



## Every Day is a Box for the Reaper Crew: The Quest for Death Transcendence and Conflicting Moral Virtues in *Sons of Anarchy*?

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### Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the FX television series *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA) through the lenses of Terror Management Theory (TMT) and Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). TMT asserts that, in order to mitigate death anxiety, people merge their identities with something larger and more powerful than their corporeal selves. The violent behaviors of the shows' protagonists are presented as illustrative of the kind of death denying defense described in TMT. In addition to graphic violence and pervasive death imagery, another central element of the show is its complex and ambiguous portrayal of morality. The moral ambivalence created by SOA is explored from the perspective of MFT, which asserts that morality is influenced by the interaction of six distinct moral senses. The behaviors of various SOA characters and the reactions of viewers are presented as a function of the reciprocal influence of these central elements of mortality and morality.

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The FX television show *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA) depicts a frenetic, gritty, and brutal world inhabited by rival motorcycle clubs, drug cartels, gangsters, and myriad law enforcement agencies, in which viewers encounter ambiguous and morally complex characters that they love to hate and hate to love. Now preparing for its seventh season, the show is very popular, with the most recent season averaging approximately 5 million viewers, making it the third most watched drama on basic cable (Bibel, 2013).

The series presents the gunrunning and other illegal exploits of the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club Redwood Original (SAMCRO) based in the fictional California town of Charming. The main protagonist Jax Teller struggles to reconcile his devotion to the club with his moral qualms about its increasing violence and instability. This struggle grows over the course of the series as Jax learns about the horrible secrets of the club's past and as his new roles as father and husband place increasingly conflicting demands on his loyalties.

Jax's deceased father John Teller was a founding member and the original president of the club. Jax's mother Gemma is now married to current club president Clay Morrow. Clay and Gemma murdered John Teller to ensure the club's continued involvement in the gunrunning trade, a fact yet unknown to Jax. Clay is committed to keeping his past secrets in order to maintain his position as club president, which he uses to pursue his own greedy objectives.

Jax has discovered a manuscript written by his father and is starting to share his father's disillusionment with the club. Jax wants to find a new less violent and more sustainable direction for the club. Gemma is an overly involved and manipulative mother who works to keep the secrets of the past from Jax but also to ensure his continued involvement in the club and his future position as club president.

This show has sometimes been dubbed "Hamlet in black leather" (Sheffield, 2012), and the similarities to and influences of Shakespeare's tragedy on *SOA* have been well documented (Corn, 2013; Withers, 2010) and acknowledged by the show's creator (Sepinwall, 2008). However, Sloboda (2012) noted that *SOA* is not committed to being merely a modern re-envisioning of *Hamlet* and therefore is not constrained by the original text. She writes, "Hamlet flavors Sons of Anarchy without defining it," because "the show is a self-aware composite, partially but not entirely dependent upon earlier material that it simultaneously builds upon and interrogates" (p. 88). Although the influence of *Hamlet* yields many oedipal themes in *SOA* that are ripe for Freudian analysis, such an analysis has already been offered (Zanin, 2013). Further, there are additional elements of the show that can be examined through theoretical perspectives other than psychoanalysis without reference to *Hamlet*.

Two of the show's central elements that will be the focus of the present paper are 1) vivid reminders of mortality through graphic portrayals of violent death and frequent depiction of death iconography in the symbols of SAMCRO and 2) complex and ambiguous portrayals of morality in terms of difficult ethical decisions as well as fluctuating displays of vice and virtue. This paper offers an analysis of the central elements of mortality and morality present in *SOA* through the lenses of both Terror Management Theory (TMT; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997), which views much of human behavior as driven by the motive to mitigate death anxiety, and Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Haidt, 2012), which conceptualizes moral

dilemmas as the result of the conflicting responses produced by a set of distinct moral senses.

### **Mortality in *SOA***

Viewers of *SOA* are constantly reminded of human mortality, given the extremely violent nature of the show. Of the shows on basic cable between 2012 and 2013, *SOA* was ranked the 4th most violent with 176 acts of violence depicted onscreen (Parents Television Council, 2013). Mortality is made salient not just by the show's violence but also by the pervasive death imagery that decorates the club's buildings and the members' clothing and bodies. As Elsby (2013) notes, "The reaper is the defining symbol of the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club. Whether in tattoo form or emblazoned on a cut or hoodie, it identifies its bearer as someone closely allied with death, as someone who both shows courage in the face of death and, in warranted circumstances, is prepared to mete it out" (Section 4, para. 1). The prominence of death in the show can be illumined through the application of a theory that gives awareness of mortality prominence as a motivating force in human psychology.

TMT (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004) asserts that mitigating death anxiety plays a central role in human psychology. The advanced cognitive capacities to think symbolically, contemplate past and future, and imagine alternative realities gives rise to the uniquely human awareness of personal mortality. The chronic awareness that death could happen prematurely and unexpectedly from myriad causes and, in fact, will happen inevitably is a potential source of terror. This terror is rarely experienced at a conscious level because the same advanced cognitive capacities that gave rise to the awareness of death are used in the service of an elaborate set of psychological defenses that protect against existential anxiety.

The basic building blocks of this defense system are cultural worldview and self-esteem. Concerns about the unpredictable and uncontrollable possibility of death are addressed directly and rendered less threatening by emersion in a culturally validated belief system that imposes order, meaning, and stability on an otherwise chaotic world and facilitates the perception that premature death can be avoided by vigilant adherence to the current cultural standards. Concerns about the inevitability of death are also addressed symbolically and rendered less threatening by culturally defined and validated ideas about literal and/or symbolic immortality. As long as people feel a sense of self-worth derived from living up to the code of conduct defined by their cultural worldview, death is less problematic because they can perceive themselves as making a valuable and lasting contribution to something more enduring than the physical self.

It is difficult to step outside the existential and epistemic comfort afforded by emersion in a larger cultural system, because the individual feels vulnerable

and powerless against the dangers of the world and questions the empirically unverifiable meaning of existence. Further the physical body with its reproductive, digestive, excretory, and other messy biological functions threatens to undermine people's death-anxiety-buffering defenses, by implying that human beings are merely corporeal entities no more special, meaningful, or enduring than other animals and destined to die and rot forgotten by a mechanistic-Darwinian-universe. Consequently, people seek to deny their creatueliness and mortality by constructing symbolic alternatives to their corporeal identities and merging with something larger and more powerful than their physical selves. Consistent with this idea, TMT research has shown that reminders of death increase: nationalism (Arndt, Greenberg, & Cook, 2002), sports team allegiance (Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000), and discomfort when cherished religious or political symbols are used in inappropriate or disrespectful ways (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995).

The death-denying-dynamics laid out in TMT can be seen in the motives of SAMCRO. Although the central protagonists of the show sometimes refer to themselves as the "reaper crew" and don a grim reaper insignia, their violent behavior is motivated by a symbolic flight from rather than identification with death. The original vision of SAMCRO founders was to break free of the stifling entanglements of traditional society to live off the social grid free to embrace the open road. Corn (2013) noted the importance of this desire for freedom stating "the Sons of Anarchy pursue and ideal of not being commanded or controlled" (Section 2, para. 6). He goes on to suggest that this desire for freedom resonates with viewers, claiming that "part of their attraction to us as viewers is that they embody a freedom that middle-class Americans have traded away for the comforts of physical security and social responsibility" (Section 2, para. 6).

From the TMT perspective, we all trade some of our freedom for the reduced anxiety that comes from emersion in larger social structures that are stronger and more enduring than the individual. Although SAMCRO has rejected the mainstream American cultural worldview and its traditional political and religious institutions they have replaced it with an alternative cultural system replete with its own religious (the inner sanctum of the club house where official business is conducted is called church) and political (club officers wear patches to signify their status) structures and symbols. SAMCRO's pursuit of freedom is illusive because the need to protect the club from external and internal threats becomes an all-consuming task that constrains personal goals and conflicts with personal morals. As John Teller observed, "On the fringe, blood and bullets are the rule of law and, if you're a man of convictions, violence is inevitable" (Seeds). The members of SAMCRO are engaged in the death denying defenses described in TMT. They have created a countercultural organization, but they are still seeking to merge

their identity into a larger entity and are willing to kill and die to protect this symbolic identity.

TMT explains that because avoiding existential terror motivates people to construct symbolic extensions of their identity that will transcend their corporeal limitations, threats to these symbols are met with the same type of violent reactions as threats to physical life and limb. TMT research has shown that reminders of death increase aggression against those who express different political attitudes (McGregor et al., 1998), increase support among American university students for extreme military action including civilian casualties and the use of chemical and nuclear weapons in the war on terror, and increase support among Iranian university students for martyrdom attacks (Pyszczynski et al., 2006).

These same violent defenses of the symbols of cultural identity are observed in the fictional world of *SOA*. For example, in the episode Patch Over from season 1, upon exiting a convenience store, Jax finds a MC wannabe sitting on his bike posing for pictures. For Jax, his bike is not just a mode of transportation but a symbol of his identity. Consequently, the poser gets his face smashed in with a helmet for his disrespect. An even more violent punishment is enacted on an excommunicated member who is desecrating the integrity of SAMCRO's insignia and reputation by continuing to display the club tattoo. In the episode Giving Back from season 1, we meet a former member of SAMCRO named Kyle who was kicked out of the club because his cowardice resulted in the imprisonment of another member. We learn in the backstory that Kyle was driving the getaway car on an arson mission with Opie, when he got scared and drove off prematurely leaving Opie to get arrested. The episode takes place years after this event, with Opie out of prison. Kyle is reluctantly given permission to attend a community function sponsored by the club so that he can hear his son's band play. However, Kyle foolishly uses the opportunity to try and ingratiate himself back in with the club and to pitch them a money making scheme. When SAMCRO discovers Kyle still has his club tattoo they chain him to a garage lift, douse him in alcohol, and use a blowtorch to burn off the tattoo along with most of the flesh on his back.

Not only will people use violence against others to protect the symbols and institutions in which their social identity is vested, but they are also willing to die for them. For example, one TMT study found that reminders of death increased British participants' expressed willingness to die for their country (Routledge & Arndt, 2008). It is ironic that people are willing to sacrifice their physical existence to defend their symbolic identities, because the motive for the construction of these symbolic identities was to help attenuate anxiety about the vulnerability of the corporeal self to decay and death.

A prominent example of such self-sacrifice in *SOA* occurs in season 2 when SAMCRO prospect Kip "Half-Sack" Epps is stabbed to death attempting to protect Jax's son Abel from Cameron Hayes, a member of the real IRA who blames the MC for the death of his son Edmund (Na Trioblóidi). Half-Sack is

posthumously inducted into the club as symbolized by the placement of a full member cut on his coffin. Similarly, in season 5 (Laying Pipe), Opie volunteers to be the payment of a blood debt the club owes to drug kingpin Damon Pope. In vengeance for the death of his daughter, Pope has used his connections to get some members of SAMCRO arrested. Pope informs Jax that one person from the club will be killed in prison and Jax must decide who it will be. The corrupt guards have staged a fight in solitary confinement in order to implement Pope's wishes. With knowledge of the dilemma his best friend Jax faces, Opie takes action by attacking one of the guards to ensure that he will be selected as the sacrifice. Opie is thrust into a locked room where he faces four other combatants who beat him to death with a lead pipe.

Members of SAMCRO are not only willing to sacrifice themselves to save the lives of their fellow members but also to preserve the future of the more abstract concept of the club. For example, in season 5, Otto Delany bites off his own tongue so he will be unable to testify against the MC (*J'ai Obtenu Cette*). At an even more abstract level, Jax has been known to risk his life over his cut (the symbol of his club membership). When Jax, Opie, and Bobby are captured by a rival motorcycle club (the Mayans), Mayan president Marcus Alvarex tells them to send Clay a message that the truce between their two clubs is over. In an attempt to make his point, Marcus orders his men to take the Sons's cuts. When Jax tells him "that ain't gonna happen," Marcus points a pistol at Jax's head and says "You will lay it at my feet." Jax calmly responds "Pull the trigger man. That's the only way this leather is coming off my back." Being a member of SAMCRO is so important to Jax's sense of identity and his cut is such an important symbol of that identity that Jax is willing to die to protect it (*Potlatch*).

The extreme violence SAMCRO requires of members in the protection of their physical lives, their club, their reputation, and their symbolic identity creates a sense of moral turmoil, especially for Jax. He is frequently depicted sulking alone on rooftops or in cemeteries reading about his father's discontent or journaling about his own feelings of disillusionment, confusion, and self-loathing brought on by the violence and mayhem he feels compelled to enact or condone. We share Jax's moral confusion because the complexities of the characters and the overwhelming power of the situations in which they find themselves yield an intense ambivalence, in which viewers simultaneously feel revulsion and admiration.

### **Morality in *SOA***

Erbel (2013) asserted that "Part of the show's appeal stems from recognizing the members of SAMCRO as kindred spirits who exemplify – albeit to dramatic extremes- the mixture of virtue and vice found in every human being's moral character" (Section 2, para. 1). Erbel offered an analysis of *SOA* through an Aristotelian perspective on ethics, in which people are neither

inherently good nor evil but have the capacity for both. Morality is explained from this perspective as a matter of degree, as virtue represents feeling or acting in the appropriate way for a situation; whereas, vice represents too little or too much of a feeling or action in a given situation. Although this perspective has utility, the moral complexities encountered in *SOA* might be further informed by the application of a modern theory of morality that conceptualizes right and wrong not as the mere excess or absence of a single moral dimension but as a complex interaction among competing moral dimensions proposed by Moral Foundations Theory (MFT).

MFT (Haidt, 2012; Graham et al., in press) asserts that moral reactions are the product of six distinct moral foundations. These moral foundations are labeled using a dimensional approach with the favorable pole listed before an unfavorable pole. These dimensions are care/harm, fairness/cheating, authority/subversion, liberty/oppression, sanctity/degradation, and loyalty/betrayal.

The care/harm foundation focuses on whether we inflict pain and suffering on others or attempt to relieve their distress and discomfort. Dr. Tara Knowles exemplifies the care end of this dimension as she tends to the sick and injured in her occupation as a physician. However, Tara is also capable of harming others, as when she punches hospital administrator Margaret Murphy in the face and threatens to kill her if an ethics complaint is not dropped (*The Culling*). Moral violations of the care/harm foundation are perceived when we encounter the suffering of others. For example, this foundation drives our moral reaction when Lyla shows up at Diosa burned, beaten, and scared at the hands of an Iranian torture porn operation (*Straw*). A strong violation of the care dimension occurs when Clay and Bobby check in on their ammunition suppliers at the Wahewa Indian reservation and discover Chief Charlie Horse enacting an ancient form of tribal punishment on a man buried up to his chest dying slowly from the hundreds of flesh eating ants covering his head (*Dorylus*). Moral reactions to the care/harm foundation are particularly strong when injury is inflicted upon the weak and defenseless, such as when a drug dealer sells crank to Jax's pregnant ex-wife Wendy resulting in their son Abel being born prematurely with questionable chances of survival (*Pilot*).

The fairness/cheating foundation focuses on the rule of reciprocity in social exchange. This foundation informs decisions about who is trustworthy and a good partner for cooperative efforts. People who have demonstrated a history of fairness are good candidates for future dealings, whereas those who have demonstrated a history of cheating are not. While the fairness/cheating foundation might typically inform decisions about cooperation, people in *Charming* typically have to deal with SAMCRO out of necessity or fear rather than out of trust. As club president, Clay has a history of cheating. For example, he has an agreement to provide protection for Sheriff Wayne Unser's trucking business. Clay takes money from Unser with the understanding that the club will protect a shipment of electronics from potential hijackers. Instead,

SAMCRO hijacks the shipments as a way of extorting Unser to stay on in his capacity as Sheriff, so he can continue to turn a blind eye toward the MC's illegal activities (*Seeds*).

Jax operates more fairly in his time as MC President. Although he must frequently be dishonest and manipulative in his dealings with others, he tries to be true to the intent if not the letter of his agreements. Take for instance the quandary in which Jax finds himself in season 6. Jax wants to get SAMCRO out of the gun business but the IRA will not allow this unless a suitable substitute is found for their gun distribution needs. Jax makes a deal with the IRA to break Clay out of prison so that he can organize a new network for the gun running. Jax has also made a deal with District Attorney Tyne Patterson. Patterson has been under a lot of pressure to find the source of a KG-9 gun used in a highly publicized school shooting and SAMCRO is her prime target. To protect the club, Jax tells Patterson he will lead her to the guns and to Gaalan O'Shay of the IRA as the source of the guns. To complicate matters even further, Jax has promised the IRA gun business to organized crime boss August Marks as appeasement of Marks' vendetta against club member Tig Trager. Jax cannot possibly honor all three of these agreements and has been dishonest by entering into three competing agreements simultaneously. He does, however, deliver a solution that protects the interests of all three parties. Jax kills Clay and Gaalan to gratify his own personal need for vengeance. He convinces IRA representative Connor Malone to make the IRA believe that Clay and Gaalan double crossed them and had to be killed in self-defense. Consequently, the IRA will use August Marks to run their guns. This satisfies Jax's agreement with both the IAR and Marks. As for Patterson, Jax leaves a shipment of KG-9s at the scene where Clay and Gaalan were killed giving her the perfect scapegoat for the school shooting case. The fact that Jax has dealt fairly if not completely honestly is attested to by Sheriff Roosevelt who exclaims to Patterson that "Teller kept his promise. He gave you Gaalan and the guns" (*Aon Rud Persanta*).

The authority/subversion foundation deals with showing the proper respect, deference, and obedience to authority figures as well as social institutions and traditions. Despite the word anarchy in the club's name, there is a clear power hierarchy, and deference to authority is expected. The traditions of SAMCRO are patriarchal and misogynistic, and women are expected to know their place. On the way to Nevada to patch over an allied club called the Devil's Tribe, Jax rescues a naïve young woman named Suzie from her abusive boyfriend and invites her to ride with him. Later at the Devil's Tribe's club house, Suzie tries to get Jax's attention while he is talking business. The Tribe's president attempts to subtly correct her by saying "girls these beers are warm." She fails to pick up on the hint and responds that they just pulled the beers from the keg. At this point a more experienced woman named Chery intervenes and shepherds Suzie away. Chery tries to explain to Suzie the importance of female submission to male authority. She says "Never throw these guys any lip." Suzie defends

herself saying “I didn’t. I just asked them a question.” “That’s even worse,” Chery replies (*Patch Over*). The authority foundation is seen not just in cross-gender relations but also in expectations for male deference to higher status club members. For example when club prospect Half Sac makes the off-color comment that Gemma gives him a “MILF chubby,” Clay takes this statement about his wife as a lack of proper respect for his authority as club president (*Patch Over*).

The liberty/oppression foundation deals with concerns over excessive limitations or infringements on personal freedoms and with abusive or tyrannical behavior from leaders. The Sons of Anarchy view government and its representatives as oppressive in their restrictions of individual freedoms. Clay calls ATF agent June Stahl a “fascists pig” and claims that her desire to bring down the club is fuel by a resentment of their liberty. He tells Stahl, “you hate the fact that we get the same rights and freedoms as you do” (*Sleep of Babies*). Whereas government agencies are viewed as oppressive by their very nature, SAMCRO does recognize the necessity of deferring individual interests to legitimate authority within its own internal power structure. Authority figures can however lose their legitimacy if they misuse their power. In the early seasons, Jax’s subversion of Clay’s authority creates tension in the club. However, in the latter seasons, Clay’s true tyrannical nature is gradually exposed to the club. It becomes clear that Clay has put his own interests ahead of the club and has abused his power as president. Once Clay is revealed as an oppressive bully, the club has no moral problem with removing him as president, kicking him out of the club, and eventually killing him.

The sanctity/degradation foundation deals with protecting the purity of the physical or political body from perceived physical or spiritual contamination and defilement. This foundation can be triggered by any perceived defilement such as lack of hygiene or violation of food taboos but is especially salient in perceptions of sexual immorality. At first glance SAMCRO’s lax sexual mores might suggest they are immune to feeling disturbed by violations of the sanctity foundation. They have wild orgies at patch over parties and when club members get out of prison. They are involved in pornography through their partnership with Luann Delaney and her Cara Cara studio and are involved in prostitution through their partnership with Nero Padilla and his Diosa escort service. They show acceptance, and in Tig’s case attraction, to the transsexual Venus Van Dam. However, they have little patience for Chucky Marstein’s compulsory public masturbation and are disgusted and outraged when they learn about the history of Venus’ mother Alice and her involvement in child abuse, incest, and child pornography (*Sweet and Vaded*).

The loyalty/betrayal foundation deals with devotion to our social identity and the preferential treatment of in-group members. Mahon (2013) argued that loyalty involving self-sacrifice for the good of the group and a willingness to support fellow club members even at extreme costs is the most highly valued trait among members of SAMCOR. Betrayal of the club, particularly if it

involves cooperation with law enforcement, is the most egregious violation of the Son's moral code. There are several instances over the course of the show where the loyalty of club members, such as Chibbs, Otto, Opie, and even Jax, are called into question because they are erroneously suspected of being rats, are pretending to be disloyal to the club, or flirt with the idea of making a deal with law enforcement only to change their minds in the end. One of the most dramatic examples of betrayal occurs when Juice Ortiz makes a deal with Sheriff Eli Roosevelt and Assistant US Attorney Lincoln Potter to help them acquire evidence of SAMCROs involvement with running drugs for the Mexican Cartel. Juice steals a brick of cocaine from a cartel shipment to give to Roosevelt and Potter as evidence. However, when he is caught by fellow club member Miles, Juice kills Miles and frames him as the thief (*With an X*).

According to MFT, any particular moral reaction can be the product of a single foundation or of any of the possible interactions among the various foundations. In addition, different moral reactions between individuals or within the same individual across time or situation can be conceptualized as a difference in the relative weighting of the six foundations. Further, moral ambiguity may arise when different foundations yield competing moral responses to the same situation. Tamborini (2011) suggested that differences in viewers' reactions to television programs could be explained by individual differences in the relative importance ascribed to each of the six moral foundations. He predicted that people would prefer to watch programming that validated their own moral sensibilities. By extension, it seems possible that viewers will feel moral ambiguity in response to fictional situations in which moral foundations that they value are put into conflict.

We might condemn a character like Alexander "Tig" Trager when he describes his enjoyment of necrophilia (*Old Bones*), because we perceive it as a violation of the sanctity/degradation foundation. Yet, we might applaud Tig's generosity when he gives \$12,000 to his daughter Dawn (*With an X*) and his compassion when he rescues an injured pit-bull from a dog-fighting ring (*J'ai Obtenu Cette*), because we perceive these behaviors as upholding the care/harm foundation.

Even if a particular situation seemingly involves only one moral dimensions, such as loyalty, it is not always easy to do the right thing because loyalty to different entities may call for contradictory actions. For example, Jax feels competing loyalties to his family and the club. As he tells Piney Winston, "I'm trying to find some kind of balance, Piney. The right thing for my family, the club. Every time I think maybe I'm heading in the right direction, I end up in a place I never even knew could feel this bad" (*So*).

The problem is made more complicated by the fact that different moral foundations may yield conflicting perceptions of right action. In *SOA*, loyalty frequently comes into conflict with other important virtues. For example, Tara Knowles wants to stay loyal to Jax and to the Club (the loyalty/betrayal virtue) but she also has to make sure her children, Thomas and Abel, are safe (the

care/harm virtue). When Gemma drives stoned and has a wreck with the boys in the car, when Wayne Unser (a frequent babysitter) is attacked by neo-Nazis at the garage, but most pointedly when the IRA blow up the clubhouse and all inside barely escape with their lives, it becomes clear to Tara that her boys are not safe as long as they have ties to the MC. Another example of conflicting moral foundations occurs in season 4, when Jax faces a moral conflict between his need for justice and his loyalty to the club. In Jax's mind, killing Clay Morrow is required to reestablish justice since Clay killed his father (John Teller), his best friend's father (Piney Winston), and tried to have his wife Tara killed. However, Jax needs Clay alive to help get the club out of dealing guns, which he views as an essential step for SAMCOR's long-term survival. In this case loyalty trumps justice, as Jax delays his personal vengeance against Clay in the best interest of the club (*To Be Act 2*).

### **The reciprocal relationship between mortality and morality**

Thus far, I have presented separate discussions of the elements of mortality and morality in *SOA*, however, there is a reciprocal influence of these central elements that warrants analysis. Morality influences mortality and mortality influences morality. Morality influences mortality because moral transgressions are used to justify violence and make it more palatable to the audience. Presenting the victim of violence as morally flawed or deserving of his/her fate makes it easier for viewers to override their natural aversion to the suffering of others. Violence is acceptable and perhaps even admirable when it serves as a mechanism for satisfying justice. For example, Clay's murder of a carnival clown by castration and exsanguination is difficult to watch particularly because of the victim's pleading and groveling (*Fun Town*). The fact that earlier in the episode the clown had raped and beaten a girl makes his gruesome fate less disturbing. In season 6, when defending the club's decision to kill Clay, Tara offers Nero an account of all of Clay's many transgressions and concludes with the verdict that "he should have been dead a long time ago" (*Aon Rud Persanta*). In the same episode, when trying to explain to IRA representative Connor Malone why he had to murder both Clay and Connor's former boss Gaalan O'Shay, Jax says "they earned that blood." The characters' moral justifications for their violent behavior mirror the audiences' need to morally justify their consumption of fictional violence, as viewers try to convince themselves that the blood they witnessed was earned.

Inversely, mortality influences morality because the existential anxiety experienced by the audience in response to violent and graphic reminders of death creates a yearning for the increased meaning and safety established by perceived moral certainty. According to TMT (Pyszczynski et al., 1997), when we feel vulnerable to this existential anxiety we deploy a set of psychological defenses aimed at bolstering our perception that we are making a valuable contribution to a heroic project defined as meaningful and enduring through

our emersion in a specific cultural worldview. The anxiety buffering properties of cultural worldview are predicated on the assumptions of orderliness and fairness. Consequently, imagery of violence and death leaves people craving the security of a worldview in which the universe conforms to the principles of human justice and morality. However, this craving may be particularly intense when the violence is unexpected and unjustified. For example, following Opie's death Jax seems to have lost his already tenuous grasp on morality. He is disoriented without Opie to serve as his moral compass. In a journal entry to his sons Abel and Thomas, Jax writes, "Since my best friend was killed, I've lost my center. 'Op' was always my pull back to true north" (*A Mother's Work*).

Although confrontations with mortality can be disorienting because they challenge the assumptions of cultural worldview, these confrontations can also be an opportunity for personal growth and the reassessment of values and goals. Fosl (2013) noted how this personal growth in response to mortality is illustrated in *SOA*. Using the terminology of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Fosl pointed out how the tragedy of Opie's death led Jax to a greater authenticity, in which he strived to find his own path as club president. Adopting the conventional values of others may help one deny the reality of mortality, but it does so at the cost of living inauthentically. Jax's moral struggles stem in part from his excessive reliance on other people and the many conflicting sources of information he receives (e.g., his father's manuscript, Clay, Piney, Opie, Tara, Gemma) about the nature of his future and the future of SMACRO. When Opie's death deprives him of his habitual moral crutch and reminds him of his own mortality, Jax must become the author of his own sense of meaning for his life and the club.

Jax appears to be cognizant of the relationship between morality and mortality. He seemingly endorses an existential worldview, in which each person must be the author of his/her own sense of morality, and shows an awareness of how the transience of life in a violent world intensifies this necessity. In season 5, he writes to his sons that "*Every day is a new box boys, you open it and take a look at what's inside. You're the one who determine if it's a gift or a coffin*" (*Orca Shrugged*).

The same dynamics between mortality and morality that illumine the behavior of characters in the series may also operate in the minds of its viewers. In laboratory studies, reminders of death have been shown to influence people's television viewing preferences. For example, Taylor (2012) found that college students who had been assigned to write about their own death found law and justice television programs (e.g., *Law and Order*, *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, 24) more appealing than did students who wrote about studying or physical pain. Reminders of death did not increase the appeal of television overall just the appeal of shows with law and justice themes. These results are consistent with the TMT perspective that the ability of culture to ameliorate existential anxiety is dependent upon the perception that adherent to moral

standards are rewarded and transgressors are punished. Generalizing these results beyond the laboratory, the violence inherent in the content of some shows might increase death related thoughts that in turn might increase concerns about justice.

For viewers of *SOA*, the struggle with moral ambivalence may be intensified by the salience of morality induced by the show's violence. The violent acts committed by characters on the show can elicit feelings of both revulsion and admiration in viewers. The same quest for death transcendence that drives the characters to extreme behaviors drives viewers to seek moral justifications for those behaviors, but the moral ambiguity presented in *SOA* often frustrates the easy satisfaction of this drive. While critics might condemn the graphic violence in *SOA* as low- brow-pandering to a base need for sensation seeking, it is possible that the awareness of mortality engendered by the use of violence is an important contributor to the show's moral complexity. Rather than viewing the violence in *SOA* as gratuitous, it might be possible to view it as a means of vicarious confrontation with mortality that could potentially influence some viewers to examine their own moral assumptions. The lives of SAMCRO members have an urgency given the precarious nature of existence in their dangerous world. Their actions have a gravity given the life and death consequences of their decisions. So too is the meaning of our lives and actions enhanced by an awareness of finitude. If Jax Teller can come to see life as a box, the meaning of which must be determined by each individual then maybe we can as well.

Certainly there are many motives for watching television, and people likely watch *SOA* for different reasons. Some viewers may simply enjoy the spectacle, as the titillation of violence and taboo violation offers vicarious arousal of the fight or flight system. Other regular viewers might not technically speaking enjoy the show at all but rather their reaction might be labeled appreciation. In an attempt to explain why people would intentionally subject themselves to sad or tragic media, Oliver and Bartsch (2011) made a distinction between the reactions of enjoyment and appreciation. They defined enjoyment of media as an immediate positive hedonic or affective reaction that occurs automatically without reflection or rational thought. Enjoyment differs from appreciation, which is a positive response to media that emerges from the slow and effortful contemplation of meaning. The experience of appreciation is rewarding to viewers in that it offers them an enhanced sense of meaning through some new moral insight.

Tamborini (2011) applied MFT to the distinction between enjoyment and appreciation of media. He argued that when media content upholds a moral foundation valued by a viewer then that viewer experiences an immediate intuitive feeling of enjoyment. In contrast, when media content pits competing valued moral foundations against each other, such as when the same behavior that violates one or more foundation upholds other foundations, then the viewer feels a sense of dissonance that motivates him/her to think about and

attempt to resolve his/her discordant reactions to the content. This effortful contemplation may lead the viewer to meaningful insight about his/her moral values and this meaning would yield the feeling of appreciation.

The addition of insights from TMT can enhance this analysis. If, as posited in TMT, reminders of death increase the need for moral confidence, then the experience of both enjoyment and appreciation might be more intense in response to violent media content that makes death thoughts salient. *SOA* offers viewers opportunities for both enjoyment and appreciation, the experience of which may be exacerbated by the violence in the show. In the final episode of Season 3, when Jax's successfully executes a plan that allows SAMCRO to eliminate two of their most ruthless adversaries (ATF agent June Stahl and IRA representative Jimmy O'Phelan) the club's reaction is one of elation (*NS*). The audience's reaction to this event is likely one of enjoyment because there is an intuitive sense that justice has been served by the death of these two villains, who in their own separate selfish pursuits have directly and indirectly been responsible for numerous deaths. In contrast, when Gemma kills Tara at the end of season 6 (*A Mothers Work*), the audience's reaction is likely shock, horror, or outrage but definitely not enjoyment. So why will millions of viewers eagerly tune back in for the next season? Perhaps, because the emotional turmoil generated in response to the series' most tragic events spurs rumination about the characters' decisions and motives and challenges viewers to contemplate how their own moral values would hold up under similar circumstances.

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