

Heidegger's Theory on Anxiety and Death's Significance in the Background of Suicide among the East Asian Adolescents

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Abstract: As a philosopher who has had a significant influence on modernity, Heidegger's theories have been discussed by people from different periods and countries. However, this paper focuses on adolescents in East Asian countries and explores the significance of his views on anxiety and death for them. Given the cultural background of Confucianism and Taoism in East Asian countries, and taking into account the development of East Asian countries in the last half century, Heidegger's theories provide an explanation for the higher suicide rate among East Asian adolescents. They fall in the conformities that society invites them to obey, and reject with death a life with no alternative possibilities. At the same time, however, Heidegger's view has certain limitations and deficiencies in the present. Young people rebel against philosophies promoting uniformity and require a theory to navigate their particular complexities and dilemmas. Heidegger's philosophy can aid our comprehension of young people's current situation and requirements in East Asia.

Keywords: Heidegger, anxiety, death, East Asian

1. Introduction

Suicide is increasingly becoming a significant health problem globally. According to a statistical study by the World Health Organization (WHO), suicide has become the leading cause of death among young people aged 15-35. East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea have distinct and noteworthy characteristics and manifestations in this regard. In 2023, Korea was ranked third among the top ten countries with the highest suicide rates. Japan is ranked eighteenth, and China is ranked lower. It is obvious that the main reasons why the suicide rates in South Korea, Japan, and China are continually elevated is not from economic backwardness, inadequate social security measures, or chaotic in law and order. So what factors contribute to these three countries in East Asia having distinct patterns in death?

After understanding the history and culture there, it might not be difficult to comprehend the reason behind these three countries having comparable views on mortality. In other words, the deep cause could be traced back to their shared cultural origin: Confucianism, which is a fundamental element of East Asian culture. As a historical inheritance, Confucian culture subconsciously influences the younger generation as they grow, shaping their perceptions.

Regarding attitudes towards death, traditional Confucian culture asserts that all elements of our body originate from our parents, and, to demonstrate respect, they must avoid harming their flesh.

This notion hence renders suicide as moral reprehensible. Death is not an act of individual decision, but rather one which affects the entire family or larger social community. Increased moral responsibility burdens younger generations. Some young individuals may opt to adopt higher moral values, whilst others may experience anxiety due to pressure and may seek to escape. In the meantime, Confucian teachings emphasise the importance of obedience to the norms, self-restraint, etiquette, and prohibiting insubordination actions.[1] Nonetheless, the increasing impact of modern lifestyles and ideas have disrupted the authority of Confucianism. Individuals learned ancient ideas but experienced inner conflict and confusion. Within such a cultural context, there may be several underlying reasons and motives for self-destructive tendencies among young people of East Asian descent.

Statistically, mental illness is the leading cause of suicide among adolescents in East Asia. According to the World Health Organization, nearly 700,000 people die by suicide each year worldwide, and about 400,000 of those deaths are due to depression. In order to analyse the anxiety of adolescents in East Asia today, the understanding of the background of their upbringing and living environment is necessary. It is clear that behind the rapid economic growth in East Asia is the continuous improvement of educational standards. And the most effective way to cultivate talent is to continuously select it through examinations. On the one hand, East Asian youths have become very good at examinations, and on the other hand, the pressure of examinations has made many adolescents suffer and confused whether one's real ability and life value can be recognised through examinations. The examination pressure is not only in school, many parents will enroll their children in after-school tutorials. After-school tutorials have been popular in Korea and China for the past 10 years. According to some statistics, South Koreans will spend more than \$20 billion on private tuition in 2022, accounting for about 1% of GDP. But apparently, when young people are faced with excessive pressure to study and begin to doubt the value of one exam after another, they begin to develop pain and anxiety. Because the reality of the environment seems to be that the only way to succeed in this society is to conform to this norm, when they want to get rid of it they will find that there seems to be no way forward. At this stage with their immature cognitive, adolescents are confronted with a question that goes beyond their current understanding - whether such a life is worth living.

A famous contemporary Chinese writer, Shi Tiesheng, once wrote in an article: "I am unhappy, meaning the spiritual self; I have a fever, meaning the physical self; I want to commit suicide, meaning the spiritual self wants to kill the physical self".[2] The conflict between the soul and the flesh seems to be something that many young people have felt growing up. In the face of mental confusion and physical exhaustion, many young people suffer from depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc, and if they cannot get proper care, they have higher tendency to attempt to suicide.

In addition to the high-pressure learning circumstance, today's teenagers have more temptations and entertainment than in the past. The popularity of short videos gives teenagers a different way of looking at the world. However, on the one hand, the yellow news in short videos can easily affect adolescents' cognition and emotions, and on the other hand, adolescents begin to become addicted to the mimetic world of the Internet rather than the real world. If the mimetic world dominates adolescents' cognition, how do real-life norms affect adolescents? Electronic addiction has also become a notable problem in environments that lack parental intervention and education. In 2019, the World Health Organization recognised electronic addiction as a new mental illness, and prolonged addiction will affect the function of a teenager's brain. To some extent, today's adolescents are different with people in the past in many aspects, so in the present people need to rethink the fear and death that adolescents face and observe if it has some specificity.

2. Thesis and Explanation

In Heidegger's theory, anxiety is the fundamental mood of nothingness, disclose people their being that they are free.[3] Anxiety for Heidegger is a peculiar experience of no longer feeling at home in the world. After people come to recognize that they were at home in the world at the beginning, the new and free relations to their environment make them feel uncanny and bizarre. It reveals that people can make decisions freely, and they will realize they can do things differently than people have always done them. People even have the opportunities to do nothing, which is the thing they can't imagine before. The truth that all human beings are anxious about nothing will make lots of adolescents feel uncomfortable. Because they are emerging out of the acceptance of habitual ways of being in childhood, but they are not yet at the place where they're accepting the status as adults. In this way, adolescents tend to disguise and forget anxiety, but in most of the time they don't know how to achieve that.

Falling back into public life (normality) is a way of escaping anxiety, and the public culture encourages this. Indeed, the culture offers "common sense" interpretations that tend to minimize anxiety itself—turn it into (confuse it with) some weak-kneed or adolescent self-indulgence. Thus, the very possibility of genuine anxiety is publicly confused and covered up—disguised and forgotten.[3]

While most adolescents feel anxious about some particular things, Heidegger point out that anxiety doesn't have a determinate object. Heidegger won't say adolescents are anxious about the deadline of essay or finding jobs after college, what they are actually anxious about is nothing. Students' guilt and obligation are related with something that school and society command them should do, "disguises a more originary self-responsibility—one that cannot be public but can only be taken over by an individual".[3] Adolescents suddenly get to know the fact that it must be the people themselves who takes on the tasks of dealing with all the pressure. They are anxious about their own nothingness in relation to the essay or the jobs according to Heidegger. Finally, adolescents realize that nothing is determining that they will get a job or pass the exam, and nobody can live their life for them.

This kind of nothingness frees adolescents to ask what they really care about rather than something they are expected to do. People used to live under the illusion that the way what our society teaches us to behave is the right way to do it. But according to Heidegger's theory on death and authenticity, every individual has the freedom to make their own decisions and anxiety can individualizes Dasein.[4] The individual freedom requires lots of responsibilities which will make adolescents anxious. When people come to face something they are afraid of, their instinct is to flee it. But because anxiety has no determinate object, it means that they are no longer fleeing. They are actually resting in nothingness which can bring about a sense of peace and acceptance of the nothingness that they are if they rest in it. This interpretation can give comfort to some adolescents who are anxious about some specific things such as the upcoming tests or important decisions. But the feeling of being indulged and thrown into still exists.

Heidegger does not conceive of Dasein as having freely chosen its inauthenticity from the outset, but as having fallen into it, and only then "becoming free" in surrendering itself to an attunement or responsiveness to its own factual particularity.[5]

Adolescents feel home about the falling in their normal life, only on some occasion they realize they have the freedom to make some different decisions. Although adolescents may understand that the "anxiety" isn't an annoying thing through Heidegger, many sensitive emotions still disturb them. It mostly because that adolescents don't find the way out of the regular norms, they can't drop out of the environment they indulged due to many social restrictions.

Death is another conception that need to be discussed both in Asian adolescents' understanding and Heidegger's interpretation. "Thrownness into death reveals itself to Dasein in a more primordial

and impressive manner in that state-of-mind which we have called anxiety”.[4] As with anxiety, conscience, and guilt, Heidegger claims that the understandings of death handed down to us by our culture are mostly fallen and forgetful disguises.⁴ But in Chinese traditional culture, it uses to have a special view perceiving death, different from European countries but have lots of similarities with Heidegger’s theory.

This traditional thought is Taoism. Taoism is more influential in China and less so in Japan and Korea, which may be one of the reasons why the suicide rate in China is lower than in the other two countries. Heidegger also attempted to translate the Taoist work “*Tao Te Ching*” into German, but ultimately failed. In China, Taoist thought is widespread and studied by every high school student. In the face of anxiety, the “*Tao Te Ching*” says “Do nothing and everything will be done”.^[6] Facing losing other opportunity, Zhuang Zi, a representative of Taoism, considered that life is finite and knowledge is infinite, don't spend people's finite life pursuing infinite knowledge. In Taoism, people shouldn't feel guilty about losing other opportunity of life. And in Heidegger, authenticity requires accepting my existential guilt.

For the views on death, *Tao Te Ching* conceives death is the beginning of life. And for Heidegger, the sight of death liberates people to discover their own grounds for choosing who to be. “In anticipating its death, Dasein can make itself responsible in an absolute sense.”.^[4] When adolescents anticipate death, they see that no conformity to expectations, norms, and standards will safeguard them from going out of existence. It may bring a kind of fear or anxiety to adolescent, but for Heidegger it will benefit adolescents by rediscover what is matter to them. This positive view of death can undoubtedly help young people to alleviate a certain amount of anxiety.

Hence, by identifying similarities between Taoism and Heidegger's views, it can be inferred that the young people in East Asia have a particular underlying understanding and association to Heidegger's ideas. But in real life, due to the long history of Confucianism as the dominant ideology, the philosophy of Taoism, as an opposing philosophy, did not have as much influence in East Asian countries.

Heidegger's theories have met some challenges in spreading to East Asian countries, and he is not as well known to East Asian youth as Sartre and Camus. This concerns the absence of direct guidance to reality and disregard for individual characteristics in Heidegger's theory. Adorno, a social critical theory philosopher, criticized that Western philosophy including Heidegger's existentialist philosophy, advocating the "sameness" notion. Sameness emphasizes on a universal, unchanging concept and value while neglecting the diversity and distinctiveness displayed by individual entities. Hegel maintained that contradiction manifests as non-simultaneity and is explainable within sameness, recognizing the rationality of contradiction. However, some contradictions are irrational in some cruel realities in the history, such as the genocide of Jews during World War II. The uncritical reinforcement of sameness fosters authoritarianism and absolute compliance. While the natural sciences strive to investigate the universally valid laws of nature, exploring the value of absolute conformity in human society carries negative consequences. In some ways, Heidegger's theory has been linked to and disparaged for its association with Nazism.

The deficiency in Heidegger's theory lies in the disregard of individual differences. For East Asian adolescents, who are usually well-educated and possess a great deal of theoretical knowledge, when facing the uncertainty, they are unable to ascertain solutions to their problems from universal truths. The initial confusion experienced by adolescents is often rooted in the question "How do I differ from the collective other". They want to know the content of human decision more than the structure. Heidegger assumed that people could find out who they are through anxiety, but this is not satisfied for youths struggling with anxiety and uncertain future. Heidegger's theories offer adolescents a new perspective on death and anxiety, but do not solve their pessimism toward the society; adolescents are more eager for a philosophical theory that can find individual meaning. Learning that

people have the freedom to choose is not the same as understanding how to make choices, and perhaps what adolescents want most now is not broad freedom but a clear and defined path. Unlike the ideological trends of the last century, which required a break with tradition and redefinition, today's East Asian adolescents need detailed guidance to find the unchanging idea of identity in a changing world. Knowing a theory does not guarantee solutions to daily life issues, and adolescents should not be made to feel helpless in addressing their anxieties due to lack of theoretical knowledge or effort invested in studying.

3. Conclusion

Heidegger's views on anxiety and death can provide a reference for adolescents to learn to understand themselves better and how to face the multiple problems in society. Besides, the cultural background which base on Confucianism of East Asian countries has resulted to mental conflicts in young individuals. Heidegger's theory cannot fully explained the reason why today's adolescents in East Asia have complex attitudes toward anxiety and death, there are some similarities but also few differences between adolescents' understandings and Heidegger's. When confronted with societal pressures, adolescents experience such anxiety related to concrete issues, while being less fearful of death. Simultaneously, they hope to discover and find their own unique identity. There are some critics on Heidegger for his sameness advocacy, these critics reveal what adolescent really need today, which is to discover their own identity.

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