that the police did not protect the people but was not involved in criminal activities, highlighting the degree of mistrust in the police.

This creates a void within the system of delivering justice to ordinary citizens. And this is where vigilantism comes in. According to Merriam-Webster, vigilantism is defined as “a member of a volunteer committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily, as when the processes of law are viewed as inadequate”.

Historically, there have been a multitude of views with regards to this issue. In the Old Testament, this comes from a law of ‘Lex Talionis’ or ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ – justice that is ‘balanced’. By making justice a divine responsibility, the need to continue reciprocal feuds is removed. So, it is easy to find many cross-cultural examples;

Sekhmet, in Egyptian mythology, for example, is the goddess of vengeance as ‘one who mauls’; Nemesis and Adretis performed a similar role in Greek mythology respectively. Many belief systems and cultures often place a degree of restraint in their teachings, on the “primordial rage” of human beings. However, as one can argue, in a modern and secular world, such restrictions have been eroded to a large extent, becoming a driving force for today’s rise in vigilantism.

At this point it is apt to now focus on the aspect that drives many individuals towards vigilantism in the first place: the idea of “seeking justice”. What does seeking justice mean to us? Such a question can only be answered when one defines their “idea of justice”. Several noted philosophers have attempted to shed light over this very question over the past few centuries. According to noted English philosopher John Rawls, principles of justice are whatever principles would be agreed to behind a “veil of ignorance,” where no one knows his or her age, sex, race, intelligence, strength, social position, family wealth, religion, or even life goals (Rawls 2).

This pursuit of defining what is one’s idea of justice has not just been a question explored by philosophers; in recent years, this has been part of several forms of media, including (but not limited to) television, movies, music, etc. However, as mentioned earlier, this paper would draw focus on the extremely popular and highly rated Anime series, *Death Note*. Heavily inspired by Japanese mythology, the show follows the story of an incredibly intelligent, disinterested young man known as Light Yagami who finds the eponymously titled notebook that gives him the ability to kill people. This happens when Ryuk, a Shinigami (God of Death), bored by his lifestyle, and interested in seeing how a human would use a *Death Note*, drops one into the human realm. Light finds this. Upon finding the *Death Note*, Light tests the deadly notebook by writing a criminal’s name in it. When the criminal dies immediately following his experiment with the *Death Note*, Light quickly recognizes how devastating the power that has fallen into his hands could be. With this divine capability,

Light decides to extinguish all criminals to build a new world where crime does not exist and people worship him as a God. From the very beginning, Light is portrayed as a character obsessed with the idea of “Seigi”, i.e., Justice. He deplores the current state of how the world works, and does not think twice before carrying out his “grand” killing scheme.

Light began with a noble idea; to make the world a better place. But as time passed, he began to lose himself to his lustful appetite to become, something beyond a God. As the series continues, we are drawn further into this dilemma, as Light behaves with an air of increasing impunity; at a point, to conceal his identity, he is forced to kill police officers and law enforcement themselves. This begs the question: At what point, does one’s action constitute an illegality? Both the phenomenon of vigilantism and its current spread are deeply fraught in terms of moral reasoning. Vigilantism presupposes a state against whose monopoly over violence, vigilante violence is measured (Anime list).

In states claiming to be democracies, an attribution of morality is intrinsically bound to the degree in which an action fits with respective government law. But, here as well, it is recognized that there exist instances where the law fails to exhaust either morality or necessity. The action of extra-judicial killings by Light, using his Death Note, does not fit into any law. However, the presupposition that the purpose of law enforcement is to eradicate crime and violations of law, does fit in with his objectives. Thus, there exist several overlapping areas of conflict that one would encounter when weighing in the morality of such actions.

This raises yet another question: What defines the urge by such individuals to commit such acts? The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) provides one such insight relevant to this example. Schopenhauer was one of the first philosophers to come up with the idea of “the will to live,” a basic principle he claims is the most fundamental aspect of life. It would be about half a century later when these ideas were further re-explored, by another German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche, drawing on Schopenhauer’s theory, propounded his idea of the “Will to Power”. He believed that when one is endowed with power, he/she would “find pleasure” in utilizing one’s own power. The will to power, he said would make one “become in love” with the very idea of using their power to dominate others even by ways of cruelty (Nietzsche).

In Light’s case, he finally has the power to do what he believes he was destined to do: to save the world from criminals and wrongdoers. It is only as time goes by, that the viewer is witness to how this “power” swallows his rationality. What began as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to save the world, becomes a path built for the pleasure of his own power.

It is only when the authorities become suspicious of these deaths, that Light is faced with a moral dilemma; fearing his capture, Light makes a decision that would go on to define his actions: he kills the entire FBI team investigating him, by manipulating the lead investigator, Raye Penber. Being the first non-criminals to be killed, it proves that Light is absolutely deadset against giving up his power.

The most chilling of his displays of the “will to power”, however, happens after the events of Penber’s death. Naomi Misora, Penber’s fiancée and ex-FBI agent, saw his death as a link to figuring out who was the alleged killer. Writing her

name in the Death Note, he smiles confidently, until he realises that she had been using an alias. It is here where the viewer sees Light’s intelligence kick in. Tricking Naomi into believing he was an investigator on the same case, she reveals her real name, to Light’s joy. He even follows her to a distance, fantasizing how she would end her life, barely able to contain his happiness. This situation shows how Light has lost his basic sense of humanity, and now finds pleasure in his own cruelty.

The idea of justice and vigilantism is not new in popular culture, whether it’s fictional, in the case of Superheroes like Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Catwoman or Ironman, or in real life, with people like, Jonathan “Jack” Idema, Captain Australia, Mr Extreme or Dark Guardian, various societies always witnessed the requisite to eliminate crime and criminals, moving beyond the boundaries of the set legal system, thus constructing the idea of vigilantism. The pursuit of achieving the ideal society, and the personal struggle to attain power, the scuffle between what is right and what is easy is demonstrated seamlessly in *Death Note*. The conflict of a character attempting to find justice through vigilantism and his own sadistic ‘thanatos,’ is reincarnated in Light Yagami. The presentation of this dichotomy was the purpose of this research paper, the grey sectors that subsist between justice, vigilantism and vaulting personal ambitions.

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