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Honors Seminar 1

30 November 2023

Ouroboros of Choice: The Complex Relationship between Free Will and Nihilism in

Everything Everywhere All At Once

Introduction

Everything, Everywhere, All At Once is a compelling and emotionally resonant film that explores complex themes such as generational trauma, depression, love, and philosophical concepts like nihilism and free will. Centered around the character of Evelyn Wang (Michelle Yeoh), a middle-aged Chinese-American woman who runs a struggling laundromat with her husband Waymond Wang (Ke Huy Quan), the movie delves into her struggles to connect with her daughter Joy (Stephanie Hsu), adding to the deeper themes of a multiverse adventure.

Throughout the film *Everything, Everywhere All At Once* takes the audience on a multiversal journey as Evelyn explores different possible outcomes of her life, raising profound questions about the nature of existence, the role of choice, and the impact of our decisions on our lives. The film explores different scenarios, such as what would have happened if she had pursued different careers, became a rock, or had hot dog hands, resulting in a thought-provoking and emotionally charged experience. While the film explores different humorous scenarios, the philosophical concepts interpreted within the film raise many thought-provoking ideas.

Furthermore, the film covers these philosophical aspects, such as the relationship between free will and nihilism, which is a fascinating and complex aspect of human existence that demands careful consideration. Throughout this paper, I aim to answer my question: How does *Everything Everywhere All At Once* explore the interplay between free will and existential nihilism? These concepts raise essential questions about the nature of our identities, the role of ethics, and the possibility of finding meaning in a world that can often seem meaningless. *Everything, Everywhere All At Once* is a beautiful portrayal of Evelyn's (and other characters') journey from despair and skepticism to a newfound appreciation for the value of every moment, relationship, and decision. This paper aims to examine the interplay between personal identity and choices within interconnected multiverses and their philosophical implications.

Identities

Everything, Everywhere All At Once delves into the intricate relationship between personal identity and individual choices within the multiverse, and later, this paper will go into how those philosophical concepts tie into them. The film explores the complexities of decision-making within this framework, aiming to unravel the threads that connect personal identity to the myriad choices available across different dimensions. Throughout the film, multiple identities are explored, such as Asian-American, Queer, and Motherhood. The importance of choice and the connection between them all are essential to distinguish. Evelyn's identity is intrinsically intertwined by being both a mother and Asian American, while Joy's identity is Asian-American and Queer. The identity of Asian Americans within the film is integral to the story. Asian American heritage places a large amount of expectation and pressure

on its youth and the next generations. Unfortunately, this leads to Evelyn becoming stubborn and “Seemingly embodies the stereotypical Tiger Mom, especially in the Alphaverse where she pushes Joy to her limits”(Kang pg.13). Her daughter Joy embodies an “Unapologetically queer existence” (Carrillo-Vargas pg.8) and even attempts to introduce her girlfriend, Jackie, to her grandfather. Still, Evelyn does not want to accept this part of her daughter (or Jackie). She will not let her be introduced as Joy's girlfriend to her grandfather (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 09:30). This leads to Evelyn becoming “Absent-minded or apathetic towards her daughters' internal struggles” (Kang pg.15).

Furthermore, Evelyn's rejection of Joy's identity and struggle with Cantonese represent an internal conflict between their roles of mother and daughter. Motherhood is integral to Evelyn, who continuously feels like she is doing what's best for Joy but is instead doing what's best for herself and, as mentioned previously, becomes the stereotypical “Tiger Mom ” (Kang pg.13) without considering Joy's feelings. Evelyn constantly struggles to show empathy towards her daughter's needs. Instead of providing support, she often tears Joy down by making hurtful comments about her weight, saying she is “fat” (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 11:00). Unfortunately, this behavior is not uncommon among Asian parents who may not fully understand their children's perspectives and experiences. In pursuing perfection, these parents may unintentionally create distance and conflict within their relationships with their children (Kang).

As a result, this pressure essentially strips away the free will that individuals would hold to themselves. In the film, we see that Evelyn and her daughter both have these expectations

placed on them by their older generations. Evelyn's father expected her not to marry Waymond and stay with them (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 14:00), while Joy's mother expects her to remain within the traditional bounds of the family and not "become different" (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 04:00). They later discover that all of their choices have consequences, and because of this, they feel as though the choices they made currently do not matter.

Waymond, on the other hand, decided that all of his choices led him to the moment he presently was in, where he was happy with his family and living the life he is currently enjoying. To him, those moments of free will mattered and impacted his life.

In addition, the audience is shown the multiple lives that each person could have lived. While these alternate lives are displayed briefly, the audience is shown glimpses of actions and consequences that led to those particular moments. The most profound of these alternate lives is when Evelyn briefly glimpses at the world where she is a famous movie star. In these flashes, we see this world's versions of her cause and effect: she chose to stay home, thus needing to learn to defend herself, and therefore took these talents to the silver screen (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 45:00).

Philosophical Concepts

One of the film's central themes is whether life inherently possesses purpose and meaning or is ultimately empty of such significance. The film touches on intriguing philosophical concepts such as absurdism, existentialism, and nihilism. While the film does not intensely discuss the idea of free will, it is interpreted. The interplay between free will and existential nihilism is a complex and nuanced topic that the film explores. In philosophical discourse, free

will and existential nihilism are often presented as opposing viewpoints. However, the film goes beyond this oversimplification and delves into the complex interconnection between these two concepts and their philosophical underpinnings more than what we think as viewers.

Existential nihilism is a philosophical perspective that asserts life “lacks inherent meaning” (Toabnani and Nikolas pg.3) or purpose. It emphasizes the absence of pre-determined significance in human existence. Thinkers like Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus have engaged with nihilistic themes to explore the human condition and the challenge of finding meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. Contrastingly, free will is the philosophical concept that suggests individuals can make choices and decisions free from external constraints or predetermined influences. Free will also includes “A core motivation for thinking about free will is a concern about responsibility”(Menges pg.2). It implies that individuals have the autonomy and agency to act according to their own desires, intentions, and values.

Philosophical Interplay with Identity

The interplay between free will and nihilism is an intriguing, however complex, philosophical concept that has been the subject of much debate and discussion. At the heart of this existential paradox lies the question of whether there is any inherent meaning in life or whether everything is ultimately meaningless. While existential nihilism post the latter, exercising free will introduces a paradox. The characters in *Everything, Everywhere All At Once* show us that despite facing a seemingly indifferent universe, they have the capacity to create subjective meaning through their choices. The film also depicts “Freedom of will, the balance of the universe, to love in a brilliant way” (Toabnani and Nikolas pg.7). The characters have the

power to create their own identity and choose to love each other, even in the absence of any inherent meaning in life. Free will includes “A core motivation for thinking about free will is a concern about responsibility”(Menges pg.2). This can be both liberating and daunting, as it places a great deal of responsibility on the characters to create their own sense of purpose and meaning.

It is important to note that the correlation between identity and philosophical concepts can vary across cultures. Different cultural backgrounds influence how individuals perceive and reconcile nihilistic ideas and the role of free will in identity formation. For example, some cultures emphasize community and collective identity more, while others may prioritize individuality and personal autonomy. We see the Asian American family within the film, founded on community over individuality. This is shown by Evelyn trying to control Joy’s autonomy and not accepting who she is entirely, and not telling her father about Joy’s queer relationship (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 09:30).

In addition, our choices, influenced by free will, can shape our very essence. However, we must acknowledge our inability to control the consequences of our actions. The conceptual dance between free will and nihilism unfolds like an Ouroboros, a symbol of eternal cyclicity, weaving a complex narrative that impacts our sense of self in profound and multifaceted ways. The film’s depiction of this relationship is insightful and engaging, inviting us to reevaluate our understanding of free will and its role in human life. The relevant scene that comes to mind regarding this interlinking concept is The Rock Scene. In the film, there is a Rock scene between Evelyn and Joy. In this universe, human life never existed, and the characters were simply rocks.

After the stressful and fast-paced sequence leading up to that moment, Evelyn understandably tries to apologize, but Joy interrupts her and says she doesn't "Have to worry about that" (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 01:40:33) where they are. This leads to Joy saying to Evelyn, "Just be a rock" (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 01:40:38). Although the scene seems minor, it holds a lot of value to the overall story and philosophical concepts. Consider the philosophy of nihilism and free will in this universe, where life is as devoid of meaning as a stationary rock. Despite this perceived lack of purpose, they still exercised agency and imbued their existence with importance. In this instance, Evelyn and Joy, as rocks, transformed their surroundings by engaging in activities such as speaking, moving, and laughing. (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 01:54:36).

Moreover, the ouroboros-like concept between nihilism and free will continues throughout this Rock scene. Joy tells Evelyn they are all "Just small and stupid" and tells the story of when humans discovered that Earth was not the center and instead was revolving around "Just one sun out of a trillion" (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 01:41:15) speaking in terms of nihilism. Nevertheless, the few last scenes showed Evelyn ignoring the concept of just sitting and being a rock by putting googly eyes (a fun strategy Waymond used when enjoying life) on herself and saying, "There are no rules" (Everything, Everywhere All At Once 01:54:44) implementing her sense of free will to decide to be more than a rock and have fun with her daughter. In this Rock scene, we see more of Joy's nihilistic thinking that nothing matters, and then we see Evelyn's thinking of getting to choose how we live this life, and that is truly what matters.

One might argue that what makes choice meaningless is that Joy has made every possible choice in every existence and, therefore, comes off as inconsequential. However, I would argue that every decision we make in this lifetime holds significance across all universes, even if the ending is different. Even if every version of us has already made the same choices, it's essential to realize that the consequences we experience are unique to our own existence. While we may not have access to every possible choice, our decisions hold weight and impact our lives in meaningful ways.

In the film's final scene, Joy reaches a point where she feels compelled to harm herself by walking in the Bagel (the film's portrayal and symbolism of a black hole). At first, her mother tries to intervene, but Joy insists on going through with her plan. Then, Evelyn reminds Joy that, no matter what, she "Will always want to be with you" in any Universe. (Everything Everywhere All At Once 02:06:37). This simple yet powerful gesture touches Joy deeply, and she reaches out her hand to be saved. Moreover, Evelyn declares while they are hugging, "We can do anything" and that "Nothing matters"(Everything Everywhere All At Once 02:09:11). I would argue, however, that something does matter - their love for each other. This bond gives their lives purpose and makes everything they do worthwhile. Evelyn's choice to accept her daughter for who she is benefits Joy and gives her a reason to continue living. Joy has always craved this acceptance and love from her mother, or she would not have tried looking for her across the multiverse. Joy's Asian American identity implemented a lot of limitations, and her individuality not being appreciated; she felt nothing she did mattered. The literal turning point is when Evelyn accepts Joy, which significantly changes her perspective on life. I believe this shows that love is ultimately a choice and that it itself holds the great weight that gives humans their meaning. The

phenomenon of love is intricately linked to the fear of loss or having nothing, a concept resembling the ouroboros symbol.

In the tapestry of nihilism, the narrative unfolds, suggesting that life lacks an inherent meaning, thereby necessitating individuals to forge their own purpose, which involves love and the people they surround themselves with. The central argument contends that our capacity for free will is pivotal, enabling us to mold our essence through our choices. These choices, shaped by the autonomy of free will, become the brushstrokes that paint the canvas of our existence, imbuing it with subjective meaning and purpose. Yet, within this philosophical landscape, there is a sober acknowledgment of our limited control over the consequences that unfold from our actions.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between free will and nihilism is a captivating topic requiring thoughtful examination. It poses fundamental inquiries about our sense of self, moral values, and the significance of our existence in this world. *Everything, Everywhere All At Once* embarks us on a transformative expedition through the multiverse with Evelyn and her family as they progress from anguish and indistinctness to a new appreciation for every moment, relationship, and choice they encounter.

Through Evelyn's story, viewers gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and wonder of our existence. The film encourages us to reflect on our own lives and the choices we make. It reminds us that every decision we make has the potential to shape our lives and the lives of those around us. The film's message is clear: the power of human connection is essential to our

well-being and personal growth. The film's exploration of the relationship between free will and nihilism is particularly thought-provoking. It challenges us to consider the extent to which we are truly free to make our own choices and the impact that our choices have on the world around us. The film's portrayal of Evelyn's transformation from a skeptic to a believer in the power of love and kindness is inspiring and uplifting. *Everything, Everywhere All At Once* reminds us that despite despair and hopelessness, there is always the potential for personal growth and transformation.

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