

Extended Essay

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The Portrayal of Ethical Choices and Moral Dilemmas in The Death Cure

Research Question: How does James Dashner portray the ethical choices of Thomas and his friends in response to WICKED's actions in The Death Cure to explore moral dilemmas in young adult dystopian fiction?

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1. Introduction

James Dashner's "The Maze Runner" trilogy is an example of young adult dystopian literature, depicting a dark society where negative social forces have the power to do whatever they want (*Digital Library and Archives of the Virginia Tech University Libraries*)¹. This society also conveys a pessimistic prospect of science application in the future, just like it is conveyed in the novel "The Death Cure" (Wang, 75)². Some of the significant elements of dystopian literature, which is covered in the novel, are pressure to conform and measures to cover up flaws and lies within society; limited/complete lack of individual freedom; division of people into privileged and unprivileged groups; inhuman lives; and flawed, misunderstood or abused advances (science/technology) (*Digital Library and Archives of the Virginia Tech University Libraries*). In the novel, there are two main groups: an organization called WICKED and the "subjects" of the experiment, also known as the Gladers, which WICKED is conducting. Basically, in the atmosphere of the novel, there is a fatal virus called Flare. Since this virus started to take over the world, WICKED aims to put an end to this virus by finding a cure. However, they are trying to find this cure by human experimentation in which some of the Gladers are harmed. This approach of WICKED to the Flare is one of the key components creating the greatest moral dilemma. Contrasting the approach of WICKED, several Gladers behave in complete opposition to it for several reasons, which is the main reason for the conflict between them. In the novel, Thomas, Newt and Minho, three of the Gladers, are fighting against WICKED for their own friends' release from brutal experiments to preserve their dignities and regain their own free wills. Being shaped by ethical values, these themes are not rare across young adult dystopian literature, and it

¹ Digital Library and Archives of the Virginia Tech University Libraries. "ALAN V40n2 - Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction." Virginia Tech Scholarly Communication University Libraries, scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v40n2/scholes.html.

² Xiaolan, Wang. "Dystopian nightmare in contemporary adolescent fiction and its ethical value." Forum for World Literature Studies. Vol. 8. No. 1. (2016): 75-86.

conveys the reflection of the world besides guiding the audience about how to act in the contemporary world (Wang, 75). The research question of this study is “How does James Dashner portray the ethical choices of Thomas and his friends in response to WICKED’s actions in The Death Cure to explore moral dilemmas in young adult dystopian fiction?” This study aims to indicate and identify the moral dilemmas and ethical issues created by the main characters’ actions in the novel “The Death Cure” through analysis of the action through utilitarianism, virtue ethics, ethics of care and other additional ethical theories to clarify the ethical scope of the novel. This question will be answered through in-depth literary analysis, identifying and defining characters’ perspectives and values and how these are reflected in their behaviour and ethical assessment of the choices or actions they made, whether this creates a moral dilemma, and to what extent and how this contributes to the main conflict between WICKED and the Gladers.

2. WICKED’s Utilitarian Reasoning on Human Experimentation

In the novel, WICKED is the main antagonist against Thomas, his friends Newt and Minho and the other Gladers who were captured and kept inside the Maze by them. The purpose of WICKED can be summarised by the quotation:

“Everything we’ve done up till now has been calculated for one purpose and one purpose only: to analyze your brain patterns and build a blueprint from them. The goal is to use this blueprint to develop a cure for the Flare.” (Dashner, 8).

WICKED is basically defined as an organisation created to find a cure for the Flare involving the process of analysing the brain patterns and actions of immune teenagers to create a blueprint from the data collected. Their aim is not specifically harming teenagers physically or mentally nor killing them; however, their trials on teenagers are brutal, and some of these methods of WICKED eventually lead to the death of the Gladers. In the previous quotation,

Janson, a significant worker of WICKED, is highlighting the phrase “one purpose” with repetition to draw the attention of Thomas to the purpose rather than the consequences. This behaviour of Janson indicates that he is trying to justify and normalise the suffering of the Gladers in his conversation with Thomas. Janson acting on behalf of all of WICKED, his actions align with the ethical theory of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is the ethical theory which favours consequentialism; in other words, considering the aftermath of a situation more significant than the process. Accordingly, the utilitarianist belief would be most likely to advocate maximum overall welfare (minimum overall harm) against a single person’s or a minority of people’s needs and welfare (*Morrell and Dahlmann, 616 and 622*).³ Therefore, from Janson’s perspective, it could be suggested that their methods in the process of finding a cure are ethically right according to utilitarianism since the survival of humanity will be guaranteed once the cure has been worked out. A different approach to the circumstance could be made by interpreting Thomas’ perspective.

”How does torturing us lead to this blueprint you’re talking about? What could sending a bunch of unwilling teenagers to terrible places, watching some of them die—what could that possibly have to do with finding a cure for some disease?” (Dashner, 9).

In this quotation, an honest overview of the whole plot from Thomas’s side, who actually experienced these horrible circumstances, can be seen. This reveals the general outlines of WICKED’s attitude towards the captive teenagers and how they have let them suffer at such a young age and even let some of them die for the sake of finding a cure. Not only treating a group of young adults in a brutal manner, WICKED also calls them “subjects”, which reveals how unimportant the teenagers’ individual beings are to WICKED’s managers. They do not see them as human beings; to them, they are only a “subject” of an important experiment or

³ Morrell, Kevin, and Frederik Dahlmann. "Aristotle in the Anthropocene: The comparative benefits of Aristotelian virtue ethics over Utilitarianism and deontology." *The Anthropocene Review* 10.3 (2023): 615-635.

the means to finding the cure. This situation seems diabolical, as many teenagers suffer and die through the experiments; however, according to the utilitarian ethical perspective, ethically right action would be something resembling WICKED's actions. In a study based on the trilogy, WICKED's experimentation techniques are analysed through two forms of utilitarianism, and it is found that WICKED's experiments mostly satisfy the criteria for an action to be considered ethically right according to utilitarianism (Pebriyadi Putri et al., 46).⁴ Hence, it would be wrong if it were claimed that what WICKED is doing is pure evil. Nevertheless, while pursuing the survival of the human race, WICKED is harming teenagers who were also forcibly abducted by them both physically and mentally. This is the most important factor in creating the most significant moral dilemmas. A moral dilemma occurs when an agent faces two or more morally contrasting obligations, but fulfilling one necessarily violates the other. In this case the moral dilemma is raised by the contrast between WICKED's utilitarian attempt to put an end to the Flare by experimenting on immune teenagers and the ethical consequences of not treating those teenagers as humans by violating their free will until they find a cure. The fact that WICKED adopted a utilitarian approach to this catastrophe could be justified by Janson's sentence:

““Are you telling me that the lives of a few aren't worth losing to save countless more?”

Again, the man spoke with passion, leaning forward. “It's a very old axiom, but do you believe the end can justify the means? When there's no choice left?”” (Dashner, 9).

The axiom Janson brings up while talking about the cases with Thomas directly points out utilitarianism in Janson's view: that the outcomes of the experiment will be worth every action taken. This indicates that their priority is saving the human race rather than taking care of the immunes. Additionally, Janson's behaviour in the quotation, the cold, serious and

⁴ Pebriyadi Putri, Tella, 20160600021, et al. *THE ANALYSIS OF WICKED'S EXPERIMENTS AS SEEN IN JAMES DASHNER'S NOVEL 'THE FEVER CODE' USING THE UTILITARIANISM THEORY*. 2020.

passionate attitude reveals how serious WICKED is about finding the cure. Furthermore, this ethical conflict is not unique to this trilogy; it reflects a recurring pattern in young adult dystopian fiction, where authorities often justify morally questionable actions with utilitarianism. To make an overall assessment of WICKED's motives, they think that if harming these teenagers would bring them closer to finding the cure, then it is worth letting them get hurt and sacrificing a few teenagers to ensure the continuity of the human race.

3. Thomas's, Newt's, and Minho's Ethical Viewpoints Centered Around the Ethics of Care

Thomas, Newt, and Minho are the protagonists of the novel who act in direct opposition with WICKED. The trio's resistance to WICKED is not revealed rapidly; instead, it evolves gradually with their increasing exposure to harm. Eventually, they comprehend that their suffering is just a part of comprehensive experiments conducted without their permission, in which their capability of choosing is rejected systematically, leading them to deny the justification of harmful methodology with a supposedly greater end. Each individual in this group plays a different role in the group's ethical and practical dynamics.

First and foremost, Thomas is mentioned as the figure who takes initiative along with the risks brought in moments of uncertainty, often shaping the decision of action of the group.

"I watched as that kid died... You can't do that. You can't do that to a person. I don't care what anyone tells me, I don't care how many people go crazy and die, I don't care if the whole shuck human race ends. Even if that was the only thing that had to happen to find the cure, I'd still be against it." (Dashner, 97)

This quotation taken from Thomas and Brenda's conversation is a strong reflection of Thomas's ethical perspective. To begin with, anaphora is used twice in the quote with the

phrases “You can’t do that...” and “I don’t care...” to emphasise Thomas’s perspective on WICKED’s approach. He repeatedly states that killing people for the sake of finding a cure will not justify the aftermath, indicating his strong opposition to the utilitarianism adopted by WICKED. Additionally, the author used emotionally escalating language along with hyperbole to demonstrate the seriousness and determination of Thomas hidden within his emotional build-up upon Chuck’s death. That being said, it is clear that Thomas is dedicated to saving his friends and himself from WICKED’s brutal experimentation, and he is exhibiting a resistant and powerful character to put an end to WICKED’s methodology. Moreover, as stated in the novel, his thoughts and viewpoint against WICKED mostly originated from Chuck’s death after experiencing the devastation of it because of how much he cared for and valued him. Because of his care, he decided that the methodology of WICKED is morally wrong for finding a cure. This illustrates that Thomas’ ethical viewpoint is shaped by the ethics of care to some extent. Ethics of care focuses on the needs of people, the relationship between them and seeking goodness and well-being. Accordingly, an action is considered ethically right if it is done for the well-being of people within their needs or for the sake of the importance of a relationship (Maio, 51-55)⁵. His ethical approach to the catastrophe is formed by his care and moral accountability towards his friends; he does not consider letting his friends suffer and die for the sake of the cure. Additionally, Thomas is occasionally portrayed as a character who is terrified of his former self because he used to believe that WICKED’s actions against the teenagers were the only choice left to find a cure, so they were justifiable. His refusal of receiving his memories back in the beginning of the novel is partly connected with that reason and also not trusting WICKED. Therefore, it could be claimed that his ethical viewpoint is somehow shaped by virtue ethics as well. Virtue

⁵ Maio, Giovanni. “Fundamentals of an Ethics of Care.” *Care in Healthcare: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, edited by Franziska Krause et. al., Palgrave Macmillan, 20 July 2017.pp. 51–63. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-61291-1_4

ethics suggests an understanding which is focused on the virtues of an agent and whether his/her behaviour contributes to his/her values and virtues or if that action makes a person good or not. Thus, an action would be right if it benefits the characteristics and virtues of a person in being a good person; the results are not that important. (*Morrell and Dahlmann, 616-617*). Accordingly, his perspective aligns with it since he is uncomfortable with his former self who believed what WICKED was doing was right, indicating one of the most significant concerns of his is how morally right his personal qualities are. In summary, Thomas has adopted ethics of care and virtue ethics as his ethical perspective to some extent due to his strong disapproval of WICKED's approach with the instinct of saving his friends.

Furthermore, Newt, who maintains relational balance and an empathetic, stabilising presence in the first two novels, becomes the most mentally vulnerable character in *The Death Cure* as he gradually succumbs to the Flare.

“Don't call us subjects. We're not mice trying to find the cheese.” (Dashner, 48)

Newt's harsh outburst against Janson reveals his approach to WICKED and their experiments. The direct tone of the quote, along with the metaphor, implies that Newt is out of his patience for WICKED and any more experiments. The mice represent the teenagers under the control of WICKED, and cheese represents the desired outcome of WICKED and their aim in an oversimplified manner. Newt's attitude is an indication of a strong opposition to the terminology “subjects”. With his outburst, he refuses the reality of being experimented on as a human being for the conservation of human dignity. This indicates his jarring contradiction to utilitarianism, just like Thomas. However, they are not on the same page, as Newt cannot be a representation of one or more ethical theories only. The care of ethics involved within his perspective is rarely observable throughout the novel, although he cares for and values his friends just as much as they do him. His care for his friends is hinted with the use of “us”.

indicating a collective resistance on behalf of himself and his friends, instead of an individual protest. Newt's ethical viewpoint can be interpreted as a human dignity-based resistance to utilitarianism, rejecting instrumentalisation and dehumanisation through experimentation. This implies that deontology is somewhat hidden in his perspective with its several certain features. Deontology is a duty-based ethical theory that judges an action as right when it obeys rational, universal moral rules or duties regardless of its consequences (*Morrell and Dahlmann, 616*). Accordingly, it aligns with Newt's perspective because Newt sees WICKED's experimentation as morally wrong, as killing people and experimenting on young adults without their consent is morally wrong, and regardless of the possibility of finding a cure to the Flare, what WICKED is doing is not acceptable morally. In conclusion, Newt has adopted an ethical perspective based on the conservation of human dignity by rejecting instrumentalisation through dehumanised experiments.

Minho complements the dynamic of the group with consistent action rather than deliberation, embodying loyalty and responsibility by repeatedly placing himself in danger for the sake of others.

"I want you three to listen to me... Ever since we broke out of WICKED, I've basically gone along with whatever you slintheads ended up saying we should do... But right here, right now, I'm making a decision and you're going to do what I say. And if anyone pushes back, to hell with you... I know we have bigger goals in mind... We need to connect with the Right Arm, figure out what to do about WICKED—all that save-the-world klunk. But first we're going to find Newt. This isn't open for discussion. The four of us—all of us—are flying to wherever we need to go, and we're getting Newt out of there." (*Dashner, 167*)

This determined speech of Minho to Thomas, Brenda and Jorge is an essential dialogue in unpacking his ethical viewpoint. He is taking over the leadership from Thomas with his

authoritative language and highlighting the urgency of the situation along with the repetition “right here, right now”, since Newt is slowly getting worse. Moreover, with his informal language in “save-the-world klunk”, he is devaluing and belittling their collective aim of saving the immunes from WICKED. In addition, the repeated use of inclusive pronouns such as “all of us” reinforces relational solidarity, transforming Minhó’s decision from a personal decision into a collective moral commitment. Moreover, this decision reveals his priorities; his loyalty to Newt is more important than ending WICKED and saving the world at the moment, which is an obvious sign that he adopted the care of ethics, like Thomas. Instead of considering the collective benefit of the world first, he is determined to focus on Newt’s survival because of his relational loyalty for him, friendship responsibilities and moral obligation towards his close environment. Therefore, for him at that moment, the ethically prior and right thing to do is look for Newt and make sure he is still alive. However, he does not reject their collective aim of rescuing the captured immunes; he just makes a reorganisation in the priority order, and their next action will still be saving the world. There is a significant point distinguishing Thomas’s and Minhó’s ethical perspectives in terms of the ethics of care. Minhó exhibits this ethical perspective through immediate action-based decisions, putting his deep emotional sadness and despair in the background, while Thomas experiences an emotional outburst when Chuck is mentioned, and later, he processes the devastation instead of putting it in the background and plans the group’s further actions meticulously instead of sudden decisions when he is in charge. In short, unlike Thomas’s emotionally charged resistance, Minhó translates relational loyalty into collective action.

To summarise, Thomas, Newt and Minhó share an ethical orientation and a collective rejection of WICKED’s utilitarian perspective, and they act strongly against it with different forms of resistance: Thomas with his conscience, Newt with his dignity-conservation perspective and Minhó with loyal leadership. Their moral perspective differs, yet they all

prioritise humanity and relational bonds and certainly refuse to be served as instruments to WICKED. This act of theirs and their defiance of authority will create an inevitable ethical conflict between the trio and WICKED.

4. Ethical Conflict Between the Gladers and WICKED Derived from the Moral Dilemma

Thomas, Newt and Minho are the captives of WICKED, and theoretically, they are obliged to do whatever they tell them to do; otherwise, they will face the menace of the strong resistant force of armed guards and the possibility of getting hurt. Moreover, since their ethical perspectives and actions deriving from them are completely different from each other, their interactions resulting in conflict are unavoidable. The moral dilemma partly arises from WICKED's ongoing consequentialist act in gathering and organising the data they have collected and their extreme force on the Gladers.

““You told us we didn't have to.” “I'm afraid we don't have much of a choice,” Janson replied. “The time for lies is over. Nothing's going to work with you three still in the dark. I'm sorry. We need to do this. Newt, of everyone, you will benefit the most from a cure, after all.””

(Dashner, 46)

This quotation taken from the conversation between Janson and Thomas exemplifies WICKED, violating Thomas's, Newt's and Minho's right to choose what they want to be done with their brains, although initially they were given the right to refuse receiving any memories back. Ever since the events they had experienced back in the Scorch in the second novel, another trial conducted by WICKED, Thomas, Newt and Minho have begun to reject undoubtedly whatever WICKED is trying to make them do because they do not have any reliable past memories which could prove they are not lying or manipulating them. WICKED first giving the permission to refuse receiving memories and taking it back a day after is also

an example of them lying, not keeping the word they have given and attempting manipulation. Furthermore, the attempt of Janson to change the topic to finding the cure by pointing out Newt's current health circumstance is also a sign of manipulation, benefiting from the weaknesses of Thomas and Minho. Therefore, Thomas, Newt and Minho have stopped relying on their words, being aware that if they did rely, they could suffer even more, pointlessly, since none of WICKED's actions resulted in any progress, as far as they have seen.

"That Janson guy thinks he has it all figured out... He thinks it all comes down to some sort of greater good. Let the human race kick the bucket or do awful things and save it."

(Dashner, 42)

"Nothing about this was black-and-white. It never would be." (Dashner, 195)

With these two quotes by Thomas, the moral dilemma in Dashner's dystopian world is directly addressed. In the first quotation, Thomas uses a colloquial dismissal through the phrase "some sort of greater good", undermining and belittling WICKED's moral justification. This demonstrates that Thomas does not believe that the cure for the Flare could be found by WICKED, and at that point, WICKED is going further for no reason justified by the fact that they have not witnessed any improvement through the whole process. Furthermore, binary framing of the sentence connected with the linker "or" itself points out the moral dilemma. Just as Thomas expresses with the idiomatic expression "kick the bucket", either the human race will be left to die or WICKED is going to allow innocent, immune teenagers to suffer at extreme levels and even cause their deaths in the end. At this point the conflict between WICKED and the Gladers converges with the moral dilemma which has the death of humans at both ends. Thomas, Newt and Minho act against WICKED because they know all they had done to them never helped WICKED significantly enough for even tiny developments to be observed in finding the cure. After many trials taking the

Gladers' humanity from them, WICKED still believes that they are accomplishing goals and someday they will be able to reach the cure and ignores the fact that after many years, there is no concrete development. Being the reason of immune teenagers' sufferings and deaths is not morally right; however, behind it, a totally beneficial and good aim lies: saving the people who have caught the Flare and trying to ensure the continuation of the human race. Hence, as stated in the second quotation with a metaphor, this situation cannot be resolved in either way without resulting in several deaths; the cure cannot be successfully developed by the end of the novel. That possibility was estimated by Thomas, Newt and Minho in the novel; that was why they were strongly resistant to WICKED. It was evident that nothing was going to work, yet WICKED had gone even further the next time they wanted something. Overall, it could be claimed that this moral dilemma and conflict are only resolved partly because the plan of WICKED collapses as immunes escape and gather at a different place.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Death Cure* is an example of young adult dystopian fiction which contains numerous ethical conflicts and moral dilemmas. Its dystopian atmosphere is also formed by other elements such as loss of individuality, having privileged and underprivileged groups, use of technology for dark purposes, etc. These moral dilemmas are portrayed with the help of several literary devices, such as anaphora, hyperbole, metaphor, tones specific to the extracts, characterisation, etc. The most significant one has arisen and intertwined with the ethical conflict between the novel's main antagonist organisation, WICKED, and the immune teenagers which they have captured in a maze called the Gladers, with Thomas, Newt and Minho being the three protagonists along with other characters. WICKED, who adopted utilitarianism as their ethical perspective, are constantly coming up with new experiments and new trials for the Gladers, making them suffer and even die occasionally, but with a

beneficial and good purpose: to find a cure for the disease, the Flare, which is basically eating up people's brains and taking away their sanity before making them die. On the other hand, Thomas, Newt and Minho, representing the Gladers and having integrated different ethical theories like ethics of care, virtue ethics and deontology within their ethical perspectives, are exhibiting a strongly resistant attitude and rebellion whenever they have the opportunity to because they are done with suffering and facing the danger of death for an aim that does not seem achievable according to their proof of not having seen any progress. Unfortunately, this moral dilemma will not be completely resolved in the later parts of the novel, yet the immunes will be rescued by the protagonists, and they will be taken to another, safer place, and WICKED will be taken down by the protagonists.

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